

## Playing with Early Literacy in an ECE Classroom

By: Megan Finesilver, M.S.Ed

The traditional school image of children sitting in rows of desks, attentively listening to an instructor does not apply to Early Childhood Education (ECE). Generally, early childhood education (ECE) spans from birth to age 8. Early childhood educators are significant to a child's development of communicating, reading and writing – which are the basics of early literacy skills. These skills are primarily learned through what most observe as “play.” Qualified childcare centers must focus on play in their curriculums to drive literacy.

### **Free-Choice and Small Group Choices:**

When children are empowered with choices, they are more engaged with the topic they're exploring, thus igniting learning. A successful ECE classroom provides a variety of choices that support early literacy. Emerging reading skills are learned through repetition of letters, symbols, phonemes, and syllables. A few of the free choice options that address these skills are play dough letters, stamps, or alphabet magnets. As children advance, they may progress into beginning spelling patterns with word and letter games such as BINGO, Boggle, or Word to Picture Memory. Using basic school supplies; imaginative educators create scavenger hunts for “blends,” word hunts, or spelling hopscotch to provide interactive literacy experiences for their students.

The timeless letter blocks center is a favorite for the budding engineer, but unknowingly, they are building literacy skills as they build. Motor skills are also practiced at the writing center. Stocked with large pencils and crayons, these tools inspire writing skills on a child's own terms. With supervision, Elmer's Mr. Sketch Washable Markers are a great tactile and smelly addition to fine motor development and emerging writing skills. To monitor progress, a basic 5-Star binder helps keep student writing samples organized and can provide an end of the year reflection of growth for both parents and students.

### **A Literacy-Rich Setting:**

A natural curiosity for learning is fostered in a setting that promotes language skills in a colorful and fun way. Products from Flagship Carpet's like the “ABC Blocks” or “ABC Words” help new readers by providing a visual memory for alphabet recognition and beginning letter sounds. Other carpets such as “Be A Good Friend,” adorned with words such as “Loyal,” “Cheerful,” and “Generous” are educational fixtures that reference not only important traits, but also develop word recognition and help increase vocabulary. Labels on doors, windows and classroom furniture provide additional exposure to reading in a functional way. The print-rich classroom where a teacher models and encourages language usage is the ideal environment for the growth of early literacy.

Books are not the only component to early literacy development, but they are a crucial element. Including a variety of genres ignites a child's imagination, while increasing vocabulary and improving dialect. Every early childhood setting should have a diverse library to encourage reading and promote a life-long love of learning. The preparation and effort of creating a literacy-rich classroom is challenging and requires thoughtful planning. However, once this type of educational environment is created, students will absorb crucial skills through what they do best - play!