

The Importance of Early Language and Literacy

Many people believe that children learn to read and write in kindergarten or first grade; however, the foundation for literacy skills is laid years before children enter school. Emergent literacy, much like any other cognitive skill, begins at birth. During the early years, children develop competency in language and literacy not through a set curriculum, but through interactions and experiences with the adults around them. Young children benefit when teachers are both knowledgeable and intentional in how they support and nurture early language and literacy.

When we use the term “early,” or “emergent literacy,” we are referring to what children know about communication, language (verbal and nonverbal), reading, and writing before they can actually read and write. It encompasses all the experiences children have had with conversation, stories (oral and written), books, and print (Parlakian, 2003). Early literacy skills unfold simultaneously as children master other domains of development, such as social emotional skills. In fact, the emotional bonds between young children and their families, other adults, and peers influence children’s motivation and potential to learn (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). It is through positive, meaningful relationships and experiences that children gain confidence in their ability to explore and learn from the world around them.

Similarly, research indicates that family expectations and involvement are also important factors influencing later school achievement in young children. Families who support and believe in their children’s ability to learn are promoting their school readiness (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Likewise, teacher expectations have also been shown to influence children’s school achievement (Bamburg, 1994).

For young children, literacy, language, and culture are interrelated. Through literacy experiences, children see the values and beliefs of their culture presented in a positive and nurturing light. Language is also an important expression of culture. As young children acquire their home language, they are mastering the knowledge and skills that form the basis of their cultural identity. For this reason, it is important for young children to be supported in maintaining their home language, especially when they are receiving care in English-language settings.

Even as adults, we can remember the warmth and nurturing we felt when sitting on the lap of a loved adult, sharing a book, and experiencing the magic of story-telling as the words on the page were read to us.

Communication: The Foundation for Learning

Children’s ability to communicate effectively—through reading, writing, and language—is critical to exploring the world and interpreting their experiences in it. Babies, it seems, are born with the ability to communicate basic needs, first using unintentional communication techniques (e.g., cooing, babbling, crying) as newborns and young infants, and gradually expanding their repertoire to more intentional techniques (e.g., eye gaze, pointing, use of words). Caring observers can watch children make the transition from random gestures to pointing, repetitive sounds to specific words, scribbling to writing. These transitions exemplify children’s innate motivation to communicate and to be understood by those around them. Indeed, research tells us that babies are born “prewired” to learn language (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000).

Communication skills are crucial for the healthy development of all children. Although methods of communication may vary—for example, a child may use American Sign Language or point at a communication board—the ability to share one’s needs, feelings, and ideas with others is a key achievement. The feelings of confidence and self-efficacy that arise from successful communications encourage children to continue—and expand—their efforts to communicate as well as shape their view of themselves as competent learners.

All children, including those with disabilities, have both the right and the desire to communicate effectively with those around them. Communication skills are a window to the world, regardless of whether a child’s primary communication strategy is language, gesturing, or writing.

Why Begin With Infants?

The early years of life are a period in which the foundation for future learning is being laid at the emotional, cognitive, experiential, and even cellular levels.

Brain Development.

During infancy, brain development is occurring at a faster pace than at any other time in a human being’s development. The networks within the infant’s brain are transformed into an increasingly complex web of visual, motor, language, and social–emotional connections that are essential for later literacy learning.

Narrative Understanding.

Narrative refers to the process of stringing together meaningful ideas as a story. Through exploration and discovery, observing daily events, and listening to simple stories, infants and toddlers begin to appreciate narrative and to themselves become “storytellers.” When a baby points to a dropped bottle and gestures grandly, she may be saying, “I was holding my bottle. Then it slipped. Now look, there’s a big mess!” When these narratives are acknowledged, infants are motivated to continue sharing their stories with adults. Narrative understanding is at the heart

of learning to read and communicate.

Communication and Language Development.

Print, spoken language, and gesturing are all strategies human beings use to communicate. In the first 3 years, infants and toddlers begin acquiring the first of thousands of words they will use throughout their lives. Simultaneously, children are learning the rules of grammar as well as absorbing the social conventions that exist around communication in their community. When adults respond sensitively and consistently to infants' and toddlers' attempts to communicate, children develop a sense of their own competence and self-efficacy.

Social–Emotional Development.

The development of strong attachment relationships with family and primary caregivers may be the central task of infancy. It is in the context of warm, loving relationships that infants learn to trust, to feel safe exploring their worlds, and to develop a sense of competence and confidence in their own ability to master new skills. This growing sense of self-esteem and personal identity prepares them for later success as communication partners, readers, and writers.

Culture.

As infants and toddlers, children are introduced to their cultural community, their culture's approach to learning, ways of interacting, and important stories and traditions. Ensuring continuity between home and child care is one important way that teachers can support children's early learning.

Appreciation of Print and Pleasure in Reading.

Long before children are readers, they can develop an appreciation for the sounds of language (phonological awareness) through the songs, imitation, and sound plays that all cultures share with their infants. Very young children also begin to associate pleasure with reading when they share this experience with a loving adult.