

# How Parents and Families Support Background Knowledge

## Introduction

Children learn and gather more and more information as they interact with people and their environments. Over time they develop a deep understanding of the routines of their lives and the words people say to them. They learn how to eat, play, walk, and run. They learn how people interact with one another, what they wear, and what things are used for. They learn their family's way of doing things—their cultural beliefs, values, rules, and expectations in different settings, such as stores, homes, restaurants, places of worship. Young children gain background knowledge as they:

- ▶ Connect new information to knowledge they have in memory
- ▶ Understand and gain new knowledge through observations, interactions, and instruction
- ▶ Solve problems and figure out how objects and their world work
- ▶ Expand their use of language and develop new vocabulary
- ▶ Reflect on what they know

Talking, reading, exploring, and just spending time with special adults provide lots of opportunities for young children to build background knowledge. The more children understand and know about their world, the easier it will be for them to acquire new knowledge (Kaefer, Neuman, & Pinkham, 2015; Sénéchal, Thomas, & Monker, 1995).



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# Supporting babies to develop Background Knowledge

## STRATEGIES

Babies begin to learn about the world around them even before they are born! With every interaction that babies and young children have with their environments and the people in them, they gather new information about how things work, how people respond, and what it feels like to be hungry or full, wet or dry, sleepy or alert. Babies develop background knowledge primarily from their varied experiences in their world and by interacting with adults who will help them make sense of those experiences.

### **Babies develop Background Knowledge when parents and family members:**

- ▶ Notice when babies are alert and interested and take advantage of these moments to interact by, for example, describing to them what they see and hear and talking to them about their routines (Rosenkoetter & Wanless, 2006)
- ▶ Use gestures, such as pointing, to direct children’s attention to objects or people of interest (e.g., “Look! See the squirrel!”) (Harris, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2011)
- ▶ Respond to babies’ needs by, for example, swaddling a baby to help her feel secure when sleeping, or feeding him as soon as he is hungry (Bell & Ainsworth, 1972)
- ▶ Include them in such cultural events as celebrations, traditions, rituals, and worship (Walker & Scott-Melnyk, 2002)
- ▶ Talk to babies about their daily routines and activities, such as feeding, diapering, swaddling, tummy time, using their home language (Rosenkoetter & Wanless, 2006; Stockall & Dennis, 2012)
- ▶ Offer safe toys and/or objects—things like balls, spoons, cups—that have different textures, such as smooth, bumpy, or soft (Bakeman & Adamson, 1984)
- ▶ Talk to babies as they explore and intentionally labeling textures, shapes, sounds, and actions (Barton & Brophy-Herb, 2006; Notari-Syverson, 2006)
- ▶ Engage babies in “conversations” by responding with different facial expressions, gestures, and/or words each time a baby babbles and coos (Fernald & Weisleder, 2011)
- ▶ Take babies out into the community to such places as grocery stores, parks, forests, places of worship and talk to them about sights, sounds, and smells (Volk & Long, 2005)



## Some ways parents and family members support babies' Background Knowledge

### STRATEGIES

#### At Home



Nine-month-old Paloma is tired and sleepy. "Time for bed, *mi amor*," Abuelo whispers. "Here's a soft blanket for you," Abuelo continues as she gently lays Paloma down on the blanket and begins to swaddle her. "First one side," she says tucking the bottom corner of the blanket around Paloma's shoulder, "then the other." When Abuelo finishes swaddling Paloma she says, "All done. Now you won't get cold." Then she gently picks her up and carries her off to bed.



#### At Home



Clara notices that 4-month-old Jennie is staring at a stuffed cat in her crib. Clara picks up the toy and moves it closer to Jennie's face. "Cat," she says as she gently shakes the cat. Jennie follows the cat's movement with her eyes. "Do you want to hold the cat?" Clara asks. "Here! You hold it," she says as she puts it in Jennie's hands. Jennie brings the cat to her mouth and begins to chew on it. "Oh! Does that cat taste good?" Clara asks.

#### At Home



Four-month-old Elina sits on her Mami's lap. "*La linda manita, que tiene el bebe*," Mami sings as she gently waves Elina's hands. "*Que linda! Que bella! Que bonita es!*" Mami brings Elina's hands up towards the sky as she sings the final word. By the time Elina is 6 months old, she will wave her own hands in the air as soon as her mother begins to sing this song.

#### In the Community



Mai takes 11-month-old Hong for a walk to the store in her stroller. When they stop at a busy intersection, Mai says, "Look at the red stop sign. That means we have to stop before we cross the street so we can be careful and safe. Cars have to stop, too." When she sees it is safe to cross, Mai says, "The cars stopped—so we can cross the street now. Let's make sure we stay in the crosswalk!" They cross to the other side and continue to the store. On their way home, Mai repeats her talk about traffic, street signs, and safety and even uses again the new word, "crosswalk," so that Hong can learn more about these words and concepts.





# Supporting toddlers to develop Background Knowledge

## STRATEGIES

Toddlers develop background knowledge through their interactions with others and with guided opportunities to safely explore the world. Parents and family members help toddlers develop background knowledge by providing them with many meaningful, hands-on experiences and by telling them what they see, hear, smell, and touch and why they do and do not do certain things. Toddlers learn the words that they hear, so it is important that they hear adults speak in the languages the toddlers are learning.



### Toddlers develop Background Knowledge when parents and family members:

- ▶ Talk about what children see (e.g., “Look at those ants carry those big crumbs! Let’s watch and see where they are taking them.”) (Zero to Three, n.d.)
- ▶ Teach them new and interesting words and concepts—for example, day and night, the changing seasons, types of weather, or how things grow (e.g., “That is a coconut! It is the biggest seed in the world!”) (Collins, 2010, 2012)
- ▶ Help toddlers safely explore the world by doing with them such things as turning over rocks to look at insects, feeding the birds, looking up at clouds, drawing pictures in the dirt with sticks, and making mud pies (Veselack, Cain-Chang, & Miller, 2011)
- ▶ Visit different places in the community, such as the grocery store, park, forest, or church, and talk about what they see and hear (e.g., “Can you smell fish? This is the fish market. Let’s see if there are lobsters to look at.”) (Tabors, Beals, & Weizman, 2001)
- ▶ Know what toddlers know and stretch that knowledge (e.g., “Remember when we saw the ducks swimming with their webbed feet? Well, frogs have webbed feet, too. Those flaps of skin between their toes helps them swim fast!”) (Rosenkoetter & Wanless, 2006; Stockall & Dennis, 2012)
- ▶ Respond to toddlers’ questions (e.g., “That’s a good question. Let’s think about how we can find out the answer.”) (Robson, 2012)
- ▶ Provide feedback that helps toddlers expand on what they know and learn more about the world (e.g., “Well, yes. It looks like a duck, but it’s a swan. See how it has a long neck . . .”) (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008)
- ▶ Explain daily routines and activities (e.g., “First, we have to go to the grocery store, and then we will go visit your abuelita.”) (Rosenkoetter & Wanless, 2006; Stockall & Dennis, 2012)
- ▶ Encourage and support imaginary play (e.g., “Look at this box! We can pretend it is a boat or a rocket ship or a fire truck . . .”) (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001)



### In the Community

Three-year-old Soledad is at the market with her abuelo. Soledad sits in the shopping cart as they go to each section. "Let's get some chilies," says her abuelo, as she looks at her shopping list. "Chilies is a type of vegetable. Look! There are beans and squash and tomatoes right next to the chilies. They are all vegetables, too!"



Soledad's abuelo is helping her learn that vegetables are a category of food and that chilies, beans, and tomatoes are part of that category. Soledad is also learning about the market and shopping lists while she has fun spending time with her abuelo, who loves her a lot.

### At Home

Henry's dad is taking apart the TV's remote control. "No work?" Henry asks. "No," Dad says. "It doesn't work. It needs new batteries." Dad pries off the back of the remote. "Look," he says. "There are two dead batteries in here." "Dead?" Henry asks. "Well, not really dead. They just don't work anymore." Dad asks Henry to get him two new batteries out of the nearby package. "One, two," Dad counts as Henry hands them over. "Now I put them back into the remote, close the cover, and . . . ta da!" Dad points the remote towards the TV and turns it on. "All better!" Henry cheers. "Yes. The new batteries made the remote all better! Thanks for your help, buddy!"

# Supporting preschoolers to develop Background Knowledge

## STRATEGIES

Children have background knowledge and their own ways of thinking about the world—often called “funds of knowledge”—that are developed through their experiences with their family and within their culture (Moll et al., 1992). The more opportunities they have to engage in conversations and experiences with others, the more they will develop these “funds of knowledge.” In addition, their background knowledge and experiences are a rich source of content for classroom conversations.



### Preschoolers develop Background Knowledge when parents and family members:

- ▶ Show children their own interest and curiosity in the world (e.g., “This book says that crabs and ants have exoskeletons. I’ve never heard that word! Let’s keep reading and see if we can find out what an exoskeleton is!”) (Zero to Three, n.d.)
- ▶ Use conceptually rich talk that builds children’s knowledge of words and concepts (e.g., “A bat is nocturnal. That means they are active only at night.”) (Paratore, Cassano, & Schickedanz, 2013)
- ▶ Engage children in concrete, meaning-making activities, such as planting a garden (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006), and include opportunities to learn important, extended vocabulary—words like “seed,” “plantlet,” “cutting,” “bulb,” and “tuber”—and concepts in meaningful ways (e.g., “We need to water the garden today because it has not rained, and plants need water to grow.”) (Cervetti et al., 2007)
- ▶ Explain unfamiliar words and concepts (e.g., “That window is transparent. ‘Transparent’ means something is clear and you can see right through it!”) (Elley, 1989)
- ▶ Connect new knowledge to what children already know (e.g., “Remember how we saw those chickens sitting on their eggs to hatch them. . . . Frogs are different! Frogs lay their eggs in water, and then they swim away!”) (Rosenkoetter & Wanless, 2006; Stockall & Dennis, 2012)
- ▶ Answer (or try to answer) children’s questions (e.g., “It *does* look like the moon is following us, but I am not sure why. Let’s see if we can find out . . .”)
- ▶ Ask questions during and after story reading (e.g., “Why do you think the mouse helped the lion? What would you do if you were the mouse?”) (Whitehurst et al., 1988)
- ▶ Ask questions that encourage thinking and reasoning about everyday experiences (e.g., “Why do you think a police siren makes such a loud noise?”) and the natural world (e.g., “How does camouflage keep animals safe?”) (Peterson & French, 2008)
- ▶ Explore the sights, sounds, and smells of the local community (e.g., “Do you smell that? I think the bakery is making bread. Let’s follow our noses and see.”) (Volk & Long, 2005)
- ▶ Share age-appropriate informational and narrative texts, and read parts or all of the text depending on children’s interest (Schickedanz and Collins, 2013)
- ▶ Encourage children to paint, draw, and “write” to show what they know and what they are interested in (Notari-Syverson, 2006)





## Some ways parents and family members support preschoolers' Background Knowledge

### STRATEGIES

#### At Home



During dinner, 4-year-old Carlitos tells his parents and brother about something that happened at school that day. "Today, Chiara's uncle brought his backhoe to school." His mother asks, "What did he tell you?" "He told us about how he works for a contractor who helps build houses and stores." "That sounds



interesting," his father says. Carlitos continues, "He says that everybody has different jobs at a construction site, but that they all have to work together. If they didn't, it would be dangerous." "Did you get to sit in the backhoe?" his brother asks. "Yes! And I got to touch the controls. He also drives an excavator. My teacher asked if he could bring it to school. That was so funny!" "Why was that funny?" Carlitos' brother asks. "Because," Carlitos explains, "you can't *drive* an excavator to school. It has crawler tracks—not wheels!" After dinner, Carlitos shows his family pictures of backhoes and excavators in his favorite book, pointing out crawler tracks and a trailer that could be used to bring the excavator to school.

#### At Home



Li and her mother are getting ready to have tea when Karen, the home visitor, arrives. After an encouraging nod from her mother, Li asks Karen if she would like a cup of tea. "Why, yes. I would," Karen says as she reaches for the teapot. "Li can do it," Li's mother says. "Pouring tea is something that we like to do for our guests." Li smiles and nods. "Thank you," Karen says and smiles. "But please, just pour me half a cup. I can't drink a whole cup. It will fill me up," she says. She points to the cup and shows Li where "half a cup" is and where a "whole cup" is. Li nods as she pours the tea with her mother's help. "Here is a half a cup for you and a whole cup for me," she says.



## Resources for Background Knowledge

## STRATEGIES

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## Resources for Background Knowledge

## STRATEGIES

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