



Word Wonders User's Guide

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Word Wonders



ZERO to THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

Word Wonders Authors' Note

ZERO TO THREE is thrilled to share the *Word Wonders* curriculum with the early education community, as we continue our work of ensuring all children under age five have access to rich and engaging learning experiences. As with all ZERO TO THREE resources, *Word Wonders* represents an intentional braiding of research-based learning experiences; joyful play and exploration; and nurturing relationships. We are deeply grateful to the **General Motors Foundation** for the support that allowed us to develop this resource and provide it free of charge to the early education community.

We have been especially fortunate to have the assistance of **Lucy Hart Paulson**, Ed.D., CCC-SLP who, as our expert reviewer for *Word Wonders*, ensured that each activity was sound pedagogically, aligned with the science of reading, and also provided children with a fun and enriching entry point for learning in the early years.

Alisha Alford, MA, Ed. shaped this resource by offering her review as a skilled and experienced preschool special educator; her perspective and feedback ensured that *Word Wonders* activities are robust and rigorous for young learners as well as realistic for teachers to implement in an early childhood setting.

The *Word Wonders* curriculum is unique in that activities are paired with specially-composed songs. These compositions were the creative brainchild of **Dr. Jennifer McDonel**, Associate Professor of Music and Director of Music Education at Radford University. Dr. McDonel composed and performed the original music featured in the *Word Wonders* curriculum.

Most importantly, we offer our endless gratitude to the pilot sites (both early education programs and a library system) that took a chance on testing our (then draft) early language/literacy curriculum.

These sites implemented *Word Wonders's* activities, provided weekly feedback on their effectiveness, and met with us regularly to suggest strengths and improvements.

We are incredibly thankful for the outstanding programs below that helped us ensure that *Word Wonders* was not only an age appropriate, engaging, and rich learning tool for young children, but also user-friendly and informative for educators as well.

Our *Word Wonders* pilot sites included:

- Ericson Public Library, Boone, IA
- The Little Scholars Club, Chicago, IL
- Sewall Child Development Center, Denver, CO
- Young Horizons Child Development Centers, Long Beach, CA

Word Wonders Author Biography

Word Wonders author **Rebecca Parlakian, MA, Ed.** is a child development and parenting specialist who serves as senior director of programs at ZERO TO THREE, where she manages a portfolio of federally and privately funded projects related to healthy child development and high-quality teaching. Rebecca has coauthored five parenting education and professional curricula, including both *Problem Solvers* (an early STEM curriculum available for free download at www.zerotothree.org/ProblemSolvers) and *Early Connections* (<https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/early-connections-a-parent-cafe-curriculum-from-zero-to-three/>), a parent café curriculum that demonstrated positive impacts on parent responsiveness and children's social-emotional skills. Rebecca has also developed a wide range of parenting resources on topics related to child development, high quality instructional practices, challenging behavior, fatherhood, and more. Her written work has appeared in a variety of publications, such as the *ZERO TO THREE Journal and Young Children*. Rebecca holds a master's degree in education and human development, with a concentration in infant–toddler special education, from the George Washington University, where she served as adjunct faculty for ten years.

Expert reviewer **Dr. Lucy Hart Paulson, Ed.D., CCC-SLP**, is an author and literacy specialist with a mission of bringing research to practice. She is also a speech-language pathologist with years of experience working with educators and young children and their families in a range of educational settings. In addition, Lucy was an associate professor teaching and conducting research in the areas of language and literacy development and disorders. She provides professional development using a broad-based perspective blending areas of language and literacy together resulting in effective, appropriate, and engaging language-based literacy instruction and intervention for all children. Additionally, she is the co-author of *Good Talking Words*, a social-communication skills program for young children; *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling* (LETRS®) for Early Childhood Educators, 2nd Edition; and *Building Early Literacy and Language Skills*, a resource and activity guide for young children.

Contributor **Alisha Alford, MA, Ed.** is an early childhood special educator and former special education attorney. She holds a Master's degree in Early Childhood Special Education from George Washington University and has taught inclusive preschool classrooms in both public school and private early childhood settings. Her work focuses on identifying innovative ways to introduce and promote the use of developmentally appropriate instructional practices in diverse early education settings.

What Is Word Wonders?

The *Word Wonders* Curriculum is a supplemental tool that provides early childhood educators with a set of 20 age-appropriate, play-based activities designed to introduce foundational early language and literacy skills to children aged 18 months to 48 months. Each activity provides meaningful opportunities to practice these skills in the context of story-sharing experiences and structured play.

The activities in *Word Wonders* are aligned to early language/literacy objectives based on existing research¹ as well as the Early Learning Outcomes Framework², developed by the Office of Head Start. Activities feature meaningful experiences with:

- Phonological skills, including segmenting words in sentences, early rhyming skills, syllable awareness, and discrimination of beginning sounds (onsets) in words,
- Language/Vocabulary development including mastery of action words (verbs) and descriptive language (adjectives), as well as opportunities to practice early comprehension skills,
- Print awareness, including identifying and interpreting print in the environment; and
- Writing skills, including fine motor development, experience with writing utensils, and early exploration of the shapes and strokes used in written English.

Each unit in *Word Wonders* includes:

- An opening shared reading experience with suggested discussion questions to use with children—designed to support expressive communication skills and comprehension;
- A song—suggested to reinforce targeted literacy/language skills;
- Two play-based activities that align with learning objectives; and
- A family handout (in English/Spanish) that offers suggestions for at-home early language/literacy activities to share with children.

Early Language and Literacy Objectives

The early language and literacy learning objectives used in this curriculum are derived, in large part, from the Emerging Literacy Screening found in *Building Early Literacy and Language Skills* (Paulson, Attridge Nobel, Jepson, & van den Pol, 2001) and the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF): Ages Birth to Five², which is designed to illustrate the continuum of learning for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers across five central domains. The ELOF is grounded in comprehensive research around what young children should know and be able to do during their early years.

Please see **Appendix A** to review a table summarizing the language and literacy objectives utilized in this curriculum.



¹ Institute for Education Sciences. (2017.) *What does 20 years of research say about teaching language and literacy in preschool?* https://ies.ed.gov/sites/default/files/migrated/rel/regions/southeast/pdf/What_does_20_years_of_research_say_about_teaching_language_and_literacy_in_preschool.pdf

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (n.d.) *Interactive Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five*. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/interactive-head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework-ages-birth-five>

The Science of Reading and Very Young Children

The “Science of Reading” describes the existing evidence, based on decades of research, that summarizes the process of learning to read and outlines the instructional practices that have been shown to support students on their literacy journey. This evidence base has spotlighted five key components in reading development—essentially, outlining what we need to teach.³ Those skills include:

1. Phonological awareness
2. Phonics
3. Fluency
4. Vocabulary and oral language comprehension
5. Text comprehension

While the science of reading focuses on practices appropriate for kindergarten-age students and older, a significant body of research has established developmental sequences and expectations for early literacy learning during the earliest years. This evidence base informs our work in early education. *Word Wonders* focuses on four areas in which children are building critical precursor reading and writing skills in the early years. Each of the 20 units in *Word Wonders* aligns to one of four key sub-domains of early language and literacy skills. These include:

1. **Phonological skills**—such as rhyming identification and production; segmenting words in sentences; syllable segmentation and blending; recognizing beginning sounds in words (onsets)
2. **Vocabulary and oral language comprehension**—such as learning the meanings of new words, using new words correctly and in context, and understanding/producing longer utterances
3. **Text comprehension** (for pre-readers, this is understanding the meaning of the story being read aloud) demonstrated by activities like: re-telling the story through gestures and/or words, acting out the story, and predicting or answering questions about the story. We also include emerging **print awareness**⁴ in this domain. Print awareness is the understanding that print has meaning. Children learn to recognize symbols in their environment. Later, they learn how print is used in their culture (in English, that print is read from left to right, top to bottom and that words consist of letters, and spaces appear between words). Children learn how books “work” and recognize that books contain text; eventually they understand that it is the print (not the illustrations) that adults are reading.



³Jiban, C. (2026). *The science of reading explained*. Northwest Evaluation Association: <https://www.nwea.org/blog/2026/the-science-of-reading-explained/>

⁴Reading Rockets. (n.d.) *Basics: Print awareness*. <https://www.readingrockets.org/reading-101/reading-and-writing-basics/print-awareness>

In addition, *Word Wonders* focuses on a fourth area of literacy development—writing skills. A recent survey of PreK-3 teachers⁵ found that 77 percent of respondents reported that fine motor skills, like holding pencils, using scissors, and writing, have become more challenging for young students. This trend likely results from a variety of reasons: increased screen use, reduced outdoor play, use of “easier” clothing fasteners (like Velcro® instead of shoelaces, elastic waists instead of buttons and zippers), and less exposure to activities like blocks, lacing boards, drawing materials, and crafting, to name a few. As a result, *Word Wonders* was designed to offer young children rich, meaningful opportunities to build fine motor skills, learn how to use writing utensils, and begin to make letter-like marks on the page.

Word Wonders translates and incorporates the best instructional practices to ensure they are appropriate for children aged 18 to 48 months. The sections below outline the beliefs and practices utilized and promoted within this resource.

Guiding Principles in Word Wonders

Word Wonders reflects the current research base on best instructional practices for early and emergent literacy skills. The curriculum focuses on four sub-domains (“building blocks”) of early literacy⁶ including:

1. **Phonological awareness**—this sub-domain refers to a child’s ability to recognize and manipulate the syllables and sounds within spoken words.
2. **Print awareness**—this sub-domain refers to a child’s growing knowledge of letter names/letter recognition; letter sounds; and how print works.
3. **Writing skills**—this sub-domain refers to a child’s ability to explore and use writing utensils (like crayons, markers, pencils), make random marks, and imitate writing. Eventually, children understand text has meaning and use marks to communicate.
4. **Language use/vocabulary development**—this sub-domain refers to a child’s ability to comprehend and use spoken language, including vocabulary, listening skills, comprehension, developing grammar, and narrative understanding and production.



⁵Will, M. (2024). *Young kids are struggling with skills like listening, sharing, and using scissors*. Education Week: <https://www.edweek.org/the-state-of-teaching/2024/teaching-learning/young-kids-are-struggling-with-skills-like-listening-sharing-and-using-scissors/>

⁶Institute of Education Sciences. (n.d.). *Foundations in emergent literacy instruction: Snapshot series*. https://nces.ed.gov/sites/default/files/migrated/rel/infographics/pdf/REL_SE_Foundations_in_Emergent_Literacy_Instruction_Overview.pdf

Curriculum units map to these four domains and within each unit, teachers can implement two play-based activities aligned to specific learning objectives (see Appendix A). The design of each activity reflects research-based emergent literacy instructional practices^{3,7}, including:

Language and Vocabulary Development Instructional Strategies	Phonological Awareness Instructional Strategies	Writing Instructional Strategies	Print Awareness Instructional Strategies
Strategies include: • Use of Dialogic Reading (see page 13) • Explicit instruction for target (novel) words, with child-friendly definitions • Use props or play-based activities to introduce/teach concepts • Pose open-ended questions that invite extended responses • Prompt multi-turn conversations with children • Model new vocabulary and/or phrases in everyday conversation • Extend by repeating the child's response and adding to it • Recast, or restate what a child says in a more complete or correct form (if a child says "poon", the teacher might respond: "yes, that is a spoon.")	Strategies include: • Use of activities that target phoneme identification/matching, and blending, counting, segmentation, and production of sounds/syllables • Embed these activities in the daily routine, such as during transitions and wait times	Strategies include: • Demonstrate writing • Introduce letters (letter names and sounds) • Encourage students to draw, copy, trace, and write with a variety of writing utensils • Offer activities designed to nurture fine motor skills • Encourage children to write their ideas at their developmental level (from scribbles to letters)	Strategies include: • Introduce all 26 letter names and sounds, gradually—starting with high-frequency letters and adding a few new letters per week; circle back to previously taught letters to reinforce • Teach concepts of print (parts of a book, reading left to right in English, and the concept that text (not pictures) is what the adult is reading) • Use small-group instruction, but keep explicit instruction short and make it playful • Use print referencing during read-alouds—focus children's attention on print by tracking text that is being read aloud • Reinforce learning through practice, play, and daily routines

⁷Institute for Education Sciences. (2017). *What does 20 years of research say about teaching language and literacy in preschool?* https://ies.ed.gov/sites/default/files/migrated/re/regions/southeast/pdf/What_does_20_years_of_research_say_about_teaching_language_and_literacy_in_preschool.pdf

WELCOMING FAMILIES AS PARTNERS

The relationship a child has with their parent(s) and/or primary caregiver(s) provides a source of safety, unconditional love, nurturance, and—learning. In fact, family support for language and literacy activities at home is positively related to children’s later literacy outcomes, including reading skills, vocabulary growth, and overall literacy achievement.⁸ The home literacy environment (defined as the broad set of both informal and intentional language/literacy practices a child experiences, the availability of age-appropriate print/writing materials, and a child’s access to community-based literacy experiences⁹) is a key variable in children’s early learning. Direct, interactive engagement in literacy activities between caregivers and children allows for scaffolding (coaching and support), dialogue, modeling, and feedback—all of which are associated with a growth in foundational early skills like vocabulary, phonological awareness, and comprehension.^{10, 11}

Shared enjoyment during these moments has a “self-perpetuating” influence, as the more parents perceive their child is enjoying literacy activities, the more likely they are to engage in these routines, which in turn supports stronger skill development.¹² This is why *Word Wonders* includes family resources to align with each activity in the curriculum. Each resource offers family members a fun, play-based activity to share with their child, specifically designed to nurture early language and literacy skills. *Word Wonders’* family resource set is available in English and Spanish. Pilot sites report that they found it most effective to share the resource early in the first week that an activity was introduced; subsequently, some sites followed up with families by sharing documentation of learning (photos, video) and asking parents to share their own experiences.

Instructional Beliefs Used in *Word Wonders*

Word Wonders activities reflect current best practices in early language and literacy instruction (see above). In addition, it represents specific beliefs and guiding principles about child development and early learning:

1. **Honor child development.** Toddlers and preschoolers bring unique skills and abilities to early education programs. This curriculum seeks to provide children with a play-based entry point for exploring and acquiring foundational understandings about language and literacy. We understand that child development unfolds in spurts and starts, and that every child approaches learning experiences with their own unique set of strengths and needs. Our goal was to design a curriculum resource flexible enough to meet each child where they’re at, while providing research-based and rigorous opportunities for all children to build a strong early language and literacy foundation.



⁸ Boone, B. J., Cunningham, P. D., Bachman, H. F., & Wellman, M. E. (2021). Partnering with families for early language and literacy: research-based strategies for early childhood educators, 2nd edition. <https://ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu>

⁹ Hayes, C., Murnan, R., & Bequette, S. (2026). Family, culture, and literacy: Unlocking the power of home for early literacy achievement. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 54, 1971-1981. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10643-025-01986-9>

¹⁰ Inoue, T., Manolitsis, G., de Jong, P., Parrila, R., & Georgiou, G. (2020). Home Literacy Environment and early literacy development across languages varying in orthographic consistency. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. Article 1923.

¹¹ Logan, J. A. R., Justice, L. M., Yumus, M., & Chaparro-Moreno, L. J. (2019). When children are not read to at home. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 40(5).

¹² Deitcher, D., Aram, D., & Abramovich, D. (2024). Parents’ literacy beliefs, home literacy activities, and children’s early literacy skills: Stability and progress approaching first grade. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(11), 1038.

2. **Enhance children’s skills and knowledge.** Each *Word Wonders* unit begins with a shared reading activity that applies the principles of dialogic reading¹³ to engage children’s background knowledge and provide opportunities for them to connect and engage with the story. These conversations center children’s belongingness in *Word Wonders* activities from the very start, as well as primes them for the learning to come.
3. **Ensure each activity has multiple entry points for learning.** Each unit in *Word Wonders* was designed to provide children with two play-based learning experiences—each designed to support the activity’s stated learning objectives. In addition, each unit features a book sharing activity and a suggested song (with movement). These different learning pathways allow children many entry points for exploring, practicing, and mastering the unit’s objectives.
4. **Learning can be looped in the early years.** *Word Wonders* is not a “one and done” curriculum. This resource can be “looped” (i.e., repeated) once all units have been completed. Repetition allows children to engage with the books and learning experiences differently as they have matured and gained new skills, and means they will continue to benefit from the content over a longer period of time.
5. **Recognize that family members are central to children’s learning.** Sharing the provided family resources offers parents and caregivers ideas for nurturing learning at home, which helps children generalize and master new skills. A secondary benefit of sharing the at-home resources is that they allow families to see and be a part of the curriculum their child is experiencing.
6. **Build physical movement into learning activities.** This principle is particularly important when working with very young children who are driven to move! Many of the activities in *Word Wonders* invite children to move about the classroom as part of the learning activity, and all of the songs include movement suggestions for students to try. Young learners thrive when they are touching, lifting, doing, and exploring.
7. **Rigor means richness.** In *Word Wonders*, children experience a wide variety of challenging activities that encourage them to explore, imagine, test, and refine their understandings. Each unit provides suggestions for increasing/decreasing the difficulty for teachers to align the challenge level to children’s current skill development. Learning objectives provided in each unit, organized by age, help teachers know what to expect and what’s coming next as children grow.
8. **Allow children to engage in “productive struggle.”** Activities that are too easy (or too difficult) are not fun or engaging; when children are not engaged, they are not learning. Productive struggle means that children are appropriately challenged and, with scaffolding (support and/or coaching), they can master the task at hand. *Word Wonders* offers teachers suggestions for increasing (or decreasing) the challenge level of each activity to allow for individualization and to provide an appropriate and rigorous level of challenge.
9. **Create opportunities for meaningful peer interactions to support learning and discovery.** Each *Word Wonders* unit suggests small group activities or games that encourage age-appropriate peer interactions. Children begin to develop their first friendships between 30 and 48 months—and are curious about peer actions and reactions as they play in parallel between 18 and 30 months.
10. **Learning happens everywhere, not just at “literacy time.”** *Word Wonders* provides suggestions for embedding the learning objectives across the day using daily routines as opportunities to reinforce vocabulary or concepts like rhyming, beginning sounds, or segmenting. Users can find these ideas in each unit’s *Making Connections Across the Day* section.

¹³ Pillinger, C., & Vardy, E. J. (2022). The story so far: A systematic review of the dialogic reading literature. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 00(00), 1-16. https://reachoutandread.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Pillinger_2022_A-story-so-far-A-systematic-review-of-the-dialogic-reading-literature.pdf

Structure of Word Wonders

Each *Word Wonders* activity includes the following components:

CHILDREN ARE LEARNING TO...

Details the specific language and literacy learning objectives of the activity.

MATERIALS NEEDED

Outlines the materials required for the activity.

PREPARATION

Explains what early educators need to do in order to prepare the activity. The first page of each activity, in the top right corner, indicates an estimate of the preparation time required for each of the 20 activities. As an open-access resource, *Word Wonders* was designed to require the purchase of as few materials as possible. As a result, activities require some preparation by teaching teams, most often creating materials using provided handouts. For example, this might include printing and cutting a set of cards to implement a game or collecting materials like cardboard boxes. To allow adequate time to prepare, it is a good practice for teachers to review the activity they plan to implement a week in advance.

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

Explore: The *Explore* section specifies a book to share with children; teachers will also find a list of suggested discussion questions designed to promote deeper engagement with and understanding of the story. These questions also give children an opportunity to share their own knowledge and experiences in the context of the narrative. Teachers should plan to read the book once or twice with limited interruptions; after that, they can pause on each page to ask a question or facilitate a short conversation. Younger children may have smaller vocabularies and/or respond to questions nonverbally (through points or gazes). Adjusting the questions asked to align with children's current development is good practice.

Engage: The *Engage* section (Activity 1) is an opening activity that emerges from the selected book. These learning experiences help teachers to expand, enrich, or adjust children's understandings of a concept/skill, using children's familiarity with the book as an anchor point.

Expand: The *Expand* section (Activity 2) introduces a second game or learning experience aligned to the objectives, expanding beyond the book and introducing new vocabulary and/or concepts. Suggested discussion questions and/or instructional approaches are embedded into teacher instructions.



Reflect: As a closing, the **Reflect** section invites children to share their thinking and experiences. This conversation is designed to reinforce key concepts and give children the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge/mastery. It also forms a playful closing ritual for the **Word Wonders** unit.

Individualizing the Activity: This section provides teachers with concrete suggestions for making activities more or less challenging to align with children’s current skills and abilities. **Word Wonders** is intended to be a curriculum tool that meets the needs of a wide age range (18 months to 48 months). Teachers may use this guidance to individualize activities as needed. (Please see the section below titled *Adaptations* for ideas on modifying activities for children with unique learning needs, developmental delays, or disabilities.) Note that some of the “more challenging” adjustments may require additional preparation.

Making Connections Across the Day: Children master new skills, concepts, and vocabulary through repeated exposure in a range of contexts. The *Making Connections* section suggests ways that teachers can expose children to language and literacy concepts through daily routines and daily teacher-child interactions. This practice provides ongoing opportunities for children to generalize (apply in new situations) learning they have mastered during the unit.

Song: This section includes the lyrics to the activity’s song and suggestions for involving children in the song (for examples, gestures, prompts, and games to play while listening). The original songs in the curriculum are available for download or streaming, and other suggested songs can be accessed via the provided website link.

Handouts: Educators will find supporting materials for implementing the unit in this section. These resources may be copied any number of times without additional permission from ZERO TO THREE.

Just for Families (English/Spanish): This section provides caregivers with suggested language and literacy activities to try at home. Teachers can copy and distribute this resource to families as they introduce each unit in the curriculum.

Making Math Connections

Each unit in the curriculum also includes a suggestion for “Making Math Connections.” This section, denoted by a yellow shaded box, suggests a play-based activity to extend learning into the math domain. These suggested “Making Math Connections” activities are aligned to early math sub-domains including: counting and number awareness; addition and subtraction; shape awareness; spatial awareness; patterns; sets; and measuring and comparing.

To access additional resources on early math instruction, consider using the *Problem Solvers* curriculum. This free, downloadable early math supplementary curriculum was developed by ZERO TO THREE and has been found effective in building early math skills for three-year-olds. Users can access the *Problem Solvers* resource at: www.zerotothree.org/ProblemSolvers

MAKING MATH CONNECTIONS

Emphasize the counting aspect of the story. Prompt children to count the different sets of creatures before they feed them to the frog. Model good counting—pointing to objects as you count them, for example.

Ask children, “*How many?*” after they finish counting to reinforce their understanding of total quantity (cardinality).

For older children, at the very end, when all the creatures escape the frog’s belly, have them place the bugs/creatures in the number sequence (1, 2, 3, and so on). Then invite children to count the total quantity (15). This will be challenging, and you may need to help children with number names after 10.

What Age Children Are the Activities Designed For?

The curriculum is designed for children aged 18 months to 48 months of age. Each unit offers variations on the activities for children aged 18 to 30 months and children aged 30 to 48 months. Teachers can select the approach best aligned to their students' current skills and needs. Additionally, teachers can find suggestions in the **Individualizing the Activity** section for making each activity more or less challenging to meet the needs of mixed age groups or children with unique learning needs.

In What Order Should We Deliver Word Wonders?

There is no specific sequence to the *Word Wonders* curriculum. The set of 20 language/literacy activities encompasses a range of skills (including those listed in Appendix A). Teachers can select activities based on focus areas in their primary curriculum or based on child interest, available time, or other criteria. We trust educators to use their best judgment about what skills and which activities their students might enjoy or benefit from most at a particular point in time.

Another reminder: The *Word Wonders* curriculum is designed to “loop”—meaning that once you have completed all activities, you can introduce them again. As children mature, they will engage with the activities in a new way and continue to benefit.

How Frequently Do I Implement Each *Word Wonders* Activity?

Each activity is designed to be delivered to children across the week, with the activities repeated at least three times. Some programs may want to repeat the book/activities for two weeks, as children benefit from repeated exposure to promote familiarity, opportunities for practice, and sufficient time for mastery. Sometimes adults express concern that children will be bored by an activity that repeats, but our pilot sites found the opposite: children asked for *Word Wonders* activities and requested past activities be repeated.

Research indicates that children need repeated experiences with a concept in order to master it.¹⁴ The leveling guidance provided to teachers in *Word Wonders* (offering tips on making each activity more or less challenging) helps educators ensure that activities are individualized to each child's current and emerging skills.



¹⁴ LoBue, V. (2019). *Why children like repetition, and how it helps them learn*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-baby-scientist/201907/why-children-repetition-and-how-it-helps-them-learn>

Why a Question-Centered Approach to Story-Sharing in *Word Wonders*?

The *Explore* section of each activity in *Word Wonders* is a story-sharing experiences. Books were selected for use in this section due to their alignment with the unit's learning objectives and represent high quality children's literature. Together, the books (listed in **Appendix B**) feature a diverse mix of both classic titles and fairly new releases. All books are currently available and in print.

We suggest that teachers share each story with children straight through with limited interruptions the first time or two they read it. After the initial reading, teachers are encouraged to shift the story-sharing experience over to children by making it more of a dialogue—asking questions, pausing for children to fill-in-the-blank, encouraging predictions, and prompting children to make connections between the story and their own lives. Discussion questions are suggested for each unit for this purpose.

The use of questions in *Word Wonders* is aligned with the practices of dialogic reading¹⁵, an approach that outlines questioning strategies educators can use to shift reading from a teacher-monologue to a teacher-student dialogue. Dialogic reading is a longstanding practice that has been shown to support the development of receptive (listening) and expressive (speaking) skills.¹⁶ It is also an important opportunity for teachers to tap into children's background knowledge and life experiences, creating moments of connection and promoting relationship-building.

Using *Word Wonders* in Library Settings

One of our pilot sites for *Word Wonders* was a library system that implemented the curriculum as part of a parent-child early literacy program. This site reported that the curriculum was easily adapted for a library setting and offered the following suggestions for others library systems:

1. **Provide families with materials from the activities to take home.** Our pilot leader provided families with "take home" resources so they could repeat the literacy games at home.
2. **Consider expanding the activities beyond the early literacy domain to promote parent-child engagement.** For example, in Unit 15 (which introduces vehicle names), our pilot leader invited parents and children to complete an art activity by dipping toy cars into paint and rolling them across paper.
3. **Use the library's community-based setting as part of the learning experience.** For Unit 16, focusing on environmental print, our pilot leader organized an outdoor walk around the library to encourage children to find and identify signage in the world around them.
4. **Leverage existing library resources.** One of the selected books in the curriculum is *The Napping House* by Audrey Wood. Our pilot leader shared that the library owned an interactive Velcro® version of this book (designed to promote sequencing skills and child engagement), which he selected to use for the read-aloud.



¹⁵ Mjengwa, S. K., & Douglas, S. N. (2026). Enhancing early literacy development through dialogic reading. *Childhood Education*, 102(3), 52-57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2026.2658415>

¹⁶ Pillinger, C., & Vardy, E. J. (2022). The story so far: A systematic review of the dialogic reading literature. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 1-16. DOI: 10.1111/1467-9817.12407

5. **Use the curriculum as an opportunity to feature related titles.** While the curriculum utilizes twenty examples of high-quality children’s literature, our pilot leader pulled a set of related stories for children and families to explore. He especially wanted to emphasize the use of age-appropriate nonfiction books to highlight “real life” examples of animals, vehicles, opposites, and more.

Multi-language Learners

While *Word Wonders* was not developed specifically for multilanguage learners (MLLs), we recognize the vast number of young learners entering early education programs with rich experience in two (or more) languages. In fact, the latest data indicates that 32 percent of all children aged birth to 8 years in the United States are dual language learners (DLL), and 43% of DLLs are living in families experiencing low incomes.¹⁷

Outlined below are generally accepted best practices for early literacy instruction for young children learning two or more languages. Educators can integrate practices like these as they implement *Word Wonders* with the children and families they serve. Keep in mind that many of the supports we know MLLs benefit from will support monolingual students as well. All young children are learning language and their brains are “wired” to do so with rich language experiences and interactions.

MLLs are a diverse group of children. Some have been exposed to two (or more) languages from birth; some children developed a foundation in one language before learning a second or third. Some older MLLs may be bilingual *and* biliterate (speaking and reading in more than one language), while others may be bilingual, but not fully biliterate. This is why, ideally, each child’s unique strengths and needs are taken into account when providing instructional support.

Following is broad guidance on research-based early language and literacy instructional strategies for MLLs:^{18,19,20}

1. **Recognize young learners as valuable contributors with an important skill set.** Multilanguage learners bring tremendous strengths to the learning setting. Their language skills should be seen as a strength and used as a foundation on which they map new understandings.
2. **Build on what students already know. Help them bridge their primary language skills to their new(er) language.** Point out cross-language connections and differences. For example, invite students to share words from their home language that make the same sound as the one you are teaching. Share cognates (words that look and sound similar across languages—like “sugar” in English and “sukkar” in Arabic) with children. Labels and signage in the learning environment should be inclusive of the languages used by students. See **Additional Resources** for a link to the *Bridging Foundational Skills Between Languages* resource which provides support with this analysis.
3. **Help students practice making the letter sounds.** Be explicit: *To make the __ sound, I __ with my lips/mouth/tongue.* Have children watch your mouth as you model saying sounds.



¹⁷ Migration Policy Institute. (n.d.) *Young dual language learners in the United States and by State*. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-state-profiles-young-dlls>

¹⁸ Instruction Partners. (2024). *5 Questions about reading curricula that can help multilingual learners*. <https://instructionpartners.org/2024/06/13/5-questions-about-reading-curricula-that-can-help-multilingual-learners/>

¹⁹ Instruction Partners. (2022). *Being responsive to multilingual learners in foundational skills instruction*. <https://instructionpartners.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Multilingual-Learner-Instructional-Strategies.pdf>

²⁰ Escamilla, K., Olsen, L., & Slavick, J. (2022). *Toward a comprehensive effective literacy policy and instruction for English learner/emergent bilingual students*. https://multilingualliteracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/21018-NCEL-Effective-Literacy-White-Paper-FINAL_v2.0.pdf

4. **Use peer interactions, visuals, and movements to help students develop oral language and vocabulary skills.** Ask open-ended questions that invite children to predict, retell, compare, share their ideas, or make a personal connection to stories. Give children meaningful opportunities to speak and listen in both languages. Include visual supports/gestures to introduce vocabulary. Repeat and practice vocabulary across the day. Consider pre-teaching vocabulary before story-sharing to promote children's comprehension.
5. **Provide targeted support when teaching sounds or sound patterns that do not exist in the children's primary languages,** like when teaching the /l/ sound to a child's whose first language is Japanese. Model precise pronunciation of sounds. Let children see where you put your tongue or how you move your lips when producing a sound. Provide plenty of practice opportunities. Use everyday routines and interactions to revisit these sounds and sound patterns.

Research confirms that literacy skills developed in students' first languages positively transfer to their second or third language(s).²¹ By intentionally building on students' early foundations, early childhood educators can support the mastery of language and literacy skills among MLLs.

How Do I Use the Songs in Word Wonders?

The goal of music education for toddlers and young preschoolers is to help them become skilled listeners by exposing them to a range of musical styles, tempos, rhythms, and melodies. In the early years, the goal is for children to become thoughtful listeners who respond naturally to music through playful movement.

The songs composed for *Word Wonders* and the songs suggested for use in the curriculum are tonally and rhythmically diverse and invite children's participation through listening and movement. While the lyrics build on the activity's learning objectives, the songs stand on their own as distinctive and varied musical experiences. With repeated exposure to the songs, children may begin to sing portions of a song or join in the refrain. However, this is not the expectation or the goal. (Nor do teachers need to learn/sing all the songs!) Rather, teachers should regularly share the music with children to give them experience with *listening*. "Listening" doesn't mean sitting still and quietly—children are encouraged to respond spontaneously to the music through movement and, over time, vocalizations as they begin to anticipate a refrain or phrase.

Teachers can utilize the songs in the curriculum in a variety of ways and settings. For example, they might:

- Play the song to cue the start of the *Word Wonders* activity time
- Play the song to cue the close of the *Word Wonders* activity time
- Play during Circle Time as a whole-group activity
- Play the song during free play as "background" music
- Play during pick-up/drop-off to share this element of the curriculum with parents
- Provide the songs to parents as a digital playlist to create connections between school and home learning experiences



There is no right or wrong way to use the music element of *Word Wonders*, though the goal is to provide children with frequent exposure to each song over the period teachers are implementing the activity.

²¹ Bloomberg, P. J. (2025). *Multilanguage learners at the heart: Bridging the divide in literacy instruction*.
<https://thecorecollaborative.com/multilingual-learners-at-the-heart-bridging-the-divide-in-literacy-instruction/>

Adapting Word Wonders for Children With Developmental Delays or Disabilities

Each child enters the early education setting with their own unique set of strengths, needs and experiences. Our calling as educators is to ensure every child has the opportunity to access learning experiences that are right for them “right now”, that are rigorous in terms of pedagogy, and that are responsive to their ongoing development. The suggestions below are designed to provide broad ideas for adaptations and modifications that early childhood educators may wish to consider when implementing *Word Wonders* with children who have special needs. These suggestions are not intended to be comprehensive. Partnering or consulting with a Part C early intervention professional or a special educator can help early educators understand the unique needs and goals of a specific child and plan for the modifications that will support their full participation. It is also important to point out that many of the instructional strategies/modifications mentioned below could be useful to *all* children, not just those with diagnosed or suspected delays/disabilities.

FOR CHILDREN WITH EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION DELAYS:

The activities suggested for children 18 to 30 months of age and the guidance provided for reducing the challenge level of activities (in the section *Individualizing the Activity*) often give teachers tips for helping children participate/respond to questions through gazing, pointing, or by showing their thinking. Encouraging this nonverbal communication is a great option for children who may demonstrate some delays in oral communication skills. Teachers can restate a child’s nonverbal response using language: *You pointed at the fire truck. The fire truck is coming to help!* Teachers can also model the vocabulary or “script” to respond to a question or participate in a game. Finally, remember to pause: give children the time and space they need to generate a response.

FOR CHILDREN USING OR LEARNING AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE:

For children using sign language as their primary communication modality, ensure that part of your preparation time is learning signs for key vocabulary that will be used in the activity. Your student’s special educator or early interventionist may be able to help with this. There is also an American Sign Language dictionary available from Sign ASL (www.signasl.org), with a mobile phone application available as well. This allows you to introduce and expand a child’s expressive vocabulary, while also promoting their participation in the activity. As a best practice, consider teaching the target signs to all children; this normalizes the use of ASL in your setting and promotes peer connections as children can more easily and meaningfully engage as peers.

FOR CHILDREN USING AUGMENTATIVE AND ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION (AAC) DEVICES:

For children using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, make sure that target vocabulary or phrases/responses are programmed into the device. Consider pre-teaching these words and phrases to your student before introducing to the class so they are prepared and ready to participate with their device.



FOR CHILDREN WITH RECEPTIVE COMMUNICATION DELAYS:

Receptive communication delays often mean that children have difficulty understanding language, which can impact a child's ability to follow directions, understand conversations and read-alouds, and process verbal information. Teachers help when they simplify the language they use with children (using simpler vocabulary and shorter sentences). Teachers can also prepare visual supports to help children understand instructions or follow along with a story. Repetition and routines can be especially useful as they allow children to hear the same language and phrases multiple times. For example, teachers may choose to share the story with a child with receptive communication delays several times before introducing to the whole class. Re-telling activities, using puppets or a children's theatre approach also supports comprehension and vocabulary retention.

FOR CHILDREN WITH COGNITIVE DELAYS OR DISABILITIES:

Because cognitive delays/disabilities can be so unique to the child, it is critical to partner (if at all possible) with the child's early intervention professional or special educator to better understand their current skills and the goals agreed upon with families in their IFSP (individualized family service plan) or IEP (individualized education program). Generally speaking, strategies like the following can help children participate in learning experiences:

- Review guidance in the *Individualizing the Activity* section and/or the activity suggestions for 18- to 30-month-olds; these sections can give teachers ideas for reducing the difficulty of each unit for older preschoolers with skills/goals more aligned to a younger age range.
- Use visual prompts (clear, simple images) and props to help children understand a story or new vocabulary with greater ease.
- Repeat stories and key vocabulary to promote understanding over time. Consider introducing these to children prior to sharing with the whole class so they have an opportunity to build a foundational understanding.
- When asking a question, reduce the field of choices to two options and/or simplify the rules or complexity of a game/activity to increase a child's ability to participate.
- Consider using 3-D (real) props, rather than picture cards, for activities.
- When needed, identify an alternate, more appropriate language/literacy learning objective that is challenging but attainable, and reflects the child's current skills and abilities.

FOR CHILDREN WITH MOTOR DELAYS OR DISABILITIES:

Consider how modified materials or environments can promote children's participation. A number of activities in *Word Wonders* are structured around movement. Children in your classroom may have different ways of moving their bodies. As you plan to implement activities, consider how you can include all. For example, some activities prompt specific movements (like bending the neck, raising shoulders, waving arms, clapping hands, etc.); teachers can decide ahead of time which of these they will ask of each child, aligning the request to reflect their abilities.

In terms of environment, teachers may need to choose a larger space in which to implement group activities (to provide room for a wheelchair/gait trainer), modify the size of props in order to make sure they are easy to grasp, and/or use larger dice to make them easier to grasp. You might decide to attach grips to writing utensils or page turners to books so that children can more easily participate in shared reading activities. For games that use cards, teachers can glue these images to pieces of thick cardboard or foamboard to make them chunkier and easier to hold. Pre-planning ensures children can fully access the learning experience.

Appendix A

Early Literacy and Language Skills Emerging From 18 to 48 Months

The table below highlights the early language and literacy concepts covered in *Word Wonders*, but is not meant to be inclusive of every language/literacy skill emerging in this period. Note that the indicated age ranges represent the typical time period that a specific skill is “emerging” – it will likely still be imperfect or inconsistent. While every child learns at their own pace, this table is designed to provide early educators with an at-a-glance tool for planning purposes.

Skill	Language/Literacy Concepts	Age Range	Activity
Use simple vocabulary to describe people, objects, actions and movements	Expressive language	18 to 48 months	1, 2, 3, 10, 12, 15
Name objects in illustrations	Expressive language	18 to 48 months	17
Use language to explain, ask, and answer questions and express feelings	Expressive language	24 to 48 months	5
Combine words to form simple sentences	Expressive language	24 to 48 months	13
Sing or chant phrases from a song or rhyme	Expressive language, Phonological awareness	24 to 36 months	6, 13
Repeat or sing a familiar song or rhyme		36 to 48 months	
Begin to produce rhyming words	Expressive language, Phonological awareness	36 to 48 months	10
Re-tell a story using single words, gestures/actions	Expressive language	18 months (gestures) to 36 months (language)	5, 7
Re-tell a story with 3 to 5 events, using words, actions, or props		36 to 48 months	
Answer a simple question about the story through actions, words, and/or simple sentences	Expressive language (Receptive language also developing.)	18 months (gestural responses) to 48 months (verbal responses)	5
Understand simple language (nouns, verbs, adjectives)	Receptive language	18 to 48 months	1, 2, 3, 4, 15
Enjoy and demonstrate familiarity with songs, rhymes, or rhyming stories	Receptive language, Phonological awareness	18 to 30 months	6, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15
Understand and use descriptive language (like: big/small, fast/slow)	Receptive and Expressive language	36 to 48 months	1, 3, 4
Understand and use sequencing words (like: first, next, then, last)	Receptive and Expressive language	36 to 48 months	5
Segment (“break”) a sentence into individual words	Phonological awareness	36 to 48 months	13
Recognize, tap, and blend syllables	Phonological awareness	24 to 48 months	14, 15
Begin to recognize rhyming words	Phonological awareness	36 to 48 months	7, 8, 9, 10
Enjoy hearing a string of words with repeated onsets (beginning sounds)	Phonological awareness	18 to 36 months	11, 12
Begin to attend to beginning sounds (onsets) of words	Phonological awareness	36 to 48 months	11, 12

Skill	Language/Literacy Concepts	Age Range	Activity
Recognize and “read” environmental print (text)	Print awareness	24 to 48 months	10
Notice the presence of environmental print (text) in the world	Print awareness	18 to 48 months	16
Understand that environmental print or print/text in books has meaning	Print awareness	24 to 48 months	16, 17, 20
Recognize the meaning of environmental print on familiar signage (like stop signs)	Print awareness	36 to 48 months	16
Point to text on a page or sweep a finger along a line of text (as they “read” or babble)	Print awareness	24 to 48 months	17
Recognize familiar alphabet letters	Print awareness / Alphabet knowledge	36 to 48 months	17
Emerging fine motor (finger/hand) skills	Writing	18 to 48 months	18
Emerging hand-eye coordination	Writing	18 to 48 months	18
Distinguish between alphabet letters (text) and drawing (illustrations)	Writing	18 to 36 months	19
Join in the Alphabet Song, all or part (learning alphabet letter sequence)	Writing / Alphabet knowledge	24 to 48 months	19
Understand what writing utensils do and how they work	Writing	18 to 24 months	20
Use writing utensils to explore cause/effect through mark-making	Writing	18 to 24 months	20
Produce scribbles and call it “writing” (using writing utensils with intent)	Writing	24 to 30 months	20
Produce letter approximations (shapes or scribbles that look like letters)	Writing	30 to 48 months	19, 20
Recognize some letter names and shapes	Writing / Alphabet knowledge	36 to 48 months	19
Write some or all of the letters in their names	Writing / Alphabet knowledge	36 to 48 months	19, 20

This table was informed by:

Furano, et al., & Parks, S. (2004). *Revised Hawaii early learning checklist*. Vort Corporation.

Office of Head Start. (2024). *Early learning outcomes framework*.

Infant-toddler: <https://www.headstart.gov/school-readiness/article/language-infant>

Preschool: <https://www.headstart.gov/school-readiness/article/language-preschool>

Paulson, L. H., Noble, L. A., Japson, S., & van den Pol, R. (2001). *Building early language and literacy skills*. Sopris West Educational Services.

Appendix B

Children's Books Required to Implement *Word Wonders*

Activity Number	Word Wonders	Author
1	From Head to Toe	Eric Carle
2	Fire Chief Fran	Linda Ashman
3	Kitty & Cat Opposites Attract	Mike Hokkanen
4	Hot Rod Hamster	Cynthia Lord
5	The Little Red Hen	Paul Galdone
6	The Napping House	Audrey West
7	Over in the Meadow	Ezra Jack Keats
8	Dozens of Doughnuts	Carrie Finson
9	There's a Bear in My Chair	Ross Collins
10	A Frog in the Bog	Karma Wilson
11	Some Smug Slug	Pamela Duncan Edwards
12	Pete the Cat and the Perfect Pizza Party	James Dean and Kimberly Dean
13	Dear Zoo	Rod Campbell
14	See You Later Alligator	Sally Hopgood
15	Little Excavator	Anna Dewdney
16	I Read Signs	Tana Hoban
17	Egg	Kevin Henke
18	Mrs. McNosh Hangs Up Her Wash	Sarah Weeks
19	Oops Pounce Quick Run! An Alphabet Caper	Mike Twohy
20	The Word Collector	Peter H. Reynolds
*Note: All books available and in print as of June 26, 2026.		