



# Teaching Lessons that Last a Lifetime

Incorporating Skills that Encourage Independence and Foster Pre-academic Readiness in Prekindergarten Classrooms



**??** How do independent functioning and adaptive skills relate to Florida standards? How do they relate to Pre-K instruction?

Those are not easy questions for Pre-K and/or Kindergarten teachers, administrators, and families to answer. There are hundreds of checklists available and they vary in the expectations described. Because we want our students to be prepared and successful in gaining academic skills, we sometimes overlook the importance of functional skills. Some examples are listed below:

## Important skills: Functioning independently in the classroom

- Take turns and share
- Sit/stand quietly, listen, and wait
- Follow simple directions
- Attends to lessons and tasks
- Put materials away
- Stand calmly in line
- Walk from one area to another and exhibit “safe” behaviors
- Use bathroom without assistance
- Wash hands and dry hands
- Use a tissue to wipe nose, cover mouth when coughing
- Put on jacket and backpack
- Follow routines for morning entry and afternoon dismissal
- Open food containers during meals and snacks
- Clean up area after eating



## Fostering independence in the Pre-K classroom:

- Build independent functioning skills into the **daily routines**.
- Allow time for **practice**, practice, practice – these are important skills and impact children’s readiness for and success in kindergarten and community. Allow plenty of time for guided and/or intentional practice.
- Emphasize and encourage independence. Help and assist but keep in mind a plan for **reducing prompts** so that children become more independent.
- Use **specific lessons**, examples/modeling, and visual supports with students who experience difficulty with self-care skills.

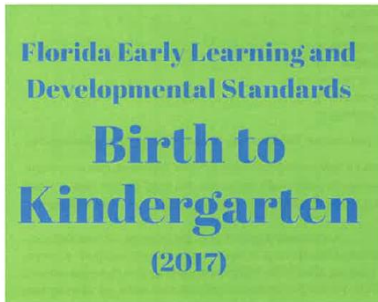
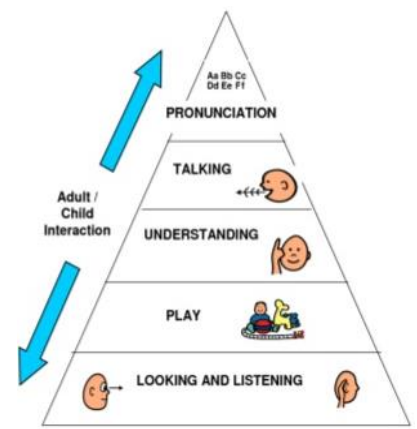
**"Play is the highest form of research."**

*Albert Einstein*



Research-based and evidence-based information indicates that fostering self-regulation and independent participation are primary ways of fostering school readiness. Researchers also note that focus on **self-regulation and independence** does not take the place of pre-academic instruction, but rather **facilitates the acquisition of academic skills**, specifically more complex processing of information.

**Oral Language** development is shown by research to be the major contributing skill to reading success. Oral language includes listening comprehension, verbal (or nonverbal) expression, and vocabulary development. Oral language development depends on multiple opportunities to listen and respond. Vocabulary development depends on opportunities to have purposeful and guided hands-on experiences with objects and situations.



*Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards (2017)* are formatted to show benchmarks across a developmental progression. The benchmarks across each age range reflect the expectation for a child at the end of each age-related time frame. This is a good resource for teachers because for each benchmark there are progressions of prerequisite skills along with current age expectations. In other words, the document shows which skills in an area come “before – now – next”.

**??** What about academic readiness? How can all children, even those who experience delays, disabilities, or difficulties make progress that will lead to academic success?

Children who are eligible for services in a Pre-K ESE program are usually served based on ESE eligibility and implementation of an IEP. When developing activities and lessons for them, it is vital that the staff consider children’s areas of strengths and needs as well as the severity of their delays and/or disabilities. For example, a developmental delay could result in a 3-year old experiencing a gap of 10 months or more in some or all of developmental domains.

Children’s development is interrelated across domains. This means that when children have delays or disabilities, their difficulties are rarely seen in only one area. It is more likely that several or all areas of development are impacted by the delay or disability.

Many young children need intentional teaching, lots of practice, and consistent exposure to pre-academic skills. In addition, young children need the practice and exposure to be hands-on, playful, guided, and paired with rich and meaningful language.

One priority for helping children progress academically is to address their **skills in attending and maintaining engagement** in multi-step activities. The more closely related to previous familiar knowledge and real life, the more likely an activity will hold a child’s attention. In addition, the more children hear and engage in conversation and oral language about what they are doing, the better they will remember it.

## **Ideas about Teaching Skills that Foster Pre-Academic Readiness**

**Teach children to listen and attend.** Make classroom books using photos and familiar patterns from favorite books (Susan, Susan, what do you see? I see the crackers I'm going to eat"). High interest photos with familiar phrases increase listening, attending, and interest and at the same time address phonological awareness and comprehension, as well as help children connect books to real life. Engage students in games and activities that require listening. Read favorite class books often and include repetitive and predictable books.

**Teach children to notice visual details.** Recognizing likenesses and differences in shapes, letters, and their parts is an important prerequisite to alphabet recognition and writing. Provide sensory practice with letters, shapes, and numerals. Tactile and motor experiences with letters help the brain remember them. Talk to children about shapes and model the drawing of shapes and writing of letters/numerals, describing the motions as you draw and write. Start with simple forms to increase visual attention. Provide ample opportunities for children to work with puzzles and manipulate blocks, search for letters in sand.

**Encourage oral language and communication.** "Oral language" doesn't necessarily mean speaking in sentences. It also includes listening, vocabulary, and indicating understanding. Remember, it is vital that the teacher, staff, or peer engage in conversation with children about what they are doing during play and task activities. Associating oral language with the activities is the key to increasing pre-academic skills. Use opportunities during play time to build vocabulary and oral language skills. Expand conversations and comprehension with role playing, acting out stories, and using puppets.

**Build fine motor and small muscle skills.** Pre-K classes are full of materials and opportunities for developing fine motor skills – sand box, scribbling/writing in shaving cream, play dough, spray bottles, tongs. Have children practice snipping small pieces from a strip of paper.

**Teach children that learning and academics have meaning in the "real world".** Use real objects for teaching matching and sorting. Incorporate real life events when teaching story sequencing, use visuals and photos of real objects when teaching math concepts. Use a class walk or class cooking experience as the basis for shared writing. Provide environmental print – familiar signs and logos, children's names (paired with photos)

**Support children's social development and emotional competence.** Develop empathy, practice recognizing facial expressions, use interesting books, role play, and puppets to model and describe feelings. Help children learn to solve conflicts, seek help, and communicate their needs and feelings. Support your instruction with visuals.

**Teach children to follow directions.** Develop and visually support classroom routines and rules. Play class games that require children to "listen and do". Directions games with multiple steps, "Put the block on a chair, clap your hands, and then hop three times" are helpful for attention, memory, position words, counting, and many other skills. Let children have turns giving directions or choosing activities for the daily routine.


**Teach and support self-regulation.** Pre-teach and provide practice for recognizing feelings, self-monitoring reactions, and performing the previously taught self-regulation routine (deep breathing, reading a calm-down story).

Although the challenge is clearly evident, with use of resources, familiarity of skill progression (FELDS), and knowledge of students; teachers can plan for instruction that develops functional skills (attention, oral language, social competence, self-care) while incorporating academic experiences.



Florida Department of Education, Division of Early Learning. [Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards - 2017. \(FELDS\)](#)

Preschool teacher super power #72:  
Helping someone in the bathroom,  
while making lunch, putting  
the nap mats out  
and successfully  
executing a  
STAR 4 lesson  
all at once!



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