
Early literacy: The essentials

Part 4. Supporting and assessing emergent reading and writing

Editor's note: This is the last of a four-part series on emergent literacy: Supporting children as they learn to read and write. Part 1 addresses language and conversation skills and is available online at www.childcarequarterly.com/fall05_story1.html. Readers can access Part 2, Sharing books and asking questions, at www.childcarequarterly.com/winter05_story1.html. Part 3, Phonological awareness and the alphabet, is available at www.childcarequarterly.com/spring_06_story1.html.



At her program's open house, Ms. Aleman shows parents the books and flannel boards in her reading center for 4-year-olds. She explains how she reads stories aloud and how children may choose books and re-tell the stories with flannel board figures.

"Shouldn't our kids be learning the sounds of alphabet letters—you know, phonics?" asks Mr. Johnson.

"Yes, children are already learning the sounds of letters, but actually they have been for some time," Ms. Aleman replies. "Think about how your children call out McDonald's when they see the sign." Several parents nod.

"Maybe I should get flash cards and teach phonics at home," Mr. Johnson says.

"If you do, you might meet your objective but defeat your goal," says Ms. Aleman.

"What?"

"You might meet the objective of your son's learning letter sounds," Ms. Aleman explains. "But you also might defeat the larger goal of his developing a love of reading and learning."

Literacy is an evolving process. Learning to read and write combines learning concepts, acquiring vocabulary, being aware of sounds, and understanding symbols. Children develop the ability to use

standard rules of grammar, spelling, and sentence structure. Traditionally, this process was pushed into high gear when children entered first grade. Today, research has helped us understand that literacy begins in infancy (when children first respond to voices) and, with support and direction, can build throughout the early childhood years.

Unfortunately, many early childhood programs have adopted outdated teaching methods. These educators—and parents—think that focused, whole-group instruction and intensive drill on letters and sounds will accelerate learning. They work under the belief that their efforts will result in toddlers who can identify words on flash cards and 5-year-olds who can read and write. Teacher-directed drill practices are not the best teaching method, even for elementary school children. They are less suitable—and may be damaging—to younger children.

We know that young children learn through meaningful experiences with people and materials in their environments. For infants and toddlers this means sensory exploration—and they can't learn the letter V by smelling and tasting it. Preschool children who



The P words

Phonological awareness refers to the awareness of the *sounds* of speech.

Phonemic awareness refers to the awareness of the smallest units of speech, one of the 44 unique *sounds* represented by the 26 letters and combinations of letters in the English alphabet.

Phonological and phonemic awareness are hearing skills.

Phonics, on the other hand, refers to the relationship between letters and sounds in *written* words.

have had rich sensory learning experiences are developmentally prepared to explore symbols and abstract concepts—usually through play.

Literacy's deep roots expand during this time when children put background knowledge, curiosity, eagerness to emulate respected adults, and awareness of environmental print into action. They begin to be able to integrate all spheres of development into a foundation for successful reading and writing.

Early literacy dilemma

The push to early literacy is a dilemma for many early childhood teachers. They respect the research that describes the best ways to support the growth and development of young children, and are likely to resist any campaign to push young children into practice and drill sessions. On the other hand, it's clear that failing to provide language-rich experiences in preschool will result in serious challenges for children later in their academic careers.

Where is the delicate balance? You already sing with infants and offer opportunities to explore tastes, textures, and sounds with toddlers. You ask questions and have meaningful conversations with preschoolers. You read aloud to all ages every day. What else is important? "A central goal during these preschool years is to enhance children's *exposure to and concepts about print*" (NAEYC and IRA 1998).

In order to support budding literacy, teachers support children's awareness of print (rather than pictures) as the primary tool for telling a story. We help children recognize that written English has a consistent form, that letters have standard shapes and they string together into words. We also help

children recognize that both spoken and printed words have meaning.

Opportunities to practice help children—and adults—cement information and provide a base for further exploration. For example, Mitch, a 4-year-old, has just enjoyed reading Gail Gibbons' book, *Up Goes the Skyscraper*, with his teacher. They have examined the illustrations, practiced new vocabulary, and discussed the new bank building going up downtown. Mitch goes to the easel and begins to paint a tall building—long, vertical, blue lines with small, red, rectangular windows. He signs his name and leaves the paint to dry. Later in the day he decides to write about his building and uses a marker to make shapes across the bottom of his painting. Ms. Jones, his teacher, is attentive to his work and

LITERACY BEGINS IN INFANCY.

responds when Mitch asks her to write his words "in the book way." Together they compose a two-sentence description of Mitch's building—Mitch dictating and Ms. Jones transcribing. They tape the dictation to the back of the picture, and Mitch eagerly anticipates sharing the work when his dad, a carpenter, comes to pick him up at the end of the day.

In this example, Mitch has recognized the power of print symbols—in a book, his name on his painting, and the transcribed description. He knows that



his words don't look like the words printed in the Gibbons book—or like the ones his teacher prints on a note card. His awareness and enthusiasm—coupled with the support and positive reinforcement he receives from his teacher and his dad—will encourage him to continue to build new skills.

Frequently asked questions

The following questions provide more information on language and literacy support for young children.

Q. Why do some children have reading difficulties?

A. Reading difficulties are often apparent in children who have significant disabilities or developmental delays—including mental retardation, expressive or receptive language delays, deafness or hearing impairments, and vision impairments. Children whose home language is one other than English may also have early language and literacy challenges.

In typically developing, standard English-speaking children, however, reading difficulties usually point to lack of exposure to language and literacy activities. Frequently these children fail to understand alphabetic and phonic principles—that written letter symbols systematically represent the sounds of spoken words. This leads to a failure to build and use comprehension skills and related strategies that give meaning to text.

Q. I visited a school that encouraged each class to study a different letter each week. Is this useful?

A. Preschool children build cognitive skills through hands-on explorations of real materials and

equipment. Remember Cookie Monster eating the letter C? Surely it's useful to 4- and 5-year-olds to handle and sort objects with names that begin with a particular letter. On the other hand, a group time devoted to printing Gs while making the associated sound is likely time wasted.

Children learn alphabet letters through meaningful interactions with environmental print—books, magazines, signs, and labels, for example. Hands-on materials like letter puzzles, magnetic letters, and play clay for shaping letters is likely to have more letter-recognition impact than studying one letter each week.

LITERACY IS AN EVOLVING PROCESS.

Q. Some of the 4-year-olds in my group are exploring letter shapes and sounds. They talk about writing but the lines don't have real meaning. What's going on?

A. Much of the writing in preschool years has no specific meaning. Instead it mimics the lines of letters and indicates increasing fine-muscle control. As children build experiences and gain familiarity with environmental print, they work harder to make their lines look like the letters in books and signs—they evolve from letter-like forms to true letters.

Typically children string together these letter-like forms. These experimentations create mock words



that the child may or may not attach meaning to. Often the first evidence of form mastery—and early recognition of the relationship between sound and letter form—occurs when children are able to write their names.

This form of writing, combining scribbles, mock letters, and real letters, typically continues through early primary school. Children will continue to experiment and mimic new letter forms as they realize that adults frequently communicate with slanted and loopy letters—not the letter form they see in books.

When children share their writing, it's appropriate to ask, "Can you read your writing to me?" Avoid trying to interpret writing marks—just as you avoid interpreting artwork.

Q. Should I teach handwriting? I had to do penmanship exercises in school.

A. Formal handwriting instruction is not appropriate for all preschool children. Most preschoolers need time to experiment, discover, and work on fine-motor skills—writing shapes with a stick in the sand, dribbling paint precisely, or building with Legos®.

On the other hand, if a child asks for specific help, give it. Creating precise marks is challenging, but as they develop, children will naturally strive to make their marks look like those they see in the environment.

Q. What about invented spelling?

A. A print-rich preschool environment offers children the tools and support for literacy development. They see letters everywhere and want to experiment with putting letters together into words. Because they are eager to master the reading and writing puzzle, they experiment with phonemes (sounds in speech) and symbolic representations of those sounds (alphabet letters). Frequently one mark or letter stands for a syllable or even an entire word.

With adult support, children will refine and organize their skills—using individual letters to represent only prominent sounds to using letters to represent all the sounds they hear in a word.

When children ask how to spell a specific word, it indicates their awareness of standard spelling. If possible, write the whole word on an index card. This allows the child to see the word in its entirety—not just isolated letters. The visual picture helps establish a pattern for later word recognition.

Q. Should I be teaching phonics?

A. Kindergarten-age children sometimes find phonics instruction helpful in decoding unfamiliar

words. Independent word recognition depends on the reader's ability to translate letters into word sounds. Short periods of instructional time spent on helping children recognize word families (*cat, mat, fat, sat*) are useful.

But phonics instruction as an independent activity is not going to produce fluent readers and writers. Instead, kindergarten and primary school teachers best use phonics as part of a meaningful, purposeful, and enjoyable reading program.

Q. Some of the parents of children in my program have difficulty reading and writing. Is there anything I can do to help without embarrassing them?

A. Ideally, we would like for low-literate parents to enroll in a literacy program, but relatively few do in actual practice. Often they must work long hours to support the family, they may not have transportation, or they feel intimidated by the prospect.

If that's the case, encourage parents to get into the daily habit of telling stories to their preschoolers, using a picture book or drawing upon their memory and imagination. Telling stories introduces children to new words, helps them learn about sequence, engages their attention, and strengthens emotional bonding. Using a picture book or other printed material establishes the book habit; children see books as a valued activity.

Illiterate parents probably never had books read to them; they don't know how to go about it with their children. You can help by hosting story times at your facility, perhaps in the evening, with refreshments.



Resources for book bags

These books describe activities to expand experiences with notable children's books. Modify these ideas or develop your own.

Shirley C. Raines and Robert J. Canady are the primary authors of the *Story Stretchers* series. All the books in the series are available through Gryphon House in Beltsville, Md.

Hope Vestergaard's *Weaving the Literacy Web* offers some excellent ideas for book-based activities. It is available through Redleaf Press in St. Paul, Minn.

Tell a story from a picture book, modeling voice changes for different characters and changing the pace to fit the action. After the story, ask questions and discuss what happened. Encourage parents to borrow picture books from your library and to share them with their children every night.

Q. What can I do to improve my program's early literacy efforts?

A. Researchers are clear that developing a literacy plan is essential—and the first step is setting goals. Naturally, your goals will be determined by the ages and developmental levels of the children in your care. Infant and toddler teachers have different goals than pre-kindergarten teachers, for example.

For every age group, read aloud, play with words, build a classroom library, provide a quiet reading corner with a variety of books, and make art and

writing materials available. For specific age groups, determine the four issues below. An example is given for 3-year-olds.

- What is an appropriate literacy goal? Children are able to clap to the syllables in their names.
- Who will be responsible for keeping the plan on course? Teachers and parents.
- Which activities will contribute to the goal? Songs at circle time.
- When do you expect your goal to be met? By the sixth month of the school year.

Focus on developing teaching skills. Use staff meetings and in-service training time to report on and monitor language and literacy goals. Review classroom management techniques in order to spend more focused time in one-on-one and small-group work with children. Plan visits to exemplary preschool literacy programs and encourage pre-kindergarten teachers to visit kindergarten teachers to share and compare expectations. Most of all, encourage reading.

Involve families in your plan. Share your goals and encourage parents to "get with the plan" at home. Specifically, you can:

- ask for help setting up a reading corner,
- encourage reading and conversation at home, and
- keep parents informed with notes and ideas for family word play.

Encourage parents to use the school lending library and always spend part of your conference time discussing language and literacy development.

Monitor children's progress. Learn to document



children's language and literacy skill development. This documentation can guide curriculum: once you see what children can do, you can plan for the next steps. Documentation also can alert teachers and parents to potential developmental red flags. Portfolios, checklists, anecdotal records, and work samples provide tangible evidence for study and planning.

Q. Is there a simple checklist that can help keep my efforts on course?

A. Evaluate your daily practice against the criteria below. Modify your practices to ensure a rich early literacy environment.

- I interact with children in a positive, engaging manner.
- The ratio of children to adults is suitable for the age group so that children can get sufficient appropriate attention.
- I have one-on-one and small-group conversations with children throughout the day.
- I respond to what children say and do by building on their verbalizations and ideas.
- I read aloud to children on a daily basis.
- I give each child daily access to at least five new or familiar books. I rotate books frequently.
- I offer a variety of books to the children (for example, story books; nursery rhymes and poetry books; concept books for number, color, and ABCs; and informational books about nature, trucks, neighbors, and other topics).
- I model different uses of literacy—environmental print, lists, labels, and other print media.
- I help children understand how reading and writing function in their lives.
- I develop meaningful ways to alert children to environmental and phonemic sounds.
- I involve children in regular writing activities.
- I plan regularly scheduled meetings with parents to discuss language and literacy development.
- I have information-sharing conversations and conferences with parents to learn about the children from the parent's point of view.
- I am involved in an ongoing program of professional development that includes support for my understandings about how to foster young children's language and literacy.

—adapted from *Love to Read* 2002.

Activities that support emergent reading and writing

Develop classroom and in-home activities like these to foster literacy through play.

Letter or word concentration

(age 3 and older)

Modify this game according to the skills and ages of the children. Younger children may be able to match shapes (a prelude to letters); older children will want to match whole words.

Here's what you need:

- index cards—all the same color
- marker
- storage container

1. Make pairs of letter or word cards. For preschoolers, write words they are likely to encounter, like *stop* and *exit*, and their names.
2. For children kindergarten age and older, write words that rhyme or are in the same word family (*bun, run, sun*) to encourage attention to similarities.
3. Show the children how to turn the cards face down on the playing surface and challenge them to turn the cards over, one at a time, to find matching pairs.



Sponge letter art

(age 3 and older)

Here's what you need:

- sponge alphabet letters
- easel paper
- cookie sheet
- liquid tempera in flat pans

1. Place the letters on the cookie sheet. Be careful that the sponges are in proper orientation to the easel.
2. Invite children to find the sponge letter that begins their name.
3. Let the children use sponge letters (or letter stamps) to print.
4. Talk with the children as they work. Challenge them to associate the sound that begins a word with the appropriate letter: *B* as in *blue* with the *B* sponge.

Guided journals

(kindergarten age and older)

Journals (spiral bound) are familiar in early childhood classrooms. Generally children spend undirected time

writing and drawing in their journals each day. A guided journal, on the other hand, offers a topic and provides words that children could include in their writing.

Here's what you need:

- pocket folders
- index cards
- markers
- lined paper

1. Provide a folder for each child. Glue an index card to the front and print the child's name using upper and lower case block letters.
2. Put a couple of sheets of paper into one of the folder pockets.
3. Make a list of topic ideas—grocery list, foods I like, my family, zoo animals, and summer activities, for example. Either identify enough topics to match the number of children in your group, or arrange the environment so that two or three children can share a topic.
4. For each topic idea, print related words on index cards. For example, the grocery list words could include milk, meat, dog food, chips, apples, peas, and soap.
5. Invite children to choose a topic and use some of the words as they journal.

Note that some of the children will find it much easier to stay focused with the addition of simple words to copy.

Resources for free books

Here is a sample listing of places where you might find free books for your school library and your families.

- Reading is Fundamental, the nation's oldest and largest children's literacy program in the United States, www.rif.org. Contact your local United Way to find a local RIF program or another organization that can donate books.
- Reach Out and Read programs, housed in hospitals, health clinics, and pediatricians' offices. At well-child checkups, a doctor, nurse, or volunteer gives children free books and advises parents about the importance of reading. For more information, see www.reachoutandread.org.
- Bookstores and educational supply stores. Ask for old or discounted books.
- Libraries. Public libraries often give away books that are worn or donated to them.
- Literacy coalitions. To find a local coalition, check the Web site of Literacy USA at www.naulc.org/members.htm/.
- Newspapers. To survive as a business, newspapers must have a literate citizenry. Check with your local newspaper about donations of books or other printed materials.



Home literacy bags

(all ages)

Use this take-home version of the reading and writing center to inform and involve parents in emergent literacy. If your budget doesn't allow buying new supplies, ask for donations from the community.

Here's what you need:

- book bags, backpacks, or small plastic suitcases
- paperback children's picture books
- language or writing activity related to the book
- clear, adhesive-backed plastic or laminator

1. Gather enough bags and books so that every child in the group has one. A few extras enable children to choose which book to share with their families.
2. Choose a paperback book for each bag.
3. Develop a language or writing activity that relates to the book. See the Resources for free books box on page 8 and the Resources for book bags box on page 6.
4. Include any materials the family will need to complete the activity.
5. Write directions for completing the activity. Laminate it or cover with clear, adhesive-backed plastic. For example, provide a paperback copy of *Dear Juno*, a story that describes the written correspondence between a child and a grandparent. Add writing materials—envelopes, index cards, lined paper, advertisement stamps from organizations, pens, an alphabet sample, and a chart listing the addresses of school friends. Your directions encourage family letter-writing time.
6. Encourage children to choose a backpack to use for a week. This will give families time to read and re-read the book with their children. Keep records of children's names and the bags they choose.

Note: If parents have poor literacy skills, take a few minutes to tell the story and explain the directions. Remind parents that it's not so important to get the story details right as it is to provide an enjoyable experience and get children in the habit of using books.

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