

# Early Literacy and You

## An Overview of Early Literacy

### What is early literacy?

**Early literacy** is what children know about communication, language, verbal and non-verbal, reading and writing before they can actually read and write. It encompasses all of a child's experiences with conversation, stories, oral and written, books, and print.<sup>i</sup> Early literacy is NOT the teaching of reading. It is laying a strong foundation so that when children are taught to read, they are ready.

### Why does early literacy matter?

Over one third<sup>ii</sup> of our children enter school without the skills ready to learn to read. Children who enter school without the skills ready to learn to read find learning to read harder and start at a disadvantage. There are many things parents, educators, and library staff and others who work with children can do to support our children's readiness to read.

### The Reading Process

Before we look at early literacy it helps to understand what goes into reading, when children become readers in school.

**Learning to read** includes two major skill areas: decoding and comprehension.<sup>iii</sup>

- Decoding is being able to recognize the words from the text. Children recognize some words by sight. Other words they sound out to figure out what the words are.
- Comprehension is understanding what the words mean. Children may be able to sound out words but cannot necessarily understand the meaning of the words. They must understand the meaning of individual words as well as the whole idea.
- Both decoding and comprehension are needed for reading.

### Getting Ready for Reading—Early Literacy Overview

Researchers have noted early literacy skills that support both these aspects of reading.<sup>iv</sup> If children come to school with a solid background in these skills, it will be easier for them to learn to read. Researchers choose to divide the aspects of early literacy in different ways, sometimes using different terms. The basic information is the same.

The early literacy components:

- Oral language—listening, speaking, communication skills
- Phonological Awareness—the ability to hear and play with the smaller sounds in words
- Print Awareness/Conventions of Print—the knowledge that print has meaning, environmental print, how to handle a book, direction of text, title/author/illustrator.
- Letter Knowledge—knowing that the same letter can look different, that letters have names and represent sounds
- Vocabulary—knowing the meanings of words
- Background Knowledge—prior knowledge, what a child knows when entering school

The image of the tree reflects aspects of early literacy, the reading process, and the adult's role in developing early literacy in children.

**Oral language** is the foundation for all later language. It is the roots of the tree.

Oral language includes speaking, listening and communication skills.<sup>v</sup> The root of language also includes non-verbal language which includes body language, facial expressions, and gestures. All of these are ways that we communicate with each other. Even infants are learning to communicate through all of these techniques.

Children learn to read our facial expressions. By four months they recognize the difference between a smile and a frown.

Young children watch our gestures, as we point to things or use hand motions and other movements to help explain what we say. As they get older they learn to follow directions, to ask and respond to questions, and to tell stories and tell us what they know.

Because oral language suffuses all of the rest of the areas of early literacy, it is not a separate early literacy component. It is the base for the early literacy components which are explained below.



**Early Literacy Components** are the skill areas that researchers have noted will help children to read.

### **Phonological Awareness:**

Phonological awareness is the ability to hear and play with the smaller sounds in words. It includes hearing environmental sounds (doorbell, car honking, animal sounds), hearing, recognizing, and making rhymes, and hearing, recognizing and making beginning sounds, hearing syllables in words. Helping children hear sounds and the smaller sounds in words will later help them to sound out words when they learn to read.

### **Print Awareness/Conventions:**

Print awareness is understanding that print has meaning, that the printed word represents the words we speak. Children may start out by recognizing signs or logos they see, like the McDonald's arches. They learn how to handle a book—which is the front, the back, upside down, and the direction that we read the print, from left to right and top to bottom in English. Preschoolers will also learn to identify the author, title and illustrator and what the author and illustrators of books do.

### **Letter Knowledge**

Letter knowledge is knowing that the same letter can look different, that letters have names and represent sounds. There are two beginning concepts that lead to letter knowledge, concepts that children learn before they are able to identify letters. One is the ability to recognize and identify shapes. Researchers have found that children identify letters by their shapes. Children also need to be able to notice what is alike and different. An **n** and an **h** are similar and also different with the height of the line. That difference makes a difference in the letter. Other differences don't matter, like the color of the letter does not change the name or the sound of the letter. A child's own name is important to him or her. Using the letters in the child's name or the letters in words that the child is interested in (dinosaurs) is one good way to introduce letters to young children.

### **Vocabulary**

Vocabulary is knowing the meanings of words. Some children enter school knowing 5,000 words. Some children enter school knowing 20,000 words. The children who enter school knowing more words will find it easier to recognize words correctly as they try to sound them out AND they will understand more words which will help them understand what they are reading. Children learn words best as you talk, play and read with them, not by drilling them on lists of words. Even if your baby or toddler does not understand all the words you say, still use those words. Exposure to the words is the first step to learning what they mean—words for things, for concepts (colors, shapes, sizes, etc.), feelings, and ideas. Preschool children benefit from your explanations of what words mean and how two words may mean something similar but not exactly the same. Books often use words we do not find in conversations. Use both story and factual books.

### **Background Knowledge**

Background knowledge is what children know when they enter school. It is the sum of their experiences, what they know about the world and how things work. There are four areas of background knowledge:

- Conceptual Thinking—thinking skills, processes like cause and effect, predicting what might happen as well as knowledge of shapes, colors, etc.
- Content Knowledge—what a child knows on different topics; factual books offer information
- Book/Story Knowledge—books are enjoyable; how stories work (have a beginning, a middle and an end), ability to tell and retell events and stories, different purposes of books—story, poetry, factual

### **The Five Practices**

YOU are the **sun**. YOU make a difference in children's early literacy development.

Every Child Ready to Read has identified five practices or activities that can help children enter school ready to learn to read. As you sing, talk, read, write, and play with young children, you have the opportunity to support their pre-reading skills in little ways that add up to make a difference by the time children enter school.

**Sing:** Singing slows down language. It helps children hear the smaller sounds in words. There is also a different note for each syllable so they hear words broken down in to parts, supporting phonological awareness. This helps children later sound out words. Some songs have interesting words that we would not hear in normal conversation with young children, so they are also building vocabulary.

**Talk:** Children start to learn language by hearing people talk. This is oral language! When you talk with your baby, your baby is hearing the sounds of the languages you speak, learning what words mean as you point to and label things. Babies will start to babble and their babble uses the sounds they have heard. As children get older they follow directions, repeat your words, respond to what you say with words, phrases, and then whole sentences. Listening to children while they speak is as important as talking to them. Young children need more time than adults do to figure out what to say and how to say it. Having your children talk, tell and retell stories, and tell you what they know all helps them to later understand what they read. When you add new words and information to conversations with your children, you are developing their vocabulary and background knowledge. When you talk with them about signs and logos, you are developing their print awareness. When you talk with them about shapes and observe what is alike and different, or point out letters, you are developing their letter knowledge.

**Read:** Shared reading is the single most important activity that you can do to help children get ready to read, even from birth! Remember to keep the interaction around the book a positive one. When children have positive experiences around books and reading they are more likely to stick with learning to read when they get to school, even if it is difficult. Books have different words than the words of conversation so children learn more words when you read books to them. Some board books for babies actually do not have many words, so you would add some to those on the page. In this way you are developing your children's vocabulary. Reading books helps develop children's background knowledge. When you read story books, they learn the structure of story so that when they are asked to write a story in school they know what to do. When you read factual books with young children you respond to their curiosity and help them learn about the world. When pointing to the words in the title or a repeated phrase you support print awareness. You can point out letters in any book or share alphabet books to support letter knowledge. Many books for young children include the sounds of animals and have rhymes, both of which support phonological awareness.

**Write:** Reading and writing go together. Both are ways to represent the spoken word. Writing goes through stages from light markings to letter like forms to drawing letters to forming them. Writing helps children understand that print has meaning. When children scribble and then say what it means, they are understanding that what they have written or drawn means something. The beginning of writing for very young children is learning how to use their hands and fingers so that later they will hold crayons and pencils.

**Play:** Play, in addition to being fun, helps children to think symbolically. One item represents another—a block might represent a telephone. This kind of symbolic thinking is the same kind of thinking that is used for reading. Pictures and letters represent real things. Dramatic play, when children act out stories, helps them build background knowledge—how stories work.

So . . . HOW you sing, talk, read, write, and play with children makes a difference in supporting their early literacy skills.

Learning to read! The **fruit** of your interactions with children is that they will find it easier to learn to read with your support of the early literacy components.

## **Early Literacy and Later Reading**

Remember the two aspects of reading?

Decoding—recognizing words and sounding them out, and Comprehension—understanding what you read

Researchers have found that phonological awareness, print awareness and letter knowledge most directly support decoding.<sup>vi</sup> A strong vocabulary also helps children be able to recognize words as they try to sound them out. Vocabulary and background knowledge most directly support comprehension, understanding what they are reading. From kindergarten through grade 2 reading instruction mostly focuses on decoding, learning to read. After grade 3, reading instruction mostly focuses on comprehension, reading to learn.

Children need ALL the early literacy components starting from birth to be good readers.

## **Early Literacy Begins with You**

Using the five practices to support the early literacy skills in enjoyable ways is the best way to help children enter school ready to learn to read.

## Resources

Association for Library Service to Children and Public Library Association. *Every Child Ready to Read @ your library*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Chicago: American Library Association, 2011.

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<sup>i</sup> 2011 Policy Brief from Zero to Three. *A Window to the World: Early Language and literacy Development*.  
<http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/policy-toolkit/early-literacywebmarch1-6.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Carnegie Foundation of New York. *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children*. Waldorf, MD: Carnegie Corp of NY, 1994

<sup>iii</sup> *Every Child Ready to Read @ your library Manual Section II page 8*

<sup>iv</sup> Neuman p.40

<sup>v</sup> Learning to Talk and Listen: An Oral Language Resource for Early Childhood Caregivers (Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, 2009), 14. <http://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/LearningtoTalkandListen.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> *Every Child Ready to Read @ your library Manual Section I page 6*