

Developing Literacy

(What Is Literacy – Literacy Components - Supporting Literacy Skill Development by Age – The Importance of Shared Reading)

What is Literacy?

Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, and visually represent ideas according to the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (1996). Children learn these skills as a result of the opportunities adults create with and for them, the deliberate availability of materials to support their development and expand upon these skills, and experiences that bring the opportunities and materials together.

Emergent literacy experts have identified a number of skills that are important for the development of literacy skills before children formally enter school. Not only can these early literacy skills predict a child's success in reading as the children progress through school, but more importantly, these skills are fostered by the adults around them (Bus, 2001; Hammerberg, 2004; Hart & Risley, 1995; Landry, Smith, & Swank, 2003; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Reading books with children beginning in infancy and continuing through the primary grades offers a unique opportunity to support the development of literacy skills. Adults can respond to what children can already do, but also challenge children to help develop new skills in several areas.

Emergent literacy, or the development of literacy skills prior to the formal entry of school, is important for a variety of reasons. Early research has identified comprehension, concepts of print, knowledge of sounds in language (or phonological awareness), vocabulary, and writing as the most important skills (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998). More recently, the National Early Literacy Panel identified a number of skills children need for future reading success. This includes skills such as alphabet knowledge, identification of letters or numbers, phonological awareness, and name writing (Lonigan, Schatschneider, & Westberg, 2008). Some additional areas of importance are informational/non-fiction text and motivating emergent readers.

These skills are discussed in more detail in the following section.

Literacy Components

(Comprehension, Concepts of Print, Letter-Sound Knowledge, Knowledge of Genre, Oral Language, Informational/Non-fiction Text, Phonological Awareness, Vocabulary/Word-Meaning, Writing, Motivating Young Readers)

Comprehension

Often considered the most important part of listening and reading, comprehension is what happens when one is able to make meaning from what we hear or read (Rand Reading Study Group, 2002). This means that children are able to understand or comprehend what is read to

them well before they are able to read the words on a page. More importantly, this means that the ways in which adults engage children with the text help children to make meaning from the text. Active engagement is a result of asking open-ended questions, making predictions, retelling a story, summarizing a non-fiction text, and other ways of thinking about different types of text. It is also important to talk about these different strategies with children to make sure they know to use these strategies as they listen to text being read and as they read text independently. These strategies are most often learned as a result of shared reading experiences that happen on a regular basis as part of a daily routine (Carter, Chard, & Pool, 2009). These are all skills that good readers use to comprehend what they are reading and are strategies that they will use regardless of the type of book they are reading.

Concepts of Print

The way in which print works serves as a foundation for other literacy skills. Children learn that print carries meaning when they develop awareness of print (Clay, 1979). They discover that books are held a certain way, that we start reading from a certain place, and that we read from left to right, and from top to bottom on the page. Concepts of print also include the knowledge that letters make up words, words make up sentences, and there are spaces between words and sentences, and even punctuation. Concepts of print are important to reading, but children will also use these concepts as they are writing.

Letter-Sound Knowledge

The understanding that each letter has a corresponding sound (and in some cases, more than one sound!) is an important aspect of reading. Sometimes letters combine to make a single sound, which is why the English language has 26 letters that represent 44 sounds. As children learn these combinations of letters and sounds, they develop an understanding of letter-sound knowledge and how to combine the letters to make words, an important concept for both reading and writing.

Knowledge of Genre

Understanding the different types of text and their purpose is important for future literacy success (Duke, 2007). As children progress through school, they will be asked to read and write different kinds of text for different reasons and knowledge of one type of text does not always transfer to the other. For example, reading only storybooks will not necessarily help a child understand how to comprehend informational books. Reading a variety of books and non-book materials is important to ensure that children not only understand the purpose of the text, but can also write in the different genres as well.

Oral Language

Beginning in infancy, the expression of one's thoughts, wants, and needs can be communicated through cries and coos. Whether children respond to the language of others through their

knowledge of receptive language or are able to communicate their own desires through their expressive language, the reliance on communication with others is a cornerstone of the development of this skill. It is so important that the National Reading Council indicated that improvement of children's oral language could prevent future difficulty with reading (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Informational/Non-fiction Text

One of the types of text with which children need to become familiar is informational text, or text that shares information about the natural and social worlds (Kamberelis, 1998; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000) because they will encounter these types of text as they progress through school. Although storybooks are enjoyable, they are not the only type of books available, and it's important for children to be exposed to a variety of texts, including informational text (Duke, 2007). Someone who knows more about the subject than the reader usually writes informational text that explains, persuades, shares an opinion, or is about a concept such as numbers or shapes. What is especially important about informational or non-fiction text is that a child does not have to see the pictures or illustrations in a particular order to make sense of the text.

Phonological Awareness

For children, the ability to hear the sounds in spoken language is one of the most important predictors of their future success in reading (Stanovich, Cunningham, & Cramer, 1984). Phonological awareness consists of the ability to hear syllables or beats in words, identify words that rhyme and come up with their own rhyming words, and hear individual, smaller sounds in words. These skills help them with reading, such as using their ability to break words into syllables, to help think about the sounds of words in manageable chunks, or recognizing a new word because it rhymes with a word they already know. They can also use these skills in reverse while

Vocabulary/Word-Meaning

Children learn new words from talking, playing, singing, and noticing the different words that adults around them use. Young children need to understand the words that are spoken or read to them at an early age as well as the words they read. A typical 3-year-old has a working vocabulary of about 1,000 words, and most 5-year-olds can follow three-step directions without interruption (Vukelich, Christie, & Enz, 2012). Hearing a variety of words that mean the same thing helps children to make sense of the world around them, but will also help them to understand when reading. This is especially important as readers will understand the text when they know the meanings of the words.

Writing

Children's drawings can be considered their first attempts at writing (Bodrova & Leong, 2006). As they observe those around them writing, they will begin to make marks on the page that mimic the marks they see others making. What might look meaningless to an adult is extremely meaningful to a child and represents the next stage of writing (Bloodgood, 1999) that will then move to recognizable letters as children develop letter-sound knowledge. Watching others write, and especially writing for authentic purposes, is an important way for children to learn that we use repeated sets of motions in our writing and can use the same sets of letters in varying ways to create words (Temple, Nathan, Temple, & Burris, 1993). Children develop their own theories about how writing works, but need to see writing modeled and to have materials and support from adults around them in order to do so.

Motivating Young Readers

Reading together is one of the most important things a parent can do with a child. Early experiences within the home have been shown to help children equate reading as enjoyable later on (Zeece & Churchill, 2001), and children who find reading enjoyable are more likely to be motivated readers throughout school. Families or caregivers provide the first early literacy experiences to a child, which take place in the home (Theriot et al., 2003) and in early childhood education settings (Storch & Whitehurst, 2001). These are essential to motivating young readers for future literacy success.

Supporting Literacy Skill Development by Age

(Infants – Toddlers – Preschoolers – School Age)

Helping young children to develop literacy skills is one of the most important things adults can do beginning at birth and continuing through the school years. By offering materials that are engaging and developmentally appropriate and also spending time with young children to show them how to use those materials, adults can provide literacy experiences that are crucial for future literacy skills. Consider some of the following ideas according to the different age groups:

Infants

- Talk early, talk often, and talk a lot. Explain what you are doing with babies, no matter what you are doing. Talk about the day, expand on the squeals, coos, and giggles, and soothe crying with gentle phrases to help them learn new words.
- Sing as if no one else is listening. Sing a lullaby, belt out an opera version of the alphabet song, or karaoke your favorite children's song with the baby's name in it.
- Read to infants. Read board books, soft, cloth books, books about shapes and colors, and books about nursery rhymes. Introduce favorites from your childhood and books of poetry, information, and books with bright pictures. Read a variety of books every day.
- Look for print everywhere with babies. Point out letters on walks and share both the letter and the sound that letter makes. Find print in their environment and explain what it does. Show infants that print is all around them and that it has a purpose.

- Write in front of infants, and let them try it too. Try finger painting with non-toxic paints, writing on water mats, or using other age-appropriate materials. Talk about the shapes of the letters as you write and the materials they are using as they make marks.
- Ask questions while you read or talk with baby and wait for the answer. Whether the infant gurgles, coos, or responds with a gaze, continue the conversation.
- Relate the books you read to babies to things in their own lives. For example, talk about how something that happened in the book may have happened with the babies, or happened in another book you read together.
- Encourage a pincer grasp necessary for writing by placing objects in front of babies and having them place them into a ball or other container (note objects should be small enough to pick up with forefinger and thumb, but large enough to not be a choking hazard).

Toddlers

- Read books with toddlers that will help introduce a new word. Repeat the new word and explain the new word using words the child already knows.
- Ask children to find a particular part of an illustration or photo and then talk about why that part is important to the story or the book.
- Encourage toddlers to write by having a variety of writing materials available. Try adding chalk, thick colored pencils, washable finger paints, big markers and crayons, and thick paper. You can also encourage toddlers to write using their finger in clean sand trays, by shaping play dough or modeling clay, and having materials that allow them to sort small objects to develop the small muscles in their hands that are needed for writing (keep an eye on toddlers while doing this and avoid items that can be choking hazards).
- Ask toddlers to be the expert. As you read a favorite storybook, ask children to share what will happen next in the story. While reading informational text, ask children to point out something in the text in the photos or illustrations. If you are reading poetry, ask them to help you act out the poem.
- Write with toddlers, using both upper and lower case letters. Point out the letters in their names wherever you see them, and practice writing their names in the air, on the rug, in the dirt, and on their backs with your finger just before a nap so they can feel the letters.
- Find a new word in a book and then use it throughout the day. Use a word like “shearing” in *Woolbur* and then use it throughout the day with toddlers as you explain that you are cutting paper or shearing the paper, talk about who got a haircut or his hair shorn, or that you need to shear off the top of your block structure so that it’s not quite so tall.
- Point to the words while you read to help toddlers learn that it is the text that we read.
- Play word games and finger plays with toddlers. They will love the repetitive rhymes that will help them pay attention to the sounds in spoken language.
- Sing songs using funny voices. Sing in a quiet voice, a loud voice, a monster voice, or an opera voice.

- Read books that enable toddlers to chime in with a key piece of text.

Preschoolers

- Read a variety of books with preschoolers about the same topic, including storybooks, information books, and other types of books including poetry and books that encourage children to be involved in the text, like activity books.
- Offer preschoolers a variety of writing materials in unexpected places, such as the dramatic play area, the block area, and outside. Encourage them to draw or write about the things that are part of their everyday experiences or they see every day.
- Use a new word with preschoolers each day and use it several times throughout the day with words they already know to help them learn the meaning of the word.
- Ask questions while reading books that require children to think about things beyond the “here and now.” Questions such as “how does that remind you of something you did last week?” or “what do you think the book character is going to do tomorrow?” help children to make meaning of the text.
- Show preschoolers how to write their name. Use an uppercase letter for the first letter and lowercase letters for the remaining letters. Ask them to show you where their name is used to label their belongings or other places where they might see it.
- Notice when preschoolers use a word to describe something and share other words that mean the same thing with them. If something is “great”, share other things that it can also be, such as marvelous, stupendous, amazing, astounding, and spectacular.
- Relate books to children’s own lives by asking questions such as “tell me about a time when you...” or “how is that like something you have done?”
- Look for letters of the alphabet in the world around you. Because we don’t always find letters in “alphabetical order”, see if children can identify letters they come across, as well as hunt for letters you specify.
- Try tongue twisters to encourage children to pay attention to the beginning sounds in words.
- Notice both upper and lowercase letters with preschoolers and talk about the difference so they are aware they can be written both ways.
- Talk about the parts of the book, including the author and illustrator, front and back covers, table of contents and glossary (if looking at information books), and other parts of books you might see.
- Give children books backwards or upside down and ask them to help you find where to start reading. This not only helps prepare for a shared reading experience, it lets you know what else you can do to help a child develop skills in concepts of print.
- Say two words to children and ask them to tell you if they rhyme. Try word pairs like “door and floor”; “moon and spoon”; and “pail and stair”. When children are able to recognize word pairs that rhyme, give them one word and ask them to provide you with its rhyme.

School Age

- Encourage children to talk with others. Talking with others, whether it is with older, younger, or same-aged peers as well as adults helps them to learn new words as part of their everyday conversations.
- Keep a journal with children. Ask children to start a journal to you and respond to their entries at the end of the week.
- Ask children to retell a book they have read to a partner or to you after they have read it. Once they have told you about what they have read from beginning to end, ask them to summarize the storybook in two or three sentences.
- Read an informational text with children after sharing a storybook about the same topic. If you read *Woolbur*, read an informational book about sheep. Then, find a poem about sheep to share with children too.
- Challenge children to find new words in books they are reading and keep a “word journal.” They can share the new words with one another by having a “word of the day” and sharing not only the word, but using the word in a sentence as well.
- Establish a writing area for children in the classroom and at home. Stock the writing area with all of the materials they might need, including writing paper and notebooks, pencils, pens, markers, and crayons. Include a stapler, hole puncher, and different types of tape as well. Consider envelopes, stickers, and “stamps” too, but also ask the children what other items the writing area might need.
- Ask children to make inferences about the text, or to figure out something about the book that the author does not specifically include. For example, ask children why sheep need to have their wool shorn?
- Point out the different parts of different types of books, such as the table of contents in informational text, or the way poetry books are a collection of poems one after another.
- Discover the sounds that letters make together, especially as some letters make more than one sound and letters can combine to make a sound.
- Look for words in everyday activities to help children learn “sight” words.
- Model appropriate word choices and grammar for school-age children rather than correct them.
- Encourage children to share their favorite part of the book, asking probing questions such as, “Why did you like that part the best?” or “What made that part stand out to you?”
- Play with the sounds in words by adding or deleting sounds and asking children what word they would end up with. For example, ask children what they would have if you added a “buh” sound to “rain”. Or, ask them what word they would have if they took out the “nuh” in “snake”.
- Write notes to children, whether it is to start the day as a morning message or to help them determine what foods to eat for snack. Ask them to write a note back responding to a question in your note.

The Importance of Shared Reading

(Sharing Books – Type of Book – Text and Illustrations - Purpose of the Shared Reading)

Sharing Books

Sharing books with young children is a critical part of developing literacy skills. The importance of early reading experiences cannot be stressed enough (Garton & Pratt, 2009). Reading to young children early, reading often, and reading a variety of books, including storybooks, information books, poetry books, and books that involve children in the text is one of the most important things adults can do with young children (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). The benefits of shared reading are many, including developing oral language skills (Beck & McKeown, 2001), increasing their vocabulary (Wasik & Bond, 2001), improving comprehension skills (Dickinson & Smith, 1994), and positively affecting overall literacy (Aram, 2006). Reading books over and over with children increases the likelihood that children will become familiar with the text, learn the words in the book, and attempt to read books on their own (Morrow & Gambrell, 2002). They are also more likely to participate in readings with the adults who read with them and make connections between the print and the things in their own world. Not only does reading books with young children create a bond with them, it helps them develop a love of reading that lasts a lifetime.

The books that you choose to read with young children may depend on several things. Each book brings something different to the reading experience, and every reading experience can support literacy development in a different way. As you make books available for children or select books with children in mind, consider the following:

Type of Book

Researchers suggest children should be introduced to different types of books (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Duke, 2007; Kamberelis, 1998) and this introduction to different types of books can happen early. The exposure to multiple types of text *genres* is important for future success in school, but also helps children to understand different genres as they are reading and writing. Encourage children to choose storybooks, informational books, poetry, folk and fairy tales, books that require them to interact with the pages or text, graphic novels, magazines, or other texts that are of interest to them. It is suggested children read books or text in a ratio that is 1/3 storybooks, 1/3 informational, and 1/3 that falls into the category of “other” (Duke, 2007) to help them understand the different kinds of books that are available. Narrative books are books that include characters, settings, problems, and solutions (Baumann & Bergeron, 1993). Informational books typically are written with the idea of sharing information and written from the point of view of someone who has more knowledge about something to someone who has less knowledge (Duke, 2003). Books that fall in the “other” category are books that don’t fit into the category of narrative or informational. Educators and parents can provide a variety of books from which to choose to encourage their selection of the different types, or select a new genre to read during shared reading time.

Text and Illustrations

Younger children benefit from books with vibrant illustrations or photos with less text, while older children may handle more text more easily. Shared reading experiences may be more interactive with just enough text to support the illustrations so that rich conversations can take place while reading. As you are looking at books, consider the age and interests of the child(ren), paying attention to illustrations or photos, amount and type of text, and vocabulary words. Don't be afraid of a book with very few words as you can create your own story or information to go along with the pictures. As you read, you can share in the reading experience by trying some of the following:

- Talk about the different purposes of the book you are reading. If you are reading an informational book, discuss what new knowledge you have gained from that book. With poetry books, talk about the way the words sound or what children liked about the poems. You can also ask children for their opinion of a storybook.
- Ask open-ended questions as you read, expanding on the children's responses.
- Use children's prior knowledge about the book, whether it is a storybook, information book, or a book from the "other" category, such as a poetry or activity book. Ask children to relate the book you are reading to what they already know.
- Engage in conversations beyond the "here and now" that encourage children to relate the text to things they might have done in the past or things they are going to do in the future. This use of *decontextualized language* is important for developing comprehension skills and can be done with any type of book.
- Use both print and pictures or illustrations in your conversations.

Purpose of the Shared Reading

With each reading, consider your purpose for the reading experience. You may read purely for the enjoyment of sharing a book with a child or group of children. Sometimes you might read a book because of the rich vocabulary it offers. Another time a book with predictive text might offer the chance to talk about what might happen next and develop comprehension skills. Rather than try to focus on several things in each reading, use each reading to focus on one literacy construct at a time. With that, know that reading the same book several times and for different purposes is a great way to get even more out of a book. In other words, if you read a book the first time and talk about all of the things you are expecting a character to do, the next time you read, look for new words in the book and talk about their meanings. A third time you read the book, ask the child or children with whom you are reading to share all of the things the character would do.

When selecting books or text, take into account an essential part of developing early literacy skills in young children is including children in the reading, which is why the experience is "shared." Involving children in the reading can be done in a number of ways, such as:

- Ask children to choose books with topics of interest to them. If you find you are reading primarily storybooks, be sure to add other types of books such as information or poetry books as well. Likewise, if you notice children enjoying information books, add activity or songs books about a favorite topic to expose them to new types and talk about the purpose of each kind of book.
- Find out what a child knows about the content of the book as you read together. Add to the child's prior knowledge as you have conversations about the book, whether you are talking about the illustrations or pictures or the text.
- Check out the illustrations or pictures as you read. Make connections to the text with questions such as "what do you think about..." or "how does this look..." to find out what children are thinking as you read a book together.
- Use open-ended questions to find out what children understand about the text as you read the book together.
- Predict what will happen next in a book by stopping on a page and asking children to think about what will happen next. Stop to talk about their responses and then after reading the next page, talk about what happened, and whether their predictions were accurate.

Further information at www.michigan.gov/michiganreads.