

# Mentoring Matters

## Mentoring Book Reads and Letter Knowledge

The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) identified instructional practices that promote the development of children's early literacy skills. In this issue of the *Beat*, our mentoring tips and guidance to mentors, coordinators, and school leaders focuses on Book Reading and Letter Knowledge.

Book reading, the single most critical activity for later success in reading, provides essential language development experiences for children. Book reading expands children's understanding about stories, the world around them and the way book language is different from oral language

Reading books aloud is an interactive activity between the teacher and the children. **Before** reading a book, teachers actively engage children in predicting new text. **During** the book read, teachers read the text and respond to children's comments/questions. This is also an opportunity for teachers to explicitly direct the children's attention to print referencing by having the children to look at the print on specific pages of the book. **After** reading the story, the teacher engages children in a discussion or an extension activity (story-telling, rereading opportunities, science/math activity, and art extension activity).

To encourage teachers to be intentional in their approaches to book reading:

- Train teachers to pre-select new vocabulary words from books selected. These words are introduced to the children as a way to build and improve children's vocabulary.
- Plan and reflect in the teacher's lesson plan the use of newly introduced vocabulary words beyond the read aloud. For example, define the words, use of objects, pictures, photographs, and letter wall cards to explore and use the vocabulary.
- Model the entire process along with a teacher on a mentoring visit by:
  - Selecting appropriate books and materials based on the theme to introduce vocabulary and concepts from the book,
  - Pre-read the book to select vocabulary and formulate specific questions to guide the reading. Refer to the Read Aloud section of the CIRCLE manual to review types of questions that teachers should formulate and pose a part of a read aloud. Refer to Language and Communication section of the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines. Another source for mentors is the mentoring guide section on book reading.
  - Develop letter wall cards based on the selected vocabulary to place on the letter wall and in the writing center.
  - Allow for children to be involved in asking questions, making comments and personal connections to the books read.
- Have teachers to complete the Read Aloud Self-Checklist in the Read Aloud section of the CIRCLE manual as a place to begin your mentoring process around book reading or as a way of reviewing the strides made to improve the teacher's book reading in the classroom.

## Letter Knowledge

Teachers engage children in letter knowledge activities that help them associate the names of letters with letter shapes and letter sounds. Letter knowledge is an essential component of learning to read and write. Knowing how letters function in writing and how these letters connect to the sounds children hear in words is crucial to children's success in reading. Young children learn best when information is presented in context and when teachers provide opportunities for children to create experiences that make the material meaningful. Rote practice can result in frustration and negative attitudes toward learning. Letter knowledge learning should be implemented in intentional, but playful ways. Knowing what children already know about letters from observations and assessments can help teachers plan meaningful and purposeful instruction increasing what children know and can use about letters, their shapes, sounds and use in words.

To encourage teachers to be intentional in their approaches to letter learning:

- Work the teacher to be reflective about her classroom environment to help ensure that children's names are displayed in multiple places and for multiple purposes. Consider name tags to move in and out of centers or take attendance, names followed by photographs on the Letter Wall, and other name games that allow children the opportunity to manipulate the letters of their name.
- Model for teachers' ways to draw attention to the similarities and difference between letters (referred to as the features of letters). Children's attention could be drawn to the features of letters during book reading, while in the ABC Center, when using the letter wall, charts and poems related to the theme of study, and incidentally as children search for letters for the words and messages they want to communicate through writing.
- Teachers must be intentional in their conversations with children to help them begin to discriminate letters based on features. To help draw children's attention to letters:
  - the mentor should model for the teacher ways of connecting new letters or features of letters to the child's name,
  - sort by feature of letter like placing all the "tall sticks" in one circle, and the "short sticks" in another circle,
  - Placing all the letters with "sticks" on one side of a graph and all the letters with "circles" on the other side of a graph (Refer to Sorting Rules in the Letter Knowledge section of the CIRCLE manual).
  - When writing, teachers draw attention to the tall stick that makes the "h" versus the short stick that makes the "n".
  - Discuss the differences and similarities between letters in words selected for the Letter Wall as they are being added to the wall.
  - Mentors should guide teacher's reflection about how they teach children to discriminate between different geometric shapes (circle, square, oval) to use similar strategies or the same principles to help children learn letters.

- Model for teachers how to use writing events to help children connect letter sounds with letter shapes:
  - Connect the sound that a letter makes as the teacher is writing a word in front of the children.
  - Match letter sounds to the letter names and the printed letter shape (See PreK Guidelines, Emergent Literacy—Reading).
  - Model children’s names making the letter sounds as the letters are written.
- Model for teachers how to focus children’s attention from letters to sounds during learning events across the day:
  - Connect the sound that a letter makes with the specific letter; for example, “Matthew starts with ‘m’. ‘M’ makes the /m/sound.” (See Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines, Emergent Literacy-Reading Domain).
  - While in the ABC center draw children’s attention to a set of letters they were able to successfully name on a recent letter naming assessment by asking them to provide the letter sound. Consider this activity for individual children or for a small group.

By encouraging teachers to be intentional in their instruction around letter learning and playful when engaging children in activities that promote basic understandings about literacy like book reading, we can ensure better-developed language and literacy skills, including the kinds of predictor skills identified by the NELP panel in their investigation of the literature.