ARKANSAS IMAGINATION LIBRARY

Building the Reading Brain

Birth–5 Teacher Guide & Family Literacy Activities

Every Arkansas Imagination Library book is an opportunity to build the reading brain. This guide provides developmentally appropriate, play-based learning experiences aligned with the Arkansas Early Learning Standards to strengthen language, literacy, and school readiness through meaningful interactions with books.

Mama Hug by Emma Straub

Delivery Month: November

Group 2 • 12 - 24 Months

Arkansas Infant/Toddler Early Learning Standards

SE1.1 Forms trusting relationships with nurturing adults
SE2.1 Experiences, expresses, and regulates a range of emotions
SE3.1 Shows awareness of self as a unique individual.
CD1.1 Shows curiosity and a willingness to try new things
CD3.1 Uses reasoning and planning ahead to solve problems and reach goals
PH1.3 Demonstrates gross-motor manipulative skills
PH2.2 Adjusts grasp and coordinates movements to use tools
LD1.1. Understands and responds to language (in child's home language)
LD2.1. Uses increasingly complex vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure (in child's home language)
EL1.1 Shows interest in literacy experiences
EL1.2 Engages in read-alouds and conversations about books and stories
EL2.1 Notices and manipulates the sounds of language

Science of Reading Foundations

- Serve-and-return interactions
- oral language exposure
- shared attention
- vocabulary development
- responsive communication
- gestures paired with language
- meaningful conversations with caring adults
- Repeated exposure to rich language builds the neural pathways necessary for future reading success.

Learning Goals

Language & Literacy: Increase receptive and expressive vocabulary through signs, pictures, songs, and repeated reading. Encourage communication through gestures, signs, sounds, and words.

Social-Emotional Development: Strengthen confidence as children communicate needs and ideas through signs and interactions.

Cognitive Development: Build understanding of symbols, pictures, and cause-and-effect communication.

Physical Development: Develop fine motor coordination through sign language movements, fingerplays, and hands-on exploration.

Start with the book:

Reading to toddler group

Create a cozy environment where you can gather children with varying mobility abilities, from crawling to walking. Sit down with the group of children, understanding that at this stage many children are participating in parallel play and may not interact with one another. Toddlers will also get up and then rejoin the group at times. Hold the book at eye level. Take time to show the pictures to each child.

Reading to an individual toddler

Gather the toddler onto your lap or in front of you, and let them explore the book by grabbing, turning pages, and lifting flaps. Position the book at the toddler's eye level. Read aloud in an animated voice, asking questions and discussing the images on the page as you go. Stay on the page for as long as the infant is interested, turning the page when the baby gives you an indication that they want to move on to the next page.

Activities to extend learning

Activity Title	Materials Needed	Instructions	Domains of Development/ Learning Standard	Why
Model book with baby dolls or stuffed animals	Baby dolls	As you read the book, have the toddler act out the actions with the baby dolls or stuffed animals.	Cognitive Development Social Emotional Language and Emergent Literacy	Role-play activities give toddlers the chance to demonstrate and explore their world.
Mirror Emotion play	Mirrors, pictures of children showing emotions	Have toddlers replicate faces in the mirror and talk about the emotions	Cognitive Development Social Emotional	This activity helps toddlers learn how

			Language and Emergent Literacy	facial expressions connect to emotion.
Sunflower Painting	Sunflower cut out, yellow paint, paintbrush.	After showing the sunflowers in the book, give children a sunflower pattern; have the children take yellow paint and paintbrushes and paint the flower.	Physical Development (fine)	Working with paint and filling the flower in with paint gives children an opportunity to develop fine motor skills.
Finger plays open shut them	none	Open, shut them, open, shut them, Give a little clap, clap, clap. Open, shut them, open, shut them, Put them in your lap, lap, lap. Creep them, creep them, Creep them, creep them, Right up to your chin, chin, chin. Open up your little mouth, But do not put them in.	Language and Emergent Literacy	Action supports building vocabulary through movement.
Sing and Dance party.	Music, shakers, noisemakers	Put on some fun music and give the toddlers shakers and have fun with a dance party.	Cognitive Development	Action supports building vocabulary through movement.
Make a family portrait.	Crayons, markers, construction paper, painter's tape	Give toddlers a blank piece of paper and let them draw, giving them a prompt to draw their family.	Physical Development (fine)	Working with writing

Teacher Reflection and Review

Anecdotal Notes: Observe and record individual responses during discussion, participation in activities, and engagement with materials
Photos: Capture children during activities, dramatic play, and art projects
Vocabulary Checklist: Note which children recognize and use book-related vocabulary words
Fine Motor Observations: Note children's ability to manipulate materials, use glue, and arrange pieces
Social-Emotional: Observe children's comfort level, ability to follow routines, and interactions with peers
Communication: Document forms of expression (words, sounds, gestures, pointing)
Engagement: Note level of interest and participation in each activity

Specific Observation Points:
Does the child respond to familiar vocabulary?
Does the child engage in dramatic play and role-playing?
How does the child transition between activities?

Differentiation

For Children with Language Delays or Limited Verbal Skills

Representation:
- Provide a communication board with bedtime pictures and words
- Use visual schedules throughout activities
- Offer audio version of the book
- Use high-contrast, large print materials

Action & Expression:
- Provide a communication board for each activity
- Offer hand-over-hand guidance
- Allow children to show understanding through actions rather than words
- Use Velcro or magnetic pieces instead of glue for easier manipulation

Engagement:
- Offer frequent breaks
- Use preferred sensory items (favorite blanket, stuffed animal)
- Create a calm, low-pressure environment
- Celebrate all attempts at participation

For Children with Fine Motor Challenges

Representation:
- Use step-by-step picture guides
- Label materials clearly

Action & Expression:
- Provide glue sticks instead of liquid glue
- Offer adaptive scissors or request teacher assistance
- Use larger crayons and markers
- Provide tape instead of glue for some activities
- Use Velcro dots for easier manipulation
- Offer hand-over-hand guidance
- Allow children to direct an adult who does the fine motor work

Engagement:
- Offer choices in materials and methods
- Provide frequent breaks
- Use preferred sensory items
- Create a pressure-free environment

For Children with Gross Motor Challenges

Representation:
- Use visual cues and picture schedules
- Provide clear, simple instructions

Action & Expression:
- Offer modified versions of movements (smaller range of motion)
- Provide support (wall, furniture, adult hand) for balance
- Use props (scarves, ribbons) to make movements easier
- Allow children to direct an adult who performs movements
- Offer alternative ways to participate (pointing, vocalizing)

Engagement:
- Provide a comfortable, safe space
- Offer frequent breaks
- Use preferred sensory items
- Create a judgment-free environment

For Children with Sensory Sensitivities

Representation:
- Provide visual schedules to prepare for transitions
- Use clear, simple language
- Offer choices to increase sense of control

Action & Expression:

- Offer quieter alternatives to activities
- Allow children to observe before participating
- Provide different textures to explore (soft blankets, smooth foam, satin ribbon)
- Allow children to opt out of activities
- Offer sensory breaks with preferred items

Engagement:
- Use a warm, gentle tone
- Offer choices and control
- Respect sensory preferences
- Provide a safe space to retreat if overwhelmed
- Use weighted blankets or compression items if helpful
- Limit transitions and provide advance notice
- Use calming music and soft lighting

For Advanced Learners

Representation:
- Introduce related concepts (sleep cycles, dreams, different bedtime routines around the world)
- Use more detailed illustrations and books
- Introduce written words alongside pictures

Action & Expression:
- Ask children to explain why each step is important
- Invite children to create new movements or songs
- Encourage detailed descriptions and storytelling
- Ask children to help teach peers

Engagement:
- Offer leadership opportunities
- Encourage problem-solving
- Ask higher-level thinking questions
- Provide opportunities for independent exploration

For Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Representation:
- Provide consistent, predictable routines
- Use clear, literal language
- Offer advance notice of transitions
- Use social stories about bedtime routines
- Provide visual supports for all instructions

Action & Expression:
- Provide a communication board
- Offer choices to increase sense of control
- Allow repetition of preferred activities
- Provide sensory breaks as needed
- Use visual timers for transitions
- Offer hand-over-hand guidance if helpful

Engagement:
- Use consistent routines and expectations
- Respect special interests and incorporate them when possible
- Provide a safe space to retreat if overwhelmed
- Use preferred sensory items
- Celebrate small successes
- Build relationships gradually

For Children with Hearing Impairments

Representation:
- Provide sign language or visual demonstrations
- Use written words alongside pictures
- Ensure good lighting for lip reading
- Use visual schedules
- Provide captions or transcripts for audio materials

Action & Expression:
- Provide a communication board with pictures and words
- Use gestures and facial expressions
- Allow children to use sign language or preferred communication method

Engagement:
- Use visual attention-getters (lights, hand signals)
- Provide one-on-one support as needed
- Use visual rewards and celebrations
- Create a visually rich environment

For Children with Vision Impairments

Representation:
- Use high-contrast colors (black on white, white on black)
- Provide tactile materials (textured fabric, 3D shapes)
- Use verbal descriptions of pictures and activities
- Provide audio version of the book
- Use real objects alongside pictures

Action & Expression:
- Use hand-over-hand guidance
- Offer verbal instructions and descriptions
- Allow children to touch and manipulate objects
- Use audio communication boards

Engagement:
- Use a warm, descriptive tone
- Celebrate participation
- Create a safe, familiar environment
- Use preferred sensory items
- Provide frequent verbal feedback

Assistive Technology and Accommodations

Visual Supports:
- High-contrast printed materials
- Large print books and vocabulary cards

- Visual timer for transitions
- Picture communication board

Auditory Supports:
- Lullaby recordings
- White noise machine
- Noise-reducing headphones
- Visual cues paired with verbal instructions

Tactile Supports:
- Weighted blanket
- Soft sensory items (stress ball, fidget toy)
- 3D foam shapes
- Real objects (pillow, blanket, toothbrush)

Communication Supports:
- AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) device if available
- Sign language or visual demonstrations
- Gesture and facial expression

Motor Supports:
- Chunky crayons and markers
- Velcro dots for easier manipulation
- Pre-cut and pre-torn materials
- Tape instead of glue
- Hand-over-hand guidance
- Adaptive utensils

Sensory Supports:
- Soft, calming music
- Scented items (lavender sachet)
- Weighted items
- Comfortable seating options
- Quiet space for breaks

Notes for Teachers

Creating a Calm Environment:
- Play gentle background music
- Keep the space uncluttered and organized
- Use soft furnishings (carpet, cushions, blankets)
- Maintain a warm, gentle tone of voice

Supporting Transitions:
- Use a visual timer
- Use a consistent transition signal (soft bell, song)
- Offer choices when possible
- Celebrate successful transitions

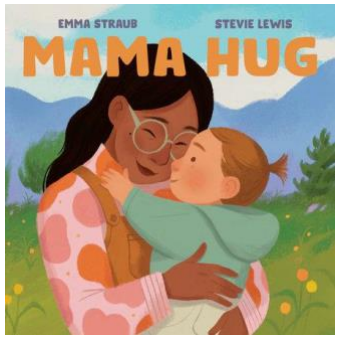
Managing Behavior:
- Use positive reinforcement
- Provide sensory breaks as needed
- Offer choices to increase sense of control
- Use a calm, patient approach

Individualizing Instruction:
- Adjust activities based on individual needs
- Provide one-on-one support as needed
- Celebrate individual progress
- Communicate with families about home strategies

Extending Learning:
routines at home
- Provide take-home materials (vocabulary cards, activity sheets)
- Suggest related books and activities
- Invite families to share their bedtime routines and traditions
- Create a classroom bedtime routine chart together

Family Connection

November 2026



Reading to your Child: 12 Months - 24 Months:

Reading is a "serve and return" interaction. This back-and-forth process is fundamental to brain wiring, especially in the earliest years. Serve-and-return interactions help parents create a safe, secure environment for toddlers and help young children recognize they're being cared for and understood.

- Read with joy and excitement. Use different voices for different characters.
- Stay on a page for as long as your baby is interested. Turn the page or stop reading when your baby looks away or seems tired or bored.
- Ask questions your child can answer by pointing. You can say, "Where's the doggie?" or "Where's the happy baby?" or "Who says meow?"
- Speaking in slow, short sentences and waiting for your child to take a turn talking helps him understand.
- Let your toddler give a picture a name; then add a comment like: "Yes, a plane! The plane is flying. The plane is flying in the sky."
- Help your child pretend to be a character in a book. You can pretend to feed a baby or be puppies, barking and running after each other.

Extend the book by trying these activities:			
Play-Based Activity Title	Materials Needed	Instructions	Why?
Finger plays: open shut them	none	Open, shut them, open, shut them, Give a little clap, clap, clap. Open, shut them, open, shut them, Put them in your lap, lap, lap. Creep them, creep them, Creep them, creep them,	Action supports building vocabulary through movement.

		Right up to your chin, chin, chin. Open up your little mouth, But do not put them in.	
Stacking activity	Blocks	Stack blocks one on top of one another, until the blocks fall or you run out; repeat as necessary.	Through this activity, the toddler gains fine motor skills by stacking one block on top of another.
Act out the book with a baby doll or stuffed animal	Baby doll or stuffed animal	As you read the book, have the toddler act out the actions with the baby doll or stuffed animals.	Role-play activities give toddlers the chance to demonstrate and explore their world.
Add the following activities to your daily routine:			
Daily Routine Activity	Instruction	Helpful Tips	
Bathtime or Diaper Routine: These are baby's fingers	These are baby's fingers, These are baby's toes, This is baby's belly button, Round and round it goes.	Songs, rhymes, and music assist in transition for toddlers as they move from one task to another.	Action supports building vocabulary through movement.
Bedtime Routine: Head and shoulders knees and toes	Head, shoulders, knees, and toes, knees and toes. Head, shoulders, knees, and toes, knees and toes. And eyes and ears and mouth and nose. Head, shoulders, knees, and toes, knees and toes.	Songs, rhymes, and music assist in transition for toddlers as they move from one task to another.	Action supports building vocabulary through movement.

Assessment for Parents

Use this checklist to observe and record your toddler's responses during sensory, music, and literacy activities. Mark what you notice during play-based activities at home.

Social and Emotional Development

- Seeks comfort from familiar adults; uses them as a secure base to explore
- Shows preferences for familiar people; may show separation protest that eases with reassurance

- Engages in simple social games (peek-a-boo, chase) and back-and-forth interactions
- Begins parallel play near other children; watches, imitates peers
- Shows a range of emotions; starts to use simple strategies to calm with adult support
- Begins to assert self (e.g., "mine," resists at times) while responding to consistent limits

Approaches to Learning (Attention, Persistence, Curiosity)

- Explores new toys/objects; tries different ways to make things happen
- Returns to an activity after brief interruptions; persists briefly on simple tasks
- Imitates adult actions during play; uses "trial and error" to solve simple problems
- Shows emerging ability to follow simple routines and transitions with support

Cognitive Development

- Understands simple cause-and-effect (push button → sound; drop toy → adult picks up)
- Matches or sorts by one attribute with support (e.g., puts shapes in sorter, stacks rings)
- Engages in early pretend play (feeds doll, "talks" on phone) that becomes more purposeful by 24 months
- Finds hidden objects; remembers where favorite items are kept

Language Development (Receptive and Expressive)

- Follows simple one-step directions (e.g., "Give me the ball," "Come here")
- Points to familiar people, objects, and some body parts when asked
- Uses gestures plus sounds/words to communicate wants
- By 18–24 months, uses at least 10–50 words and begins to combine two words (e.g., "more milk")
- Imitates new words; names familiar people/objects; uses simple pronouns near 24 months

Emergent Literacy

- Enjoys shared book time; brings books to adult; attends briefly to stories
- Points to and names familiar pictures in books
- Scribbles with crayons/markers; makes purposeful marks
- Turns board-book pages (several at a time early on; closer to one at a time by 24 months)

Fine Motor/Self-Help

- Uses pincer grasp to pick up small items; places objects into/out of containers
- Stacks 2–4 blocks; places shapes in simple sorter with growing accuracy
- Uses spoon with some spills; drinks from open cup with help
- Assists with dressing (offers arm/foot; attempts to remove simple clothing)

Social Studies

- Recognizes familiar routines, places, and people; anticipates what comes next
- Shows awareness of family roles (imitates chores, helps "clean up")

Creativity and Aesthetics

- Enjoys music and movement; bounces/dances to rhythm
- Engages in simple art exploration (finger paint, crayons); enjoys cause-and-effect of materials
- Uses pretend objects (spoon as microphone) with growing imagination

Family Connection activity

Play-Based Activity Title	Materials Needed	Instructions	Why?
Act out the book with a baby doll or stuffed animal	Baby doll or stuffed animal	As you read the book, have the toddler act out the actions with the baby doll or stuffed animal.	Role-play activities give toddlers the chance to demonstrate and explore their world.

Have enough baby dolls or stuffed animals for the family groups. Act out the actions for the book with the dolls or stuffed animals, demonstrating for the families. Give each family time to role-play the book with the child.

References

Arkansas Child Development and Early Learning Standards: Birth through 60 Months. (2016). Arkansas Department of Education and Arkansas Head Start State Collaboration Office. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/AR-Early-Learning-Standards-2016-1_20230505102527.pdf

Reading tips | Arkansas Imagination LIbrary. (n.d.). Retrieved July 23, 2026, from https://arkansasimaginationlibrary.org/reading-tips/

Straub, E. (2025). *Mama hug*. Rocky Pond Books.