

Early Literacy Skills Development

By Ann Casey, PhD, NCSP & Christina Sheran, PhD, Minneapolis Public Schools



Young children are eager and ready to learn. Current research emphasizes the importance of teaching young children the fundamental skills that lead to literacy. While our focus is on the development of early literacy skills that are tied to language development, best practice is to teach young children in such a way that all the important early childhood developmental domains—language, concepts, social, emotional, and motor skills—are integrated and linked with children’s background and prior knowledge. Because literacy competence opens the doors for all other academic learning, preschool and kindergarten children should receive instruction in emergent literacy skills to help ensure later success in school.

Foundational Skills

It is well established that, upon entering kindergarten, children’s skill levels vary dramatically—some children have well-developed language and social skills while others do not. Current research suggests that quality early experience can reduce the gaps that frequently exist for children from less advantaged circumstances, and can lead to improved language and literacy outcomes for the long term. Fundamental language skills that lead to emergent literacy include phonological awareness, print awareness and vocabulary.

Phonological awareness. Understanding that spoken words are made of individual sounds is an important foundational skill for literacy and should develop in early childhood. Knowing that the word “ball” is made of three sounds b/a/l/ is an example of phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is more likely to develop in children who have varied language experiences including word play activities such as rhyming and singing activities. Many children develop phonemic awareness easily and without explicit instruction while others may need repeated exposure to activities that help make this connection. Since this is such an important skill for later literacy development, preschool providers need to provide the experiences that foster phonemic awareness.

Print awareness. This is another important foundational skill that should develop in preschool years. Print awareness is simply the idea that spoken words are represented by written symbols. Alphabetic understanding, which is generally regarded as a kindergarten task, is a more specific but imperative skill in learning to read. It is the mapping of individual sounds to print in order to decode words. Print awareness is the underpinning of alphabetic understanding. Many children who have not had the opportunity of shared reading activities or exposure to many kinds of print materials do not understand that the funny-looking black symbols on paper are actually letters, words, and sentences that we say when we read them out loud. Young children should be

encouraged to “write” and draw pictures to represent a thought, which may include some letters as children begin to learn letter/sound relationships.

Vocabulary and concept development. This is perhaps the most important of all language skills, which not only is related to literacy development but is highly predictive of future academic success. Too many children are entering kindergarten with under-developed language. Yet, current research suggests that children can develop increased knowledge in these areas when their environment is structured in such a way as to make connections with their existing knowledge structure.

The Role of Environment in Developing Emergent Literacy

“Developmentally appropriate” practice. Many early childhood educators have relied heavily on what has been termed developmentally appropriate practice. In this approach, teachers take their lead from the child, and children must be “ready” to learn certain skills. Unfortunately, developmentally appropriate practice has too often resulted in delaying instruction to children who need it. Current research suggests that children can and should learn a variety of skills in early childhood that will foster increased academic success upon entering elementary school. In addition, it is clear that there is a reciprocal relationship between brain development and environmental influences. Enhanced environments such as high quality preschool programs, particularly for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, can have a large impact on further development. We can be developmentally appropriate while at the same time exposing children to increased language and literacy experiences.

Language-rich environments. Hart and Risley, in their book *Meaningful Differences* (see “Resources”), found that the amount and kind of talking that parents use with their young children is highly predictive of important educational outcomes. Parents who talk more with their children and who use affirming supporting responses to children tend to have children with larger vocabularies.

While there is a relationship between parents who provide such verbal interactions and income level, other studies have demonstrated that it is not the income that causes better achievement but the environment that middle class families create that fosters language and early literacy skills.

High quality preschools can create these same environments by providing frequent verbal interaction between adults and children. Stories are frequently read and children have opportunities to predict what will happen next. Teachers use the story to introduce new concepts and vocabulary words. Teachers ask questions that extend children’s verbal responses, and children are encouraged to use their words and are reinforced for their efforts. Teachers make a conscious effort to make every moment a teachable one.

The importance of children’s background and culture cannot be underestimated in the development of language and concepts. In order for new knowledge to have meaning, children need connections to their own experiences within their family, neighborhood, or culture.

Fostering Literacy Development in Preschool Settings

When we enter a literacy-rich preschool environment, two characteristics stand out: the organization of the environment and the teacher's role. The classroom environment is arranged in such a way to facilitate multiple opportunities for children to engage in literacy and language activities. And most importantly, the teachers are active facilitators of language and responsive to children's choices and needs.

Environmental Characteristics

Access to print. A high quality preschool environment is print rich. Children have access to an array of print, and everyday objects are labeled and visible for young children to see. Children's names can be found on charts, lockers, and walls, providing multiple opportunities for children to recognize their name as well as the names of their friends. Weekly or monthly themes are evident and are connected to relevant literature. A schedule is posted, followed, and referred to throughout the day. Poems and rhymes are posted throughout the classroom so children can practice and experiment with the sounds of language. Classroom rules are posted and reviewed daily. A classroom library is accessible, inviting, supports the classroom themes, contains both fiction and non-fiction choices, and provides multicultural books.

Schedule and organization. The printed schedule includes printed words and a picture so that children can begin to connect the printed word with the event (e.g., music time printed with a picture of a musical instrument). The classroom schedule is organized around weekly themes. Themes help children make connections in their daily activities. If the theme for the week is beach vacations, then all activities will have a beach focus, including art, music, dramatic play, meals, and, most importantly, book reading.

Activity centers. These are used in literacy-rich environments and have clear boundaries with accessible materials that are connected to literature. Each center contains both writing and reading material (i.e., books, magazines, crayons, paper, and markers) and is consistent with the current classroom theme. A writing center is clearly evident. Activities in the writing center relate to the content themes such as journal writing, book making, letter writing, and list making. Children are provided with demonstrations of how to use materials, and materials change as new themes are introduced. Activities in the centers include conversations with adults and peers, small group read-aloud, dramatic play activities that have adequate props and scripts, and literacy activities to promote skill development.

Circle time. This occurs several times throughout the day and includes large and small group activities, teacher and individual child time, and child-to-child interactions. Activities include calendar time, demonstration of new materials, songs, telling of stories, show-and-tell, phonological awareness games, and writing experiences.

Reading time. This is one of the most important components in a literacy-rich environment. The daily schedule should reflect sufficient time for book reading. Books should be read and reread, and discussions about books should be engaging with opportunities for all students to participate, particularly English Language Learners.

Schedule sufficient time for book reading:

- In a full-day program, read aloud at least three times per day for a minimum of 45 minutes total. In partial-day programs, read once or twice per day for a minimum of 10 minutes per session.
- Divide the children into groups of 8–10 children for one or two group book reading times. Use these smaller groups to allow time for children to ask questions and for the group to engage in thoughtful discussions about books.
- Provide individual and small-group reading experiences every day, ensuring that each child has this experience at least twice a week.
- Do not withhold book reading as a punishment, and do not drop book reading from the day's activities.
- Schedule time for children to look at books alone or with a friend.

Read and reread various types of books:

- Share your enjoyment of books by reading your favorites with the children.
- Read books that are related to your theme. Be sure to seek out some that convey important information and contain varied vocabulary.
- Stretch children's attention to books by reading longer books and books with more text than you typically read.
- Read favorite books several times. With rereading, be alert for opportunities to extend children's understanding by asking questions about features of the plot or characters that have not been discussed before.

Be thoughtful about discussions:

- Establish clear routines for book reading—when it happens, who sits where, and how turn-taking will be handled.
- Hold children's attention by reading with drama, asking questions, and showing and discussing pictures.
- Be clear about expectations related to turn-taking, but be aware of stifling involvement and enthusiasm with overly strict rules governing participation.

Responsive Teachers

A second characteristic of a literacy-rich preschool environment includes responsive teachers who engage children by conversing in a variety of ways throughout the day and adjusting their communication style to fit the activity. Responsive teachers respond *promptly and sensitively* to children. They are keen observers, identifying the needs of each child and planning ways to meet those needs. They know how to provide the right amount of scaffolding (specialized support that teachers provide for children) so that, each day, children experience many successes. In addition, they provide opportunities to make choices throughout the day which further supports a child's independence.

Responsive teachers provide both *direct and indirect instruction*. During large group activities, they direct the conversation based on the content as well as responding to children's questions and comments. They use explicit demonstrations and models to teach new information, always connecting new information with previous knowledge and experience. During less structured times such as free play and meal times, they take on a listening role, encouraging children to extend their ideas, embedding new or novel vocabulary into conversations, and giving every child an opportunity to share.

Responsive teachers *provide oral language development* within a social context. They arrange the environment to stimulate talking by providing interesting activities and events that children want to talk about, including book conversations, play conversations, mealtime conversations, and free-play conversations.

Book conversations. The purpose is to extend ideas and vocabulary from book reading sessions to other activities throughout the day.

- Prompt daily conversations around books with children individually and in small and large groups.
- Talk about the characters' lives and their motivations.
- Model thinking skills out loud and talk about the meanings of words.
- Help children make sense of books, predicting what will happen next and questioning why characters act as they do.

Play conversations. "Pretend I'm the mommy."

- Model, demonstrate, role-play, and encourage children to follow your lead during dramatic play, eventually encourage children to take on the various roles by requesting their favorite roles, interacting with peers, and negotiating with peers for roles.
- Use scripted play as a way to provide opportunities for verbal communication. Scripted play includes the use of props and themes children are familiar with in their everyday experiences (e.g., cooking, gardening), special events (e.g., camping, vacations), and occupations (e.g., doctor, fireman). The teacher models the dialogue, including new vocabulary (e.g., camping gear), and sequences the activities (e.g., set up our tent, start a fire) that one may experience if they were going on a camping trip.
- Provide novel vocabulary, sequence activities, and help children extend their conversation beyond the limits of the classroom.

Mealtime conversations. Use mealtime to do more than eat:

- Sit with children during meal time and have family-type meals (1:5 adult-child ratio).
- Encourage children's discussions by asking children to share personal experiences. Meal conversations should include talk about events occurring during the meal as well as events that occur outside of the classroom.
- Encourage children to use novel vocabulary during mealtime conversation.

Free-play conversations. Children are talkers and problem solvers.

- Build in child-to-child talk during free play.
- Engage individual children in conversations that are sustained over several turns making sure there is space in the conversation for children to talk.
- Use a variety of words, striving to include a high percentage of relatively novel words.
- Engage children in conversations that are intellectually challenging and not always predictable.

NASP Communiqué, Vol. 32, #6
March 2004

Resources

Burns, S., Griffin, P., & Snow, C. (Eds.). (1999). *Starting out right: A guide to promoting children's reading success.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press. ISBN: 0-309-06410-4.

Bowman, B.T., Donovan, M. S., & Burns, S. (Eds.). (2001). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press. ISBN: 0-309-06836-3.

Dickinson, D. K., & Tabors, P.O. (2001). *Beginning literacy with language.* Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

Hart, B., & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children.* Baltimore: Brookes. ISBN: 1557661979.

Website

National Association for the Education of Young Children—www.naeyc.org

Ann Casey, PhD, NCSP, is an Assistant Director of Special Education in the Minneapolis Public Schools. Christina Sheran, PhD, has been a speech clinician and school psychologist and currently consults with early literacy projects in the Minneapolis Public Schools. This handout will be included in the forthcoming *Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators* (NASP Publications, Spring 2004).

© 2004, National Association of School Psychologists – 4340 East West Hwy #402, Bethesda, MD 20814; (301) 657-0270; www.nasponline.org