

much more independent as the year goes on, allowing the teacher to spend time teaching and interacting with children. Along with this gradual increase in what children are asked to do independently, teachers can set up the environment for success by doing such things as opening one center at a time in the beginning of the year, continuing to explain new materials as they are placed in the centers, and using labels to clearly help children know where items belong.

## **Classroom Activity Planning: Creating Opportunities for Interaction as Well as Self-Discovery**

Decisions about curriculum and adult interaction with children should be as individualized as possible. Teachers must be attentive to the manner and pace of each individual child's learning so that learning can be fully supported. At the same time, productive interaction, understanding, and cooperation with other children and adults are crucial skills for children to develop at this age. Supporting children in learning to adapt and function successfully in a classroom setting is a key component of early childhood education. With the principles of individual instruction and instruction with adults and peers in mind, prekindergarten programs should include opportunities for both individual and group activities to allow for independent exploration and play as well as socialization.

**Large-Group Instruction:** Teachers may often gather the entire class together to provide information, support collaboration, and listen to ideas. By the end of the year, large-group sessions should occur two to three times per day and last 15–20 minutes.

During this time, the teacher is intentionally building a classroom community through the following activities:

- Engaging in a variety of circle games
- Delivering a morning message
- Going over the schedule for the day
- Conducting a read-aloud
- Allowing the children to share news
- Engaging the children in a language or phonological awareness activity
- Announcing a "Special Person of the Week" or a birthday
- Leading the children in a musical activity, such as a song
- Introducing an instructional theme

**Small-Group Instruction:** Small-group learning activities with the teacher providing intentional instruction about new concepts may be one of the most effective ways to promote young children's learning. Research shows that children learn math, literacy, and language concepts best when teachers support their attention and growth in gaining new knowledge in small groups (no more than six children). These activities are effective if the teacher engages children with targeted activities for short periods of time (10–15 minutes). The activities, whether they are meant to facilitate the learning of specific cognitive (such as math or literacy) or social skills, need to be engaging, with children taking an active role using manipulatives, books, and pictures as opposed to worksheets or flashcards.

**Individual Learning Areas:** Children also learn effectively when working in separate, set-apart learning areas. These are not places to go for playtime activities after the "important" instruction. In small-group learning areas, children cement the direct instruction with guided exploration and hands-on experience. With a little creativity, even home care environments can include effective learning centers. Every learning area should have the following:

- Fun, playful, and purposeful activities

- A literacy connection
- Writing materials
- An opportunity for verbal conversation with an adult or another child

Developmentally appropriate programs provide opportunities for children to broaden and deepen their behavioral knowledge. They provide a variety of firsthand experiences and help children acquire symbolic knowledge by representing their experiences in a variety of media, such as drawing, painting, dramatic play, and verbal and written descriptions. Furthermore, while small-group learning schedules involve a lot of time for child-directed learning, the teacher is as active as the child in directing learning and supporting discovery. In fact, the teacher provides and encourages the critical interactions that turn play into learning. Research suggests that the following seven types of centers are effective:

1. Pretend and Learn Center
2. Writer's Corner
3. Library and Listening Center
4. Construction Center
5. Math and Science Center
6. Creativity Station
7. ABC Center

These areas should integrate a variety of different learning concepts and should incorporate mathematics, science, phonological awareness, reading aloud, motivation to read, letter knowledge, written expression, print and book awareness, and language development. Well-stocked learning areas supplied with books and other educational materials will help promote the integration of these academic concepts. It is important that children have experiences with books that help them understand the world they live in as well as those that reflect their own culture. Whenever possible, classrooms should include books that are culturally and linguistically relevant in learning centers.

Data from behavioral science literature have long pointed to the need to create safe, secure, supportive environments for infants and young children. Overall, a positive and effective classroom environment makes classroom management easier, gives children ownership of the classroom and the power to manage themselves, respects each child's individuality, and recognizes and promotes taking responsibility in the classroom community. This type of learning-conducive environment creates positive impacts on young children's development, preparing them to acquire skills needed in both school and life. A properly arranged and maintained classroom provides the essential foundation upon which a teacher can build to effectively promote children's success and school readiness.

### **Establishing a Schedule**

Schedules give children a sense of structure throughout their day so they can anticipate when specific activities will occur and how long they will be engaged in these activities. This sense of anticipation helps children begin to regulate their attention and emotions. It gives them a plan for their daily routine.

To best use a daily schedule

- list each activity with a picture (time is optional),
- draw children's attention to the schedule as activities change,
- have children refer to the schedule to identify what activity comes next, and
- post the daily schedule at the children's eye level.

## What happens daily in a prekindergarten schedule?

Every day should include the following:

- Phonological awareness activities (minutes throughout the day)
- Reading aloud (twice a day per half-day session, three or more times per full-day session)
- Writing (teacher modeled, shared, interactive, guided, and independent)
- Math concept development
- Language development (incorporated throughout the day, especially during the read aloud session)

The following are examples of suggested schedules.

### Half-Day Schedule

Time	Activity
	Child arrival & independent activities
10 min	Opening (for example, pledge, helper chart, calendar [2–3 minutes], songs with movement)
15 min	Circle time (for example, read aloud, introducing center activities, talking about children’s experiences)
60 min	Centers/small-group time (includes child-directed play in play centers)
15 min	Snack time
15 min	Circle time (for example, science and math activities, read aloud)
30 min	Outdoor time (for independent play and teacher-child conversations)
15 min	Circle time
10 min	Closing/Reflection

### Full-Day Schedule

Time	Activity
	Child arrival & independent activities
10 min	Opening (for example, pledge, helper chart, calendar(2–3 minutes), songs with movement)
15 min	Circle time (for example, introducing center activities, talking about children’s experiences)
60-90 min	Centers/small group instruction time (includes child-directed play in play centers)
15 min	Snack time
15 min	Read aloud
20 min	Outdoor time (for independent play and teacher-child conversations)
15 min	Circle time (for example, science, math activities)
30 min	Lunch time
15 min	Read aloud
	Rest time
15 min	Movement/large motor/music
15 min	Circle time
30 min	Centers (for example, child-directed play, science discovery, child-directed reading or writing time)
25 min	Outdoor time (for independent play and teacher–child conversations)
10 min	Closing/reflection

In addition to teacher guidance and conversation during learning activities, teachers can assist children’s learning during other times of the day, such as outdoor time and snack or meal time.

## Suggestions for Outdoor Time

- Move close to a group of children and describe what they are doing. (“I see Josh and William running very fast!” “Juan and Sandra are building a big sand castle together.”) This is a good time to teach action words and descriptive words such as *climbing, swinging, running, building, shouting, chasing, racing, riding and fast, quick, powerful*.
- Ask the children open-ended questions as they are playing. (“Marvin, how does it feel when you swing high?” “Keshia, what are you making with your sand pile?”)
- Point out interesting things outdoors that children might not have noticed, such as a bird’s nest in a tree, a bug crawling in the grass, or workers building a house. Invite children to talk about what they see and what they think is happening.

## Suggestions for Meal Time

- Show children each part of the meal they will be eating, and ask them if they know what it is. If they don’t recognize or name it correctly, name it for them and encourage them to say the name of the food or drink.
- Label utensils and other items on the table. Use these words throughout the meal: *plate, cup, spoon, fork, napkin, bowl, pitcher, serving spoon*
- Encourage the children to describe and talk about the food they are eating. For example, they may be eating *round, orange carrots; long, skinny, green beans; or soft, white bread*.
- Make these descriptions spontaneous and creative rather than just encouraging repeating phrases. Encourage the children to come up with their own descriptions of their food, such as *My tomato looks like a ball! My bread is squishy like a sponge*.
- Take opportunities to talk to the children about table manners, such as staying seated while eating and not talking with food in their mouths.
- Use meal time as a conversation time to reflect on the activities children completed earlier in the day, rather than just telling them to eat so that it can be a time for developing rich language and conversational skills.