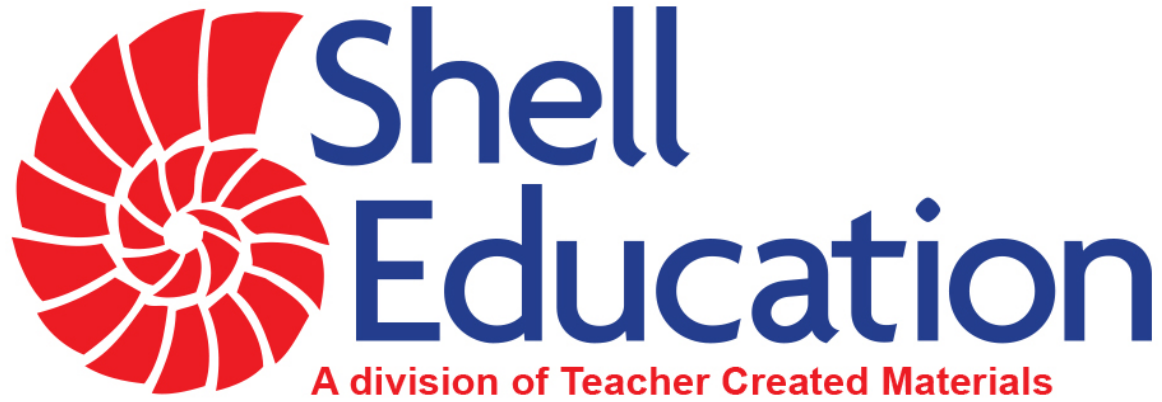


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# Being Your Child's Most Important Teacher



A Guide for Families  
with Young Children

Rebecca A. Palacios

# Table of Contents

<b>Preface</b> .....	5
<b>Section I: Young Children and Learning</b> .....	11
The Four Es: Expression, Experiences, Explanations, Extras .....	13
Why Do Children Ask Questions? .....	24
Engagement in Learning: It's About What's Important to the Learner .....	27
Oral Language Experiences for Young Learners .....	33
A Young Child's Approach to Learning .....	37
Blanket Your Child with Success .....	43
Fine Motor Development .....	48
<b>Section II: Everyday Activities</b> .....	53
Learning to Cook and Cooking to Learn .....	55
Music for Young Learners .....	60
Learning through Water Play .....	64
Drawing for Young Learners .....	69
Outdoor Play for Young Learners .....	73
Inspiring Creativity in Young Children .....	78
The Allure of Technology for Young Learners .....	83
Books, Books, Books! .....	88
Take Your Young Child to the Library .....	93
The Building Blocks to Literacy .....	97
Learning to Count and Counting on Learning .....	103
Children Making Sense of Numbers: Number Sense .....	109
Science: Setting the Stage .....	115
Science Explorations .....	119
More Science Explorations .....	124
The Wonder of Weather for Children .....	129
STEAM for Young Learners .....	134
Teaching Young Children about Work .....	140
The World at Their Fingertips .....	145

# Table of Contents *(cont.)*

<b>Section III: Going to School</b> .....	151
Learning Routines and Routines to Learn .....	153
Kindergarten Readiness: Physical and Social/Behavioral Indicators .....	158
Kindergarten Readiness: Academic Indicators .....	165
Preventing Learning Loss .....	172
Going to School: The Learning Continues .....	177

# Preface

From birth, babies meet the world armed with tools such as their five senses, which help them learn about the world around them. As they grow into toddlers, children formulate thoughts, ideas, and concepts. They touch and feel the world around them—rattles, balls, books, clothing, water, and so many other things in their first eight years—drawing on experiences provided by their families or caregivers. Babies can smell their family members and recognize what they like and don't like through smell, and as they grow older, they can categorize scents. They hear the sounds around them, and they begin to classify them as loud, soft, music, or speech. They can taste the first drops of their mother's milk or formula, and as they grow older, they begin to experience different spices and textures and can begin to distinguish what they like or don't like. These beginning learning and living experiences should continue as children mature and grow.

All the experiences that young children encounter set the foundation for all their learning to come. Thus, each family becomes a child's first teacher. This most important role is pivotal for all young children.

All the experiences that young children encounter set the foundation for all their learning to come. Thus, each family becomes a child's first teacher.

The purpose of this book is to provide families with ideas for everyday learning opportunities. Many of these activities don't cost a thing. The suggestions in this book will help support children's learning growth as they get ready for and enter school. School readiness is so important for children, and it paves the way for later success in life. All children should have positive school experiences that build up from birth by their families. I call these "early childhood prepares you for life" experiences.

I would like to tell you my story. I was born and raised in Corpus Christi, Texas, where I still live. For those who haven't been here, Corpus Christi is a beautiful city by the Corpus Christi Bay. My family has been here for five generations.

Fifty-seven years ago, our local school district was one of thousands across the country preparing to open Head Start classrooms for the first time.

I was 10 years old and looking forward to finishing fifth grade. My hair was a little longer then!

And I was precocious! When I was three, I had announced that I wanted to become a teacher. The big school down the street where my sister attended was always a magnet for me. My *abuelita* and I would walk there to pick up my sister from school, and I would stare in awe at all the wonderful, exciting things I could see.

So, you can imagine how excited I was when—about seven years after that—my mother told me about the need for volunteers to work with the young children at my elementary school. She knew about my desire to teach and wanted me to see what it would be like, and I wanted to learn about all the ways teachers work with children and prepare activities. I found myself doing the Hokey Pokey, matching pieces of lost puzzles, helping open milk cartons, and asking students questions after reading to them.

My novice teaching adventure began that summer in 1965, the first summer of Head Start. And starting with that experience, I developed a deep appreciation and respect for Head Start and every child Head Start has served. There have been so many success stories, not only for the children but also for teachers, families, the country, and volunteers.

My love for teaching and learning has increased since that time. I became a teacher, as I had dreamed of as a young child! My parents provided me with so many opportunities to learn: they gave me records with stories and songs, outdoor play opportunities, access to school clubs, and home experiences like fishing and letting me read all day long if I wanted to! I played with mud, sticks, rocks, leaves, and whatever was around my yard, and I sang songs endlessly. I didn't know at the time that my vocabulary in two languages was preparing me for a future life as a teacher—and a bilingual teacher at that!



When I became a teacher, I tried to put everything I learned into early childhood lessons. To tell you the truth, when the children would simultaneously burst into applause at the end of a lesson, it kept me going back each day to teach. I am grateful that I have been able to lead children to find their gifts and provide them with teaching and learning experiences they can carry through their lifetimes. That, for me, has been the greatest reward. My teaching career was an opportunity to meet my lifetime goal.

But I got another opportunity, and it's one I never expected. Several years ago, a friend and colleague from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards introduced me to Age of Learning, the company designing what would become ABCmouse.com. I worked with the team at Age of Learning developing a comprehensive online curriculum for early learners, using the power of the internet to make high-quality education resources available at low cost to every child. I saw a way to teach and reach children, not just in my school community but around the world, and to help prepare the youngest learners for success early on and throughout their lives.

All these learning opportunities began with my parents who knew that their little girl wanted to be a teacher and chose to help her with many experiences: piano lessons; opportunities to play outside and explore in nature, including making mud pies; fishing, beach, and zoo trips; trips to the library; and visits with extended family. Those experiences—and so many others—set the foundation for the person I am now.

My teaching adventure started 50 years ago in a Head Start classroom. It continued with 34 years of teaching in the Corpus Christi Independent School District in early childhood classrooms, and it continues today in a global way. In 1976, I did not know that one day I would have a job that had yet to be invented but would connect to everything I loved and enjoyed as a child: talking about nature and science; reading; singing; working with children, teachers, and families; and taking on new adventures!

Today, in schools, we see the need for families to continue their involvement. It is not enough to be a child's first teacher and then relinquish that role once

The foundation you give your child will be lasting, and it will help create your child's own "early childhood prepares you for life" story.

they begin school. All children, up through their maturity, need a family's support and visibility in their schooling. Schools are not only looking at family involvement but also family engagement. There is a need for fully empowered families who can be true partners and collaborators in their children's education.

This book has two sections that will help set the stage for wonderful learning experiences for your children.

In **Section I**, the Four *Es* are introduced. They are important concepts as families rear their children, and understanding them can help families build strong foundations for their children. Children's abilities to express themselves begin when they are babies, when they cry as a signal for comfort, food, or help. Babies are ready to learn language as soon as they are born, and they develop listening and speaking skills first, then reading and writing skills during the preschool years.

**Section II** covers ways to incorporate learning into everyday activities and includes specific topics related to literacy, math, science, and social studies.

The final section, **Section III**, includes how to help children prepare for school. These chapters address kindergarten readiness and things families can do to help prepare children for school.

Following each chapter is a childhood story from my family, friends, and colleagues about how their families impacted who they are today and taught them lifelong skills, ideas, and concepts. The far-reaching experiences of these contributors illustrate the importance of each family member on young children. I hope that through these stories, readers will recall their own childhood stories and help bridge similar experiences for their young learners.

I also hope that this book helps provide a rich, fun time with your child. The foundation you give your child will be lasting, and it will help create your child's own "early childhood prepares you for life" story.

Enjoy your children and grandchildren!



# The Four Es: Expression, Experiences, Explanations, Extras

The limits of my language mean the  
limits of my world.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

The Four *Es*, *Expression*, *Experiences*, *Explanations*, and *Extras*, can help guide families in teaching their children to express themselves; in creating positive experiences where children learn over time; in providing explanations for objects, events, and experiences in their world; and in choosing extra activities that can enrich and enlighten children with a sense of wonder. The goals in this section provide guides for families, and the sample activities help families understand how to meet those goals.

## Expression

*Expression*, or teaching children to express themselves using a rich vocabulary, is the first of the Four *Es*, as I've named them. The ability to express and use words along with a large vocabulary helps prepare children for school.

When children have a wider choice of words and expressions, they can better express their thoughts and feelings. Opportunities arise every day for adults to speak with their children, using words that describe the world around them. For example, when you shop at a grocery store, take a walk, or observe your child playing, ask them about their experiences. Create dialogue that helps your child describe the world in colors or shapes, or encourage them to ask you questions.

Developing an expressive vocabulary is crucial to reading comprehension and creative writing skills. The more your child can describe something in detail, the better their story will

be. For example, your child might point to and say, “that flower.” You could then ask them probing questions about it: “What color is the flower? How many petals does it have? Can you tell me more about the flower?” As the conversation progresses, encourage your child to create a story about the flower: “My flower is pink and pretty. It grows in the ground and has six green leaves and eight petals.” You can also help expand the discussion by saying, “I wonder if that flower can grow anywhere.” Find things to read about the flower, and look for pictures and names of other flowers to help your child learn more.

Research tells us that as adults use songs, pictures, rhyming games, and expressive talk or discourse, the better a child will be able to read. “Kindergarten readiness” is an important factor for schools and educators and it happens long before the child sets foot in a school classroom. Using books in the home, and creating a home literacy environment, is a critical part of developing the concepts, skills, and vocabulary needed to be academically successful.

The following are some ways to develop a vocabulary that’s connected to a daily routine.

Goal	Sample Activities
Help your child develop a rich vocabulary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Talk to your child during cooking activities to explain the process, such as chopping, dicing, boiling, or frying, and try to use other cooking-related words.</li> <li>◆ Take walking-and-talking trips to build vocabulary about what you see, touch, taste, smell, and/or hear.</li> <li>◆ Read together daily, and use oral storytelling to help develop listening skills.</li> <li>◆ Discuss what happens during your daily routine.</li> <li>◆ Develop vocabulary about tools, shapes, names of family members, and the classification of objects, including things that roll, things you eat, and things people wear.</li> </ul>
Help your child express forms of respect and responsibility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Model being respectful and taking responsibility.</li> <li>◆ Use important related expressions, including <i>please</i>, <i>thank you</i>, and <i>may I</i>.</li> <li>◆ Show your child how to care for people, plants, and animals. Discuss caring words, feelings, and emotions.</li> </ul>

Goal	Sample Activities
<p>Help your child develop an understanding of family and culture through modeling family engagement and engage them in family discussions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Attend your child’s school activities and talk about them with your child.</li> <li>◆ Attend special events, such as parent or grandparent events, and discuss what you did or learned with your child.</li> <li>◆ Become a part of learning events where information is not only provided but families also share what they are doing at home.</li> <li>◆ Develop an awareness of the richness of your culture, and teach your child about their family history.</li> </ul>
<p>Help your child understand that what people say aloud can also be written.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Encourage your child to draw pictures and dictate stories about what they hear.</li> <li>◆ Show your child how to write their name, capitalizing the first letter and using lowercase letters for the rest, such as Isabella, Caleb, Donovan, and Eva.</li> </ul>

Expression is critical in our world. Whether you communicate through speaking, reading, writing, or listening, you’re teaching your child that what they say is important—and you’re taking the time to expand their world of words.



# Fine Motor Development

Developing a child's motor skills is extremely important because motor development is the mediator of cognitive, social, and emotional development. Good motor skills predict a whole lot later in life, so it might be something that all of us should be concerned about early in a child's life.

—Priscila Caçola

Once babies discover their fingers, parents are often thrilled to see their children learn to control those little fingers to grasp, pinch, or clutch in a fist. Child development experts call the process of learning to use the small muscles of the hands and fingers *fine motor development*. This includes development of both control and strength in grasping and the pincer motion (using the thumb and index finger together) and eventually in writing.

Fine motor development not only impacts learning and everyday skills, it's also an important aspect of a child's ability to engage in independent activities. Therefore, it's essential that children have opportunities at home, from birth to kindergarten, to practice using these muscles.

Here are examples of fine motor skills that children use daily:

- buttoning a shirt or coat
- zipping up pants
- snapping the snap on a pair of jeans

- tying shoelaces
- picking up a small piece of fruit with fingers

Here are examples of fine motor skills that children use at school:

- turning the pages of a book
- drawing with a crayon
- using safety scissors
- sorting small shapes into sets
- stringing beads
- using a computer tablet



Families can use similar activities to help their children practice in a play-like atmosphere. There are also objects at home that a family can use to promote practice in using the small muscles of the hand (always making sure that none of the objects chosen are choking hazards).

The following chart shows some engaging activities to try.

Activity	Parent Tips
Modeling Clay Snake	Give your child a round pat of modeling clay, and encourage them to roll the dough back and forth on the table, using their palms until it looks like a snake. Encourage your child to use their pincer grasp to pick up the snake, and then show your child how to coil the snake into a circle.
Zipping and Buttoning Time	While you're sorting laundry, give your child small towels to fold, shirts to button, and zippers to zip. For variety, use a timer to time how long it takes them to button a shirt more than once, and compare the times.
Pasta Patterns	Give your child a few varieties of dry pasta in a bowl, and ask them to make a pattern using the pasta, picking up one piece at a time.

Activity	Parent Tips
Scissor Skills	Provide your child with safety scissors, and explain what can be cut and what can't! Give your child a box lid and an old newspaper page, and show them how to cut strips of newspaper with the scissors. Then, tell your child to put all the cuttings into the box lid.
Nature Walk	Take your child on a nature walk, bringing along a bag or box to hold special items that they collect. Show your child how to use their pincer grasp to pick up items such as a special rock, a beautiful leaf, a funny-shaped stick, or an acorn. Encourage your child to put the items in the "walk box."

There are many more creative and interesting activities that can support your child's use of their small muscles throughout the day. And as you persuade your child to try these activities, you'll find that you're not only helping them develop important skills but you're also giving your child something even more important—special time with you!

# Learning to Cook and Cooking to Learn

**Life is what happens to us while we are  
making other plans.**

—Allen Saunders

Cooking can provide wonderful opportunities to create learning experiences for children. These experiences are especially powerful because they involve all the senses: smelling, tasting, touching, hearing, and seeing—which is one reason why memories created in the kitchen can last a lifetime! With a little thought and preparation, you can use this special time to help your child build important understandings and skills in literacy, mathematics, science, health, and even art.

Before you can start cooking, you first need to gather ingredients! Planning and making lists are engaging ways to develop mathematical, literacy, and critical thinking skills because they show children the connections between our ideas and the written words and numbers that represent those ideas. Help your child create a list by providing a blank page with numbers running down the side. Include plenty of space between each number. Then, ask your child to write the word for, or draw a picture of, each item you need to collect. Don't worry about spelling or legibility. Also, be sure to have your child write how many of each item is needed, which will help them experience the use of numbers to show both sequence (numbering the list in order) and quantity (how much). There are other ways to create lists, too. For example, you can collect newspaper grocery ads with pictures of foods.

Cooking together is a perfect  
time to discuss family and  
community traditions.

Help your child find and cut out (using safety scissors!) the pictures of the items that are needed to create your meals. Then, ask them to glue the pictures next to the numbers on the list. Using scissors helps develop eye-hand coordination and strengthens the muscles used for writing.

After you shop for the items on the list and bring them home, there is still a lot more that your child can learn. Here are a few activities to try:

- Place all the items on a counter to play a sorting game, such as collecting everything that's green. For older children, collect everything that is shaped like a cylinder.
- Play a guessing game, which helps develop descriptive vocabulary, by asking such questions as "I'm thinking of something that is long and slender and light green, with little ridges down the sides. What is it?"
- Work together to create a book using the labels from cans or cartons (which reading educators call *environmental print*): (1) Carefully remove and clean the labels. (2) Slip them into clear protective pages that have been pre-punched to fit a three-ring binder. (3) Place them into a binder. When it's time to cook, bring out the binder, and ask your child to look at the pages and tell you about each kind of food.

Probably the most fun children can have in the kitchen is watching the way food changes when it's cooked. The cooking process is fascinating, and young children can observe at a safe distance, away from hot surfaces and sharp items. For example, it's amazing for your child to watch you peel, cut, and/or dice potatoes; place them into boiling water; check them for softness; observe them as soft; mash them; and once cooled, taste them!

The vocabulary that you use to describe these steps can also be very interesting! Be sure to describe the way the potatoes look and feel before you cook them, using words such as *hard* and *solid*. After the potatoes are boiled and mashed, talk about how they look now, using words such as *mushy*, *squishy*, and *soft*. Guiding your child to notice that mashed potatoes are halfway between a solid and a liquid will also help them understand important science concepts around how matter is classified.





**Measuring ingredients is another engaging way to build mathematics concepts and skills. Show your child your measuring spoons and cups and explain why it's important to measure the ingredients that go into a recipe. Help your child pour rice into a measuring cup and add it to the rice cooker, along with the measured water. Let them measure spices in fractions ( $1/2$ ,  $1/4$ ,  $1/8$ ) of teaspoons. Your child may not completely understand what the fractions mean, but they will learn through experience that, for example, one-fourth is less than one-half; and this experience can become the foundation for understanding what those symbols mean later.**

You can also try this exciting science experiment: Let your child cook a combination of ingredients of their choosing to see how it comes out (in small quantities, of course).

Cooking together is a perfect time to discuss family and community traditions. It can strengthen your child's relationships with family and community members while building a foundation for future understanding of the idea of culture, including teaching the names of foods in your family's heritage language.

Finally, consider making menu-planning a family activity because it will naturally lead into a discussion of good food choices.

Perhaps the best aspect of all is that it's a natural extension of a family activity to help your child see that reading, writing, math, social studies, science, and art—just like flour, butter, and eggs—are essential “ingredients” to great dishes.

# Books, Books, Books!

There are many little ways to enlarge your child's world. Love of books is the best of all.

—Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis

Open a book with your child, and step into another world!

When we give children the gift of books and language, we provide them with imaginative experiences that are important parts of building a nation of creative thinkers and innovators.

Early experiences with quality children's literature help build oral vocabulary, which is a critical component of learning how to read. Building oral language vocabulary is just one of the ways that books help young children. Through exposure to books, children also learn that what people think can be written down, that those squiggly things are letters, and that the letters represent the sounds that make up words. In the process of teaching these and other reading skills and concepts, the selection of high-quality and high-interest books is also very important. Many parents wonder, *How do I know which books to select?*

One resource that can help you choose children's books is Reading Rockets, a national multimedia literacy initiative that offers information and resources on how young children learn to read. The Children's Book Council ([www.readingrockets.org/article/choosing-childs-book](http://www.readingrockets.org/article/choosing-childs-book)) provides guidelines for book selections for babies and toddlers, preschoolers and kindergarteners, children in the early school years (ages five to eight), and older children (ages nine and up).

Stories are wonderful vehicles for introducing children to new worlds.

High-interest books for children in the early years share these qualities:

- They have a good rhythm.
- They're predictable.
- They have things in them that children can relate to.
- They describe experiences that mirror children's own, with elements such as families and pets and daily activities such as eating, playing, and learning.

Many Mother Goose books and nursery rhymes are helpful because their rhythms and rhymes familiarize children with how words can sound similar and different. When children are hearing and learning such rhymes, it can be a big help to have accompanying hand movements, as with the rhyme Pat-a-Cake.

Stories are wonderful vehicles for introducing children to new worlds. Likewise, nonfiction books show them the rich variety and wonders of the real world that they'll someday be able to explore. Offer your child lots of choices as you select nonfiction topics, whether it's different vehicles and how they move; the animals that live under the sea; the lives of insects; or how people live in the desert, tundra, or rainforest. If you see your child exhibiting a special interest in a particular topic, look for similar books on the topic to help further expand their knowledge.

The books that you share with your child can also provide opportunities to teach these important book concepts:

- We read from top to bottom and left to right.
- Books have authors and illustrators.
- What we read can be reread because the words are written.
- Illustrations help us understand what's being said in the story.
- We should take care of books.

The first time, or the first few times, you share a book with your child, you'll probably want to read the book all the way through for enjoyment, answering questions as your child poses them.



During subsequent readings, you may want to pause to ask questions like these to help your child learn to think about what they are hearing:

- Who is in the story? Are they people or animals?
- Where does the story take place?
- What happened first, second, and third in the story?
- What was your favorite part?
- Can you find specific letters? For example, can you find any letters on this page that are also in your name?
- What is the author's name?
- Is there another book that we read that's written by this author?
- Who is the illustrator?
- What word on this page sounds like *blue*? (Yes, the word *blew*!)
- What word on this page rhymes with *pig*? (Yes, the word *big*!)
- Can you help me read the book now?

**When you and your child read a book together and talk about it in these ways, you are creating what reading experts call *shared reading experiences*. Such experiences provide a background for developing your child's understanding of the alphabetic principle—the basic idea that the words we speak and listen to are represented in writing, with letters that stand for the sounds in those words. Understanding the alphabetic principle is a critical and necessary step on your child's path to learning to read.**

Share books early, share books often, and make each reading experience a pleasure for both you and your child. If you do this, you'll be successful in one of your most important responsibilities as your child's first teacher.