

Fun Worksheets for Preschool Learning

Pranalee Sharma and Rima Kaur

Preschool education is imparted to children who are 3-6 years old. The age group of 3-6 years, that is, three years of preschool, in addition to classes I and II, will now fall under the Foundational Stage as part of the 5+3+3+4 pedagogical and curricular restructuring stated in the National Education Policy of 2020 (NEP 2020). The age range of 3-8 years is widely accepted as the stage of early childhood care and education (ECCE). As per NEP 2020, early childhood education must consist of 'flexible, multi-faceted, multi-level, play-based, activity-based and inquiry-based learning... to attain optimal outcomes in the domains of physical and motor development, cognitive development, socio-emotional-ethical development, cultural/artistic development and the development of communication and early language, literacy and numeracy.' (NEP 2020, Para 1.2, p. 7)

A very widely-used instructional material in preschools is the worksheet. A worksheet is printed instructional material in the form of a loose sheet of paper containing tasks or problems that help children explore and learn a topic. For teachers, the worksheet is an important assessment tool, as well.

Unfortunately, worksheets have slowly turned into a drill of questions that are repeated in the same format with usually only one right answer. Some might argue that worksheets also have scaffolding questions that foster inquiry-based learning, but the appropriateness of using these in early childhood can be questioned. Research has, time and again, established the significance of play and play-based learning in early childhood education, and the dichotomy between learning through play and learning through more academic approaches continues to exist. The demands of time have pressured children as young as 3-years to know the alphabet, numbers, counting; recognise shapes, and; so on, much before they are ready to do so. The recent focus on formative assessment to collect authentic evidence of children's progress has exacerbated classwork and homework in notebooks and worksheets. This disregards developmentally-appropriate practices and gives

rise to scenarios where young children are force-fitted into learning and assessment tasks that are not congruent with their learning needs.

However, the effectiveness of worksheets cannot be discounted even as they are categorised as a more cognitive (academic) approach to learning and assessment. Let us see how worksheets can effectively be designed and used in early childhood, specifically in the preschool years, in conjunction with other play-based pedagogical processes in a stimulating and rich learning environment. We can do this by first looking at a few worksheets that are commonly used in the preschool classroom.

Worksheets commonly used in preschool

Many critical concerns emerge when we examine these worksheets. Generally, such worksheets:

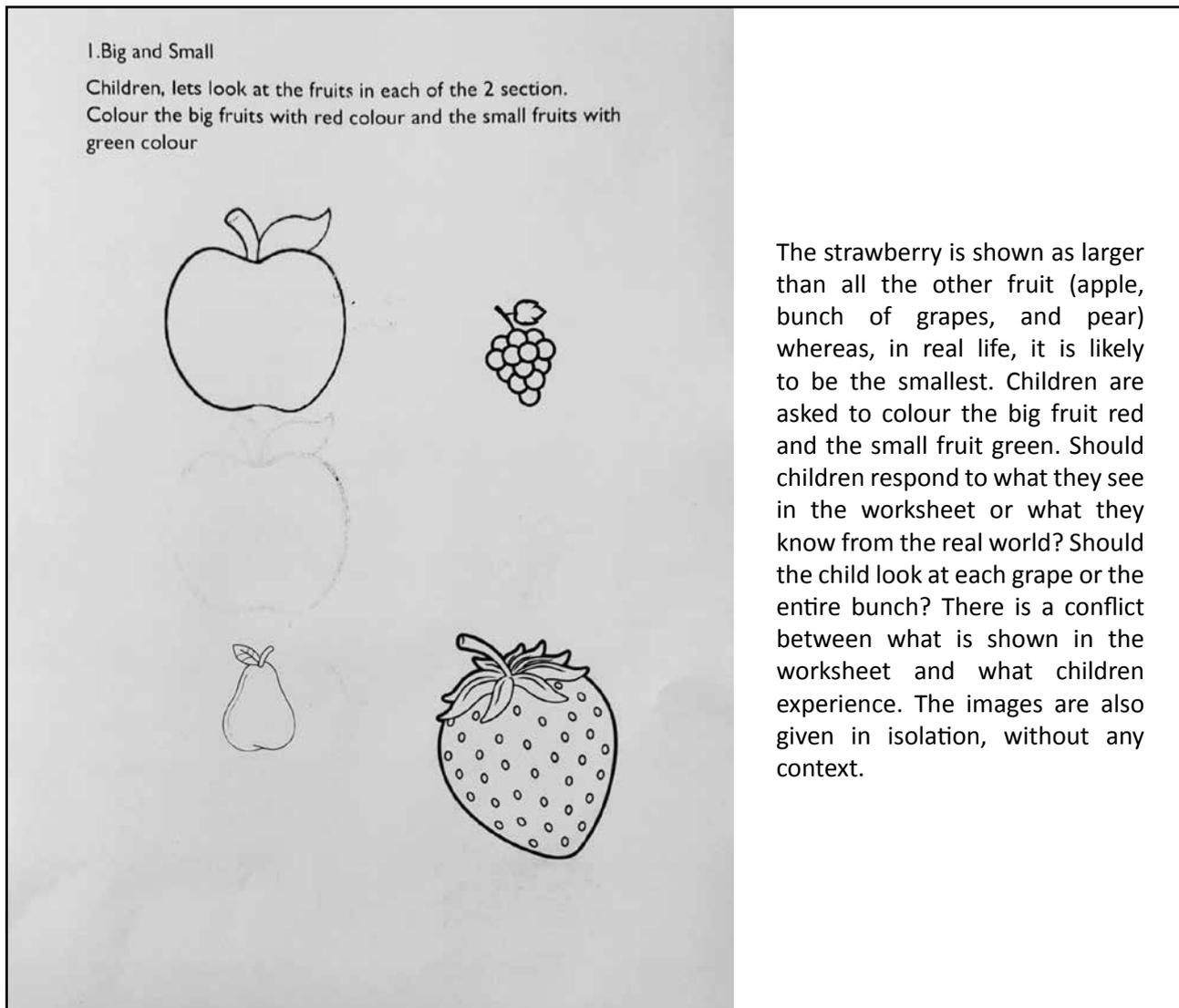
- Follow only traditional worksheet formats, such as copying, tracing, matching etc.
- Aim to develop fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination of children
- Are given to very young children who may not have developed a meaningful relationship with print
- Presuppose that the teacher has introduced the concept through play-based activities
- Focus on certain concepts only or these are too concept heavy/loaded
- Neglect or underrepresent aspects of a healthy attitude, skills of critical thinking, values, collaboration, communication, creativity, and socio-emotional development
- Are decontextualized, isolated, and divorced from children's experiences and interests
- Provide little to no intellectual, creative, or emotional stimulation to children
- May not even be designed by the teacher/school for the specific class/children in question
- Give the impression that they are child-friendly by incorporating pictures, colours, etc.
- May be riddled with factual and conceptual errors and inaccuracies

- Do not have clearly defined instructions for the teacher or may have instructions that are confusing
- Are in one language, that is, the medium of instruction, which is often not the children's home language
- Disregard children with disabilities who may benefit from a tweaked design or format
- Become the go-to assessment tool in the preschool classroom and push out anecdotal records, checklists etc.
- Are designed for collecting evidence, leaving no room for providing feedback for learning
- Align to only a few Learning Outcomes, if at all

These critical concerns give us food for thought regarding the features of good worksheets. A good

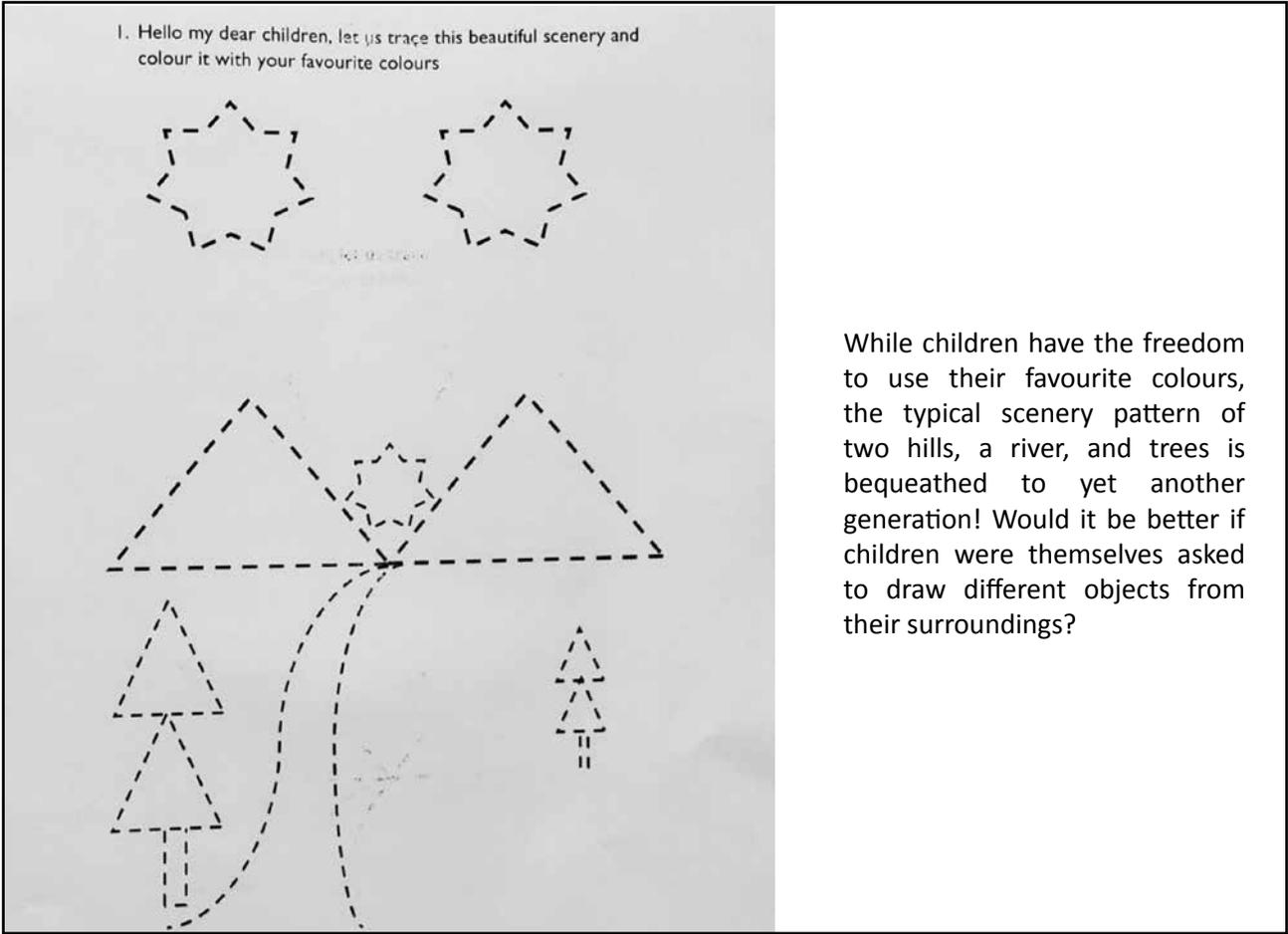
worksheet should:

- Use mixed formats, depending on the nature of the task
- Be developmentally and contextually appropriate
- Have simple, clear, and contextually relevant language
- Be factually and conceptually accurate
- Trigger curiosity and thinking
- Help identify the stage of learning and misconceptions, if any
- Be aligned to Learning Outcomes
- Encompass all domains of development
- Have an inclusive design and flexibility for adaptation
- Be used as one of the curricular materials in preschool



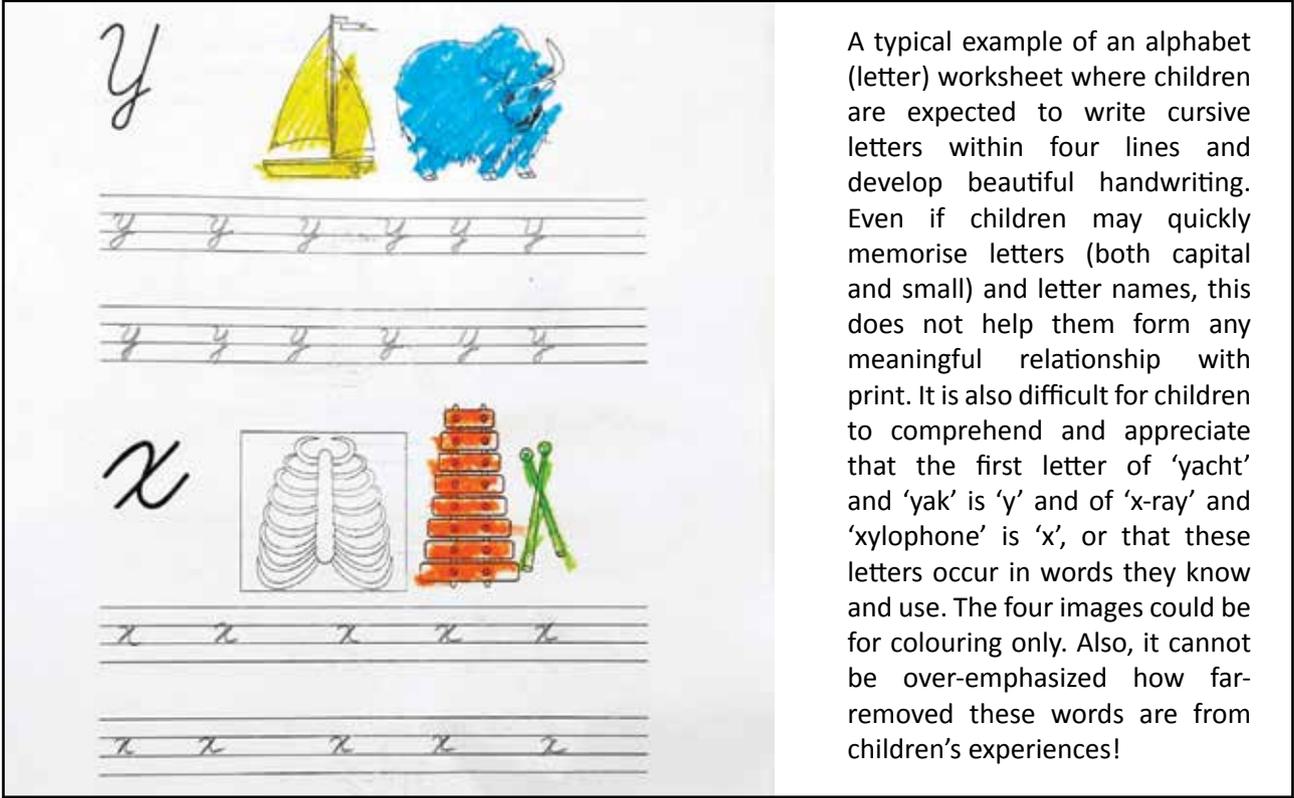
The strawberry is shown as larger than all the other fruit (apple, bunch of grapes, and pear) whereas, in real life, it is likely to be the smallest. Children are asked to colour the big fruit red and the small fruit green. Should children respond to what they see in the worksheet or what they know from the real world? Should the child look at each grape or the entire bunch? There is a conflict between what is shown in the worksheet and what children experience. The images are also given in isolation, without any context.

Figure 1. An example of a commonly used worksheet in preschool.



While children have the freedom to use their favourite colours, the typical scenery pattern of two hills, a river, and trees is bequeathed to yet another generation! Would it be better if children were themselves asked to draw different objects from their surroundings?

Figures 2 and 3. More examples of commonly used worksheets in preschool.



A typical example of an alphabet (letter) worksheet where children are expected to write cursive letters within four lines and develop beautiful handwriting. Even if children may quickly memorise letters (both capital and small) and letter names, this does not help them form any meaningful relationship with print. It is also difficult for children to comprehend and appreciate that the first letter of 'yacht' and 'yak' is 'y' and of 'x-ray' and 'xylophone' is 'x', or that these letters occur in words they know and use. The four images could be for colouring only. Also, it cannot be over-emphasized how far-removed these words are from children's experiences!

A teacher's view

An interview with a private preschool teacher from Nagaland gives insights into how worksheets are commonly used in the preschool years. She stated that most recently, worksheets were sent home during the pandemic so that parents had some support material and children had 'something to do'. When in school, children are usually handed worksheets from the very beginning. In the first two to three months of the ECCE programme, they engage in a lot of drawing, colouring, and tracing activities. This helps the teacher assess concepts like shapes, letters and numbers; and produces evidence of the child's progress. Once children go through this initial phase, worksheets related to other concepts are similarly introduced and used. The teacher also adds that worksheets are a regular feature every week, in addition to indoor and outdoor play, music and movement, etc. A standard set of worksheets is used year after year, though teachers who are creative may develop worksheets of their own.

This teacher admits that though most preschool teachers have got some form of training on how to design interesting and fun worksheets post the introduction of NEP, they have not yet been able to implement their learnings and are aware that worksheets in their current form are not very helpful. Another government preschool teacher from Nagaland shared that there are large differences between the use of worksheets in public and private preschools, with public preschools (both government schools and *anganwadis*) often facing a resource crunch when it comes to printing worksheets for all children.

'Fun worksheets' for early childhood

The Preschool Curriculum developed by NCERT

(2019) suggests using 'fun worksheets' along with a diverse list of activities. Now, what is 'fun'? When teachers say they want children to 'have fun', what do they mean? For children, fun can be activities that provide pleasure without any purpose. An activity that is accompanied by smiles and laughter can be termed as fun from an adult's perspective. Fun, in early childhood, is often equated with play. The NEP 2020 and the Preschool Curriculum clearly emphasise play and play-based learning as well as the significance of making a preschool classroom enjoyable using 'fun' worksheets. The children's choice and control over the activity or task in a worksheet have a role in defining a worksheet as fun or not. A worksheet that might seem like work can be fun depending on the choice, freedom, and control provided to children.

The question that arises then is, what kind of worksheets are appropriate for children in preschools? Can we look at worksheets which are not only educational but also pleasurable for children? Let us look at the process that is usually followed while developing a worksheet for early childhood.

Step 1: Planning

A preschool teacher first needs to decide the reason behind developing a worksheet. Every worksheet must serve a concrete purpose in the five domains of development, namely, physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and language. Several worksheets focus solely on cognitive and physical development but miss out on social and emotional development.

The questions a teacher should be able to answer at this stage are:

1. What is the purpose behind preparing this worksheet?

Planning

Preparing

Assessing

For example, the purpose could be to look at the child's progress in one of the domains of development.

2. For which age group am I preparing this worksheet?

For example, a teacher may prepare it for 3-year-olds, and needs to know what can be expected from a 3-year-old who can sort items by one characteristic as opposed to a 6-year-old who can sort items by more than one characteristic.

3. From where can I get ideas to prepare this worksheet?

For example, a teacher may discuss with fellow teachers, join a group of teachers on *WhatsApp*, or even refer to articles and blogs on early childhood.

Step 2: Preparing

Each worksheet must align with Early Learning Outcome(s) (outlined in the *Preschool Curriculum, 2019*). This also ensures the validity of the worksheet. A worksheet can be tagged as 'valid' if it is able to measure what it is supposed to measure.

The questions a teacher should be able to answer at this stage are:

1. To which Early Learning Outcome(s) is this worksheet aligned?

For example, the teacher may cluster two-three outcomes from different preschool goals.

2. Will the worksheet give me insights into a child's learning?

For example, the teacher may anticipate certain responses from children in specific areas.

3. Which pedagogy do I need to prepare for?

For example, the teacher may have to prepare the learning environment or design/obtain materials.

Step 3: Assessing

The third step is using the worksheets for the assessment of children's learning. Once children fill up the worksheets, teachers can use these to identify areas where improvement is required. The information gathered through worksheets helps both teachers and parents.

The questions a teacher should be able to answer at this stage are:

1. What does the child understand and not understand?

For example, the teacher may identify

misconceptions or gaps in learning based on the child's responses.

2. What should the child be learning?

For example, the teacher may identify what the child should focus on, based on the misconceptions they may have.

3. Which pedagogy would be appropriate to address gaps in learning?

For example, the teacher may change the instructional strategy, other material used, or the worksheet itself.

Ideas for 'fun worksheets'

Here are some suggestions for designing fun worksheets for children who are in preschool.

1. Standard worksheets

A few worksheets can certainly be in the usual format where a sheet of paper has a task that needs to be completed with a pencil or crayons. These can be made more engaging by keeping the principles of designing good worksheets in mind.

- a. Mazes: A variety of mazes can be designed for interesting problem situations, for example, going from home to the market to buy paper and crayons, taking a mother duck to her ducklings, helping a boy find his missing shoe, and a bee to a hive. Mazes should provide the right degree of challenge to children, that is, these should neither be too easy nor too difficult to complete.

- b. Matching: Instead of matching two columns, children can match using squiggly lines where the pictures, words, shapes, etc., are scattered across the page. This leaves children with more scope for navigating and playing with the page space while still solving the task. More creative and unconventional ways of matching can be explored. Matching emoticons to different picture-based situations (getting hurt, playing with friends, being surprised) and matching letters with initial sounds of words represented by pictures ('p' for pig, 'c' for cake, 'b' for bus) for developing sound-letter correspondence are a few examples.

- c. Joining dots: Children can join dots in serial order to form a picture that they can colour. The dots can be accompanied by numbers (depending on how far children can count) and even letters (a-z). The pictures should interest and excite children, for example, a many-legged insect, a funky vehicle, a flying dinosaur, or even a wizard

wearing a hat. An isolated picture, such as an apple or a strawberry in the middle of a white page that does not interest or excite children, should be avoided. It is better to have a larger and more detailed picture where one part is in dots rather than a small and boring picture that is fully made up of dots.

- d. **Odd-one-out:** Meaningful scenarios where an object, person, or animal is 'odd' and does not fit into the given category, for example, an elephant sitting on a tree with a parrot and a crow, a tortoise flying in the sky, or a fridge full of food and one shoe. Worksheets can slowly include more categories and abstract concepts in a decontextualised format, such as living and non-living things, solids and liquids, shapes, and edible and non-edible things.
- e. **Spot the difference:** Two near-identical pictures with a lot of details where children circle or point out which details are missing or different. The more detailed the picture and finer the differences, the greater the challenge.
- f. **Drawing and colouring:** Drawing and colouring pages can certainly be considered worksheets. Instead of arbitrary drawing assignments, children can be asked to engage with their culture and surroundings, for example, they can be asked to go home and draw an interesting/heavy object they cannot get to school, they can draw a scene of their family having a meal, and they can even draw themselves playing in their favourite corner of the house. Children can also draw from their imagination. For example, how they will look when they grow up, what they would like to wear for a celebration in school, or what their dream world would look like. These worksheets should not aim to assess or judge children's choice of colour, ability to colour within the lines, or overall finesse in art. Different materials like colour pencils, paints, vegetable prints, thumbprints, etc., can be introduced, depending on the nature of the task.
- g. **Alphabet-recognition worksheets:** Learning to form letters can begin with colouring and decorating large outlines of their names, slowly graduating to recognising, circling/underlining, and copying individual letters from their names, names of friends and family members, and other familiar words, preferably accompanied by detailed pictures for context, such as truck, bus,

and cycle on a busy road scene. This is preferred over tracing and copying small and capital letters in isolation, as commonly seen in 'fading worksheets' in which capital and small letters are repeatedly traced in a four-line format with decreasing visual clues in each line.

- h. **Number-recognition worksheets:** Similar to the alphabet worksheets, worksheets for counting can be more than 'fading worksheets' or counting several random items in rows. These may contain vivid and detailed scenes – a farm or orchard scene where children count vegetables, fruit, trees, birds, butterflies, farmers, farm equipment like tractors etc.

2. *Cut-and-paste worksheets*

Worksheets that children can tear free-hand or cut with scissors and either assemble or paste together for a specific purpose, such as cutting and arranging jumbled pieces of a puzzle, cutting clothing items and dressing a human figure, making zigzag/spiral/mesh paper streamers by cutting along the dotted lines, cutting pictures of birds and animals and pasting them in the correct columns, cutting numbers and pasting them next to pictures that have the same number of items, etc.

3. *Letter-writing worksheets*

Worksheets that have the basic format of a short note or a letter that can be folded so that it can double up like an envelope. These can be either posted directly or handed over to classmates, teachers, parents, etc. Children can engage in imitative writing, scribbling, and drawing and build a meaningful relationship with print with the help of the teacher.

4. *Checklist worksheets*

Checklists can be used for ticking items found in a treasure hunt, marking attendance, voting for which games to play, marking items to purchase in a shopping role-playing game, selecting items to pack for a school picnic etc. They can be picture-based or have both pictures and words for scaffolded exposure to printed words. Depending on the nature of the activity used in conjunction, both individual and group worksheets can be designed.

5. *Pop-up worksheets*

Worksheets printed on thick card paper containing outlines of different elements of a big

picture, which children colour, cut out, fold, and paste on a piece of cardboard or box to make a pop-up scene. For example, to make a playground pop-up scene, the worksheet can have outlines of trees, swings, a few children, a puppy, and a ball. Each child can make his/her own pop-up scene or contribute any one element to a large pop-up that the class builds together. A 'hanging scene' can be similarly created where children hang their cut-outs in a shoebox using thread, for example, making an underwater scene with a shark, an octopus, bubbles, seaweeds, and a submarine or an outer-space scene with the sun, moon, rocket, an alien, and an astronaut.

6. *Game-based worksheets*

Similar to *Bingo* or *Tombola*, these worksheets contain grids of pictures, letters, numbers, shapes, or even familiar words that children

tick or colour based on what is called out by the teacher or a friend. It can be played individually or in pairs.

7. *Worksheets for recording*

Worksheets that are independently filled and discussed at regular intervals, for example, daily worksheets where children colour the emoticon that represents their day, weekly worksheets where children draw their favourite activity from the week, or fortnightly worksheets where children observe and record the growth of a sapling in the school garden.

8. *Pattern-making worksheets*

Children design and repeat patterns using self-made stamps using erasers; vegetables, like potatoes or ladyfinger; flowers; matchboxes; thumb- and hand-prints, etc.

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Pranalee Sharma has a PhD in Human Development and Childhood Studies from the University of Delhi. Her research work is on children in Vaishnavite monasteries. She is involved in large-scale assessments; in developing courses on childhood studies, socio-emotional learning and also in the capacity-building programmes for teachers on Early Childhood Education. She is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Continuing Education and University Resource Centre (SCE-URC), Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. She may be contacted at pranalee.sharma@azimpremjifoundation.org



Rima Kaur is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Continuing Education and University Resource Centre (SCE-URC), Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. She has a B Ed from Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi, and an M Ed from Bharat Ratna Dr B R Ambedkar University, Delhi. Her areas of interest are Early Language and Literacy and Early Childhood Education. She may be reached at rima.kaur@azimpremjifoundation.org