



LESSONS IN LEARNING

How parents foster
early literacy

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There is much truth in the cliché that parents are a child’s first teachers – especially when it comes to a child’s early literacy. Simple activities such as reading storybooks or singing songs to a child can have significant impact on a child’s ability to develop language and literacy skills. But there are many more things parents do and can do to ensure that their children get off to a good start on the road to speaking, listening, and reading.

Today we have a new understanding of how children learn to read and what environmental factors have negative or positive effects on literacy development. We know that skilled readers continually have higher academic scores and have the best chance of lifelong success. We know that the path to skilled reading begins in the earliest years, between birth and age five. And we are beginning to learn what activities, tools or programs can be used in the home or child-care centres to provide the best advantage to young children as they move into literacy.

Home or family literacy activities for young children will help to develop vocabulary, language, phonological awareness (understanding of the sounds and the meaning of spoken language), as well as book awareness and interest. They cultivate understandings of narrative structure, functions and concepts of print; and foster letter and word recognition as well as overall comprehension skills. These child and parent-child activities can include:

A shift towards greater and more structured in-home teaching is taking hold within families of young children

- providing access to numerous books, including alphabet books, picture books and books with rhyming;
- reading storybooks with a child;
- offering access to writing implements, paper and a writing surface;
- giving access to games that encourage alphabet knowledge and reading, such as magnetized alphabet and computer reading games;
- teaching the alphabet, letter sounds, how to write the child’s name, and new words;
- engaging in songs and music, oral stories and other art-based activities;
- engaging in regular, detailed and informative conversations with the child;
- exposing children to adult reading activities – simply by having them see adults reading at home every day (books, magazines, online articles); and
- visiting a library or bookstore.

All the world is a literacy stage: how we learn to read

Everything a child does in the early years of life feeds into development: the first sensory experiences, the first explorations, the first assessments of the world. The richness of that world, in terms of opportunities for experience, parental support and availability of resources, is now thought to have a direct impact on language skills and emergent literacy (see sidebar). Simply stated, everything in the early years matters. The question is, how?

It has long been accepted that vocabulary, book and print awareness, as well as understanding of narrative structure are key elements required in a child's progression into literacy. In recent years, a growing body of research has identified the importance of phonological awareness in the acquisition of both language and literacy skills. (Phonological awareness can be defined as the ability to hear and distinguish parts of speech, such as syllables, rhymes and letter sounds.) There is also general agreement in the research community that an early sensitivity to the sounds and structure of spoken language is a strong predictor of reading success.

Current research has also found that language and emergent literacy are both related to phonological awareness, but not in the same way. The various facets of phonological awareness play different roles in the advance of literacy at different stages of a child's development. Depending on what phase of learning a child is in, different competencies and knowledge are required. For example, early reading draws upon emergent literacy and certain phonological processing skills, namely phonemic awareness (the ability to detect individual letter sounds), while more advanced reading draws upon language skills and the different sets of phonological skills that are tied to oral language, such as comprehension of rhymes and syllables.

In sum, phonological awareness is important for the development of both early language skills and emergent literacy skills, which in turn is necessary for the development of skilled reading in later years.

The question of how we cultivate these different kinds of skills and abilities has been the focus of a great deal of study. Shared book reading is the most common literacy-based activity that parents and young children participate in and as such it has been extensively researched. Its benefits are well documented and clearly demonstrate that shared storybook reading plays an important role in the development of language skills in both preschoolers and school-aged children. In particular, shared book reading enhances language comprehension, vocabulary development, and certain elements of phonological awareness. Of course, book reading is not the only activity to develop language. Oral stories and rhymes, songs, art, and focused conversation all contribute to the growth of language.

Emergent Literacy

The term "emergent literacy" was coined by New Zealand researcher Marie Clay in 1966 to describe the behaviours seen in not-yet-literate children when they use books and writing materials to mimic reading and writing. Today's understanding of the term is far broader. Literacy is now known to begin at birth (or perhaps earlier) with the first experiences with oral language, and is expanded through exposure to books, music, art and other media. Emergent literacy is tied to every aspect of a child's intellectual, cognitive, emotional and social development, and encompasses all activities and learning that a child does that contributes to their eventual ability to read and write. This includes vocabulary development, phonological awareness (understanding of the sounds and the meaning of spoken language), early attempts at reading (telling a story based on pictures) and writing (scribbling), but also encompasses the conceptual understanding of the abstract symbolic nature of communications.

Research has just begun to unravel the complexities of learning in other types of literacy activities that are believed to foster emergent literacy – a key skill in early reading development. It is currently felt that emergent literacy is advanced by a wide variety of phonological activities that focus on letter-name and letter-sound awareness. We have yet to identify if any one or more activities produce better results than others, but several streams of research are underway. These include the influences of art activities, video game and computer experiences, narration, and the effect of family literacy programs. As the scope of research broadens, so too does our understanding of this important and remarkable process.

Beyond the activities a child engages in, a number of other factors have emerged as contributing to the ease with which children gain language and emergent literacy skills. These include: parenting styles (such as methods of discipline); mother-child bond; and children’s interest in literacy.

Of particular note, however, is the impact that maternal education levels, maternal age, and socio-economic status have on comprehension and language development, as well as later literacy and academic skills. The evidence consistently demonstrates that children whose mothers have lower levels of education will be more likely to have below-average academic results. Similarly, children born in lower socio-economic strata also score lower in literacy and other academic areas.

A number of studies have examined this trend in an attempt to identify and mitigate the causes that lead to poor literacy and academic performance. The preliminary results indicate that children in these circumstances often face a host of biological, social and cultural stresses that make literacy and education a low priority. But the exact ways that poverty, low maternal age and education act individually or collectively to adversely impact children’s language and literacy skills is not yet completely understood.

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What can be said, based on studies of families of middle to high socio-economic status or with mothers with higher education, is that they are more likely to promote literacy in the home. Children in these environments generally have greater exposure to print materials, are read to more often, partake in more art and educational activities, visit libraries more often, and have greater levels of interaction with parents or caregivers in which early literacy skills are promoted.

In some cases, biological and other risk factors require medical or more intensive remediation. However, early identification and prevention can begin at home. Parents should and can begin building and teaching literacy from early infancy. The earlier a child is exposed to language and literacy activities, the greater the child’s chances for future literacy and academic success, and the greater the chances that a potential problem can be identified at an early age.

Lessons in learning

Parents inherently want their children to succeed. And as an increasing body of evidence points to a child's early years as critical to future academic and lifelong success, a shift towards greater and more structured in-home teaching is taking hold within families of young children.

Surveys conducted by the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics suggest that from 1993 and 1999 there's been an increase of up to eight percent in family literacy activities for children between the ages of three and five.

We have seen how reading to young children remains an important and valuable part of a child's emotional, intellectual and cognitive development. The comprehension, language and phonological skills gained through this simple activity lay the groundwork for eventual literacy. Research shows that parents and caregivers who go beyond reading, to engage their child's interest in letters and the spelling of words, do have a significant and lasting impact on that child's literacy.

In recent years, an increasing number of programs, tips and materials dedicated to family literacy have become available to Canadians through literacy centres, libraries, public health centres and websites. They provide tools and ideas that enable parents to foster language and emergent literacy in the home.

Lessons for parents and caregivers: Creating a home environment to support a child's literacy acquisition

A family literacy environment should include activities that guide and nurture all aspects of language and literacy development. Below are suggested activities that can easily be adopted or adapted to suit a child's age and interests.

Activities that foster vocabulary and language development:

- Have regular (more than once a week), detailed, informative conversations with children. For example, during bath time ask, "What do you think happens to water when it goes down the drain?" Ask other exploratory questions in the car, while eating or reading.
- Teach children new words on a regular basis.
- Use labelling games with infants and toddlers – "Where are your ears?" or "The cat is on the couch."
- Comment on children's surroundings, particularly when in a new environment. Talk about children's experiences before, during and after a new activity.
- Encourage children to talk about their favourite books – get them to read it to you, or have them comment on their favourite part. Respond back to encourage continued conversation.

Activities that foster phonological awareness (understanding the sounds and meaning of spoken language):

- Sing songs, recite nursery rhymes and poems, engage in language and rhyming games that draw attention to language and sounds.
- Draw attention to letter sounds – use everyday activities to talk about letters and their sounds (Milk begins with the letter m. M makes the mmmmm sound).
- Read books that focus on sounds and rhymes (e.g., *In the Small, Small Pond* by Denise Fleming).
- Lay out groupings of pictures that feature similar sounding words (e.g. house and mouse, ball and bell) and, in a quiet place, encourage children to find the picture of one of the items (Can you find the bell?).

Identifying children at risk of low language and literacy development is another critical step in the process of fostering literacy skills in preschool children

Activities that foster understanding of narrative structure (understanding the parts of narrative, such as sequence of events, characters and dialogue):

- Read to children frequently and in different situations – bedtime, on the bus, in the bookstore, waiting in line at the bank, as a break during clean-up.
- Encourage children to pretend to read (e.g. give them a picture book and have them tell you the story) and encourage turn-taking with books children are familiar with.
- Take time for oral storytelling and pretend storytelling using puppets or dolls.

Activities that foster book awareness and interest (understanding that books convey ideas, knowledge and information as well as creating positive experiences with books and reading):

- Provide access to a variety of high-quality books, including alphabet books, picture books and books with rhyming; ensure books are age-appropriate (e.g., board or cloth books for babies).
- Make regular visits to a library or bookstore (at least once every two months). Expose children to different kinds of books – storybooks, non-fiction books (e.g., about trucks, nature, dinosaurs), and poetry.
- Read to your child frequently (at least four times per week) and create a warm storytime or reading environment. Let children initiate shared reading times, encourage children to take turns reading, allow time for questions.
- Connect visual experiences to books – if a child takes an avid interest in a television program, extend their knowledge by obtaining books on the same or similar topics.
- Allow children to see adults in the home reading every day (books, magazines, online articles).

Activities that foster understanding of print concepts and functions, as well as letter and word recognition (understanding that print gives us meaningful information, can amuse, comfort and entertain; understanding that print follows certain conventions, such as spaces between words, is read left to right, top to bottom; understanding that words are made up of letters):

- Allow children to help with daily activities involving print – write a shopping list, write an appointment in a calendar, choose items from a take-out menu. Explain the purpose of these activities.
- Explain and show how print works – read the title and author of a book before reading, follow the print with your fingers as you read.
- Point out conventions of print when reading (e.g., if a child interrupts while reading, explain that you will answer when you finish the sentence and point to the period when you get there. Say what it means, then allow time to answer the original question).
- Provide access to games that encourage alphabet knowledge and reading, such as magnetized alphabet, computer reading games (e.g., Reader Rabbit);
- Encourage children to learn the first letter of their name and help them find it in printed materials they encounter (e.g., signs, mail).
- Teach children alphabet songs.
- Write a child's name often – include it on their art work, label the door to their room, or their favourite toy. As they get older, write labels for common words and place them on the item.

Activities that foster comprehension (understanding the meaning of language heard in everyday conversation and in narrative form):

- Ask questions during shared activities such as reading, watching television or playing computer games that help children think about vocabulary, plot, or character.
- Tell a story or listen to an audio recording of a book, then ask children to draw a picture of their favourite part of the story and have a conversation about it.

Lessons about public support for the next generation of readers

The family literacy activities listed reflect the clear shift in the belief of what is required to assist a child's literacy development, from incidental learning to directed learning. This shift is also evident in the public sphere, where child-care, preschool and kindergarten programs have begun to move into directed forms of learning that stress letter knowledge, phonological awareness and language skills. These programs have shown improvements to children's oral language and their emergent literacy skills, particularly with children of low socio-economic status.

However, these programs can be costly to implement on a large scale. Most child-care facilities, preschools and other public education facilities operate on minimal budgets. Major, or even partial program changes have considerable associated costs in terms of publication, training and assessments. Therefore, it is crucially important that research feeds the adoption of practices and tools that have the maximum benefit to children.

Identifying children at risk of low language and literacy development is another critical step in the process of fostering literacy skills in preschool children. But traditionally, assessments do not take place until a child is well into his or her school years, when interventions are more costly and difficult to implement. Again, this underscores the importance of early assessment and directed learning in the early years.

The current and emerging research will create a greater understanding of the importance of preschool years for early language and literacy development and will continue to provide insight into best practices for early intervention. In the many ongoing discussions on the subject of early literacy among researchers, educators, policy and program makers, there should be a focus on the application of best practices in testing and remediation, as well as making the necessary programs and facilities available.