SOFTWARE & TECH

Before Five In A Row

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Unlocking Early Learning: A Comprehensive Guide to Before Five in a Row

In the vast landscape of early childhood education, parents and educators alike are constantly seeking resources that are both effective and nurturing. Among the treasure trove of homeschool curricula, **Before Five in a Row** (BFIAR) stands out as a beloved, literature-based program designed for children aged two to four. Unlike rigid academic programs, BFIAR introduces foundational learning through classic children's picture books, gentle activities, and the magic of connection. This article explores everything you need to know about Before Five in a Row, from its philosophy and lesson structure to its developmental benefits and how it nurtures a lifelong love of reading.

What Is Before Five in a Row?

Before Five in a Row is a preschool-level curriculum created by Jane Claire Lambert, designed as a precursor to the popular *Five in a Row* series for older children. The core concept is deceptively simple: for five days in a row (or longer, at your child's pace), you read the same carefully selected picture book each day, then engage in short, playful activities that tie into the story. These activities cover a range of developmental domains—language, motor skills, sensory exploration, art, music, and simple math or science concepts—all integrated naturally through the book's themes. The premise is that young children learn best through repetition, routine, and relational warmth. Before Five in a Row is not a drill-based program; it is a gentle invitation to explore the world through story.

Why Choose a Literature-Based Preschool Approach?

Many preschool curricula emphasize letter recognition, counting, and worksheets. Before Five in a Row takes a different path. Research in early childhood development consistently shows that the most powerful learning in the early years occurs through play, conversation, and meaningful interactions. When you incorporate a literature-based approach like BFIAR, you:

- Build vocabulary and comprehension naturally by exposing children to rich language in the context of engaging stories.
- Foster attention spans through repeated readings, allowing children to notice new details and make connections.
- Encourage critical thinking by asking open-ended questions (e.g., "What do you think happens next?" or "How does the character feel?").
- Strengthen the parent-child bond through snuggled reading time and shared activities.
- Respect the child's developmental readiness—there is no pressure to master skills before they are ready.

By anchoring lessons in beloved stories such as *Goodnight Moon*, *The Runaway Bunny*, *Caps for Sale*, or *Blueberries for Sal*, Before Five in a Row turns reading into a joyful anchor for the day rather than a chore.

How the Curriculum Is Structured

Before Five in a Row comes as a large, spiral-bound manual that contains lesson plans for 24 classic picture books (the "Five in a Row" titles) plus additional "Before Five in a Row" suggestions for very young toddlers. Each book chapter includes a synopsis, a brief social or emotional theme, and then a collection of activity ideas organized by subject. While there is no rigid schedule, the typical rhythm is:

1. Day 1: Read the book aloud for enjoyment. Introduce the title, author, and illustrator. Let your child hold the book and explore the illustrations.
2. Day 2: Reread the book, then focus on a social/emotional or language activity: talk about characters' feelings, practice retelling, or act out a scene.
3. Day 3: Reread and introduce a simple math or science concept connected to the story (e.g., counting blueberries in Blueberries for Sal).
4. Day 4: Reread and do an art, music, or motor skills activity (e.g., painting a picture from the story, singing a related song, or a game using the book's themes).
5. Day 5: Reread again and then do a "go-along" experience—a visit to a park, a cooking project, or a field trip that extends the learning.

This gentle repetition solidifies language patterns and story structure while the activities keep the experience fresh. Importantly, you can adapt the schedule to your child's mood and attention. Some days you might do two activities; other days just reading is enough. The **flexibility** of Before Five in a Row is one of its greatest strengths.

Key Skills Addressed in Before Five in a Row

Parents often wonder: what exactly will my child learn? While BFIAR is not a formal academic program, it systematically builds a strong foundation in the following areas, all while having fun with books:

- Pre-Reading Skills: Book handling, left-to-right tracking, predicting outcomes, and understanding narrative sequence.
- Oral Language and Vocabulary: Exposure to rich, descriptive language—words like "trundle," "dawdle," or "solemnly" that seldom appear in everyday conversation but enrich a child's expressive ability.
- Fine Motor Skills: Activities such as finger painting, cutting with safety scissors, lacing cards, or assembling simple crafts.
- Gross Motor Skills: Action games (e.g., "be like the bears in the story and walk slowly/quickly"), balancing, or nature walks inspired by the book.
- Early Math Concepts: Counting, sorting by size/color, recognizing patterns, and comparing quantities (through baking or sorting objects mentioned in the story).
- Science and Nature: Observing animals, plants, weather, or the seasons as they appear in the story; doing simple experiments.
- Social-Emotional Growth: Discussing feelings, conflict resolution, empathy, and kindness as modeled by characters.
- Creative Expression: Art projects, music and movement, dramatic play, and storytelling.

The beauty of the program is that skills are not isolated. A single book like *The Carrot Seed* can yield a gardening project (science), counting seeds (math), and a conversation about patience (social-emotional).

Before Five in a Row vs. Five in a Row: What's the Difference?

Understanding the distinction between these two levels helps parents choose the right starting point. **Before Five in a Row** is intended for children ages 2–4 and focuses on a very gentle, play-based, and connection-rich introduction to learning through books. The suggested activities are short (5–15 minutes) and require minimal preparation. The manual also includes a special section for babies and toddlers with ideas for sensory play, nursery rhymes, and bonding activities.

Five in a Row (for ages 5–8) uses more complex chapter books or picture books with deeper themes. The activities are longer and more academic—covering geography, history, art, and science in more detail. Children are expected to sit for longer periods and participate in more structured lessons. Before Five in a Row is the ideal warm-up for what comes later, ensuring that a child associates learning with warmth and wonder before formal demands

are placed on them.

Practical Tips for Getting Started with Before Five in a Row

If you are new to the curriculum, here are some tips for a smooth and joyful start:

1. Gather the books first. You will need the 24 picture books used in the manual. Many are available at local libraries or thrift stores. Keep them in a special basket or shelf so your child can revisit them.
2. Read the manual's introduction thoroughly. It explains the philosophy and gives practical advice for different ages and temperaments.
3. Start with one book you know your child already loves. This builds confidence and shows how the activities connect to a familiar story.
4. Don't feel you must complete every activity. Pick one or two that resonate with you and your child. The goal is not to finish a "lesson" but to enjoy being together with the book.
5. Embrace the repetition. Some children want the same book for two weeks. Others ask for a new one after three days. Follow your child's lead.
6. Incorporate real-life experiences. If you read Make Way for Ducklings, visit a pond and feed ducks. If you read The Snowy Day, go outside and make snow angels. These connections deepen understanding.
7. Keep a journal or scrapbook. Document your child's favorite activities, art projects, or dictations about the story. This becomes a treasured memory and also shows progress.
8. Connect with other BFIAR users. Many online communities share activity ideas and support, helping you stay inspired.

Sample Week with "Blueberries for Sal" by Robert McCloskey

To illustrate how the curriculum unfolds, here is a sample week using one of the most beloved BFIAR books:

- Day 1 – Read for pure enjoyment. Snuggle up and read the story. Talk about the illustrations—the blueberry bushes, the mother bear and cub. Ask: "What do you think will happen?"
- Day 2 – Social/Emotional and Language. Reread. Discuss how Sal and the bear cub both get separated from their mothers. How did they feel? Scared? Brave? Act out the story together using stuffed animals.
- Day 3 – Math and Science. Reread. Count blueberries: give your child a handful of fresh or frozen blueberries to count (and eat a few!). Compare sizes: big blueberry, small blueberry. Talk about how blueberries grow on bushes.
- Day 4 – Art and Motor Skills. Reread. Do a blueberry print painting: dip a halved lemon or a pom-pom in blue paint and make prints on paper. Or practice fine motor by having your child thread a piece of yarn through blueberries (dried or large beads) to make a necklace.
- Day 5 – Go-Along Experience. Visit a farmer's market or grocery store to buy blueberries. Make a simple blueberry muffin or jam. Talk about where food comes from. You might also draw a picture of the bear and Sal.

Common Questions About Before Five in a Row

Is it a complete preschool curriculum?No, it is not a full preschool curriculum covering all domains exhaustively. It is an excellent supplement or a core program for gentle, literature-based learning. Many families combine it with free play, nature time, and basic letter/sound exposure as they see fit.

Can I use it if I do not homeschool?Absolutely. Many parents use BFIAR as a guide to enhance storytime at home, even if their child attends a daycare or preschool. The activities are simple enough to do after work or on weekends.

What if the books are hard to find?Libraries are the first stop. Some are out of print but available used online. You can also substitute a similar book, though the manual activities are tied to each specific title for maximum learning.

Do I need to buy the manual?While you can theoretically design your own book-based activities, the manual provides rich, age-appropriate ideas and the educational rationale behind them. It is a worthwhile investment if you value organized but flexible guidance.

Conclusion

Before Five in a Row offers a gentle, loving, and deeply effective way to introduce your young child to the joys of learning through story. It respects the natural pace of early childhood development while building pre-academic skills, language, and emotional intelligence. By centering your days around beautiful picture books and simple, playful activities, you create a rich environment where curiosity flourishes. Whether you are a homeschool veteran or a parent seeking quality time with your toddler, BFIAR invites you to slow down, read aloud, and discover the world one story at a time. The result is not just a head start in learning—it is the foundation of a lifelong relationship with books.

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