Early literacy: The essentials

Part 1. Beginning conversations

Editor's note: Over the next four issues we will address the complex—and dynamic—issue of emergent literacy: supporting children as they learn to read and write. In this issue we'll focus on beginning conversations and the basics of communication. Part 2 will focus on asking questions and sharing books. Part 3 will examine phonological awareness and alphabet activities for kindergarten-age children. Part 4 will review tools for supporting emergent reading and writing, and assessment.

When does a child learn to read? How does it happen? What are the building blocks of true literacy?

While thousands of pages of research and conjecture make their way to the popular press, there are few absolutes in emergent literacy. Because each child and each teacher is different, it's hard to talk about a single best practice or curriculum.

There are, however, some consistently identified components or building blocks of literacy—aspects everyone involved in the early care and education of children should recognize. These include:

- oral language skills—built by talking and listening;
- awareness of print—from exposure to books, magazines, and other print materials;
- awareness of the sounds of spoken language (phonological awareness)—being able to hear, identify, and blend sounds into words;
- letter or alphabetic knowledge—recognizing that words are composed of letters that fall in a particular order; and
- appreciation for written words and the motivation and persistence to decode print into meaning—words combine to build sentences, stories, and books that are interesting and enriching.

Literacy is a dynamic process. It may seem that children learn first to speak and then to read. But speaking and reading are intertwined in the process of language development, a process that begins at birth. Actually, some research indicates that language begins before birth as a fetus becomes familiar with the cadence and tone of language heard from inside the uterus.

Building oral language skills

Early conversation takes many forms. It's newborn Amanda crying—and having her cries interpreted and addressed. It's 3-week-old Clara blowing bubbles and sticking out her tongue in imitation of her mother. It's 6-month-old Juan playing peek-a-boo with his brother. It's 15-month-old Latoya tossing and retrieving a rubber ball saying, "-et -all!" And it's 40-month-old Ben asking "Why" when his grandmother dies.

Children's conversations—and oral language skills—are triggered by their senses. They hear others talking, laughing, and singing. In a learning-rich environment, they see and feel textures and shapes, and engage in activities. They're eager to respond to the sounds that fill their world—with babbles, echoes, meaningful sounds, and eventually with

words. Children use their sensory experiences to make sense of the world—and to build the foundation for later reliance on the symbols used in reading and writing.

By the time children are a year old, they already know a lot about conversation—the back-and-forth of talking and listening. They recognize some speech sounds. They respond to their own names and know that others have names too. They know and begin to imitate the sounds that represent important people, activities, and objects.

Children learn all of this by listening to the conversations around them. This learning is experiential and inspired by the child's senses. It's as though the child thinks, "If I can touch or hear it, it must have a name that I can say." "From John Dewey to Jean Piaget, educators have generally agreed that while didactic teaching has its place, small children learn mainly from interacting and not passive listening, understanding and not memorizing, reading for fun and not simply decoding." (Kirp 2005)

Language is embedded in the experiences of a young child's daily life—touching, smelling, hearing, tasting, and saying. It emerges as literacy when children have

- time, materials, and resources that build language and conceptual knowledge;
- a supportive learning environment with access to print resources;
- social and learning groups that meet both the needs of individual children and the needs of the group;
- opportunities for sustained and in-depth learning and play; and
- adult-guided activities that support learning in all spheres of development. (Neuman and Roskos 2005)

Activities that foster conversation

Clearly, children who are exposed to positive, information-rich language begin to build a knowledge base—background knowledge—that becomes the foundation for all future learning. Knowledge is built through connections between what we already know and what we encounter in new, unfamiliar experiences. We try to relate the new to the old in a meaningful way, adding to our knowledge base. For example, Jason has a puppy. From experience and conversation Jason knows that his dog has four legs and is a color called *brown.* When Jason takes a ride in the country, he calls a cow "puppy" because it too is brown and has four legs.

Important terms to know

Concept—a generalized idea about a thing or class of things; an abstract thought. Example: Roundness, as in "This plate and lid are round."
Conceptual knowledge—knowledge of concepts, including objects and events, and how they're related
Contextualized conversation—dealing with the here and now
Decontextualized conversation—not tied to the immediate context or environment. Instead, it may reflect past events, embellish or fictionalize activities, analyze events, or predict what's next.
Didactic teaching—teaching by telling, rather than by allowing learners to interact and participate
Emergent literacy—ways children learn about reading and writing before being formally taught
Literacy—one's ability to read and write
Phonological awareness—awareness of the sounds of spoken language

Ideally, Jason's caregivers respond to his confusion with positive, sensitive warmth. They talk about color, body structure, and size. They share pictures, plastic animal models, and conversations about what animals eat, where they live, how they smell, and how they are cared for. As Jason builds his background knowledge, he is more likely to recognize that horses, goats, and elephants all have four legs (like his puppy) but are otherwise different animals with new characteristics to discover and discuss.

Responsive adults help children connect new information and ideas with what they already know and understand. As a result, children build a conceptual knowledge base. Adults reinforce it with new questions, investigations, discoveries, evaluations, and inventions. With that knowledge base, children have a secure foundation, and reading and writing are just a natural step away.

How can you help children develop background knowledge?

Use these guidelines from the U.S. Department of Education (2002) as you help children build strong oral language skills.

- Provide children with opportunities to develop concepts by exploring, manipulating, and evaluating

objects and materials in a variety of ways. Introduce and rotate materials so that children can make daily discoveries and develop new vocabulary to describe their interactions. Materials for babies include plastic lids and nesting toys. Materials for preschoolers include everything in traditional learning centers, such as funnels and strainers for the sand table, and scales and magnets for the discovery table.

- Share informational books. Balance fictional picture books with nonfiction—concept books, science and nature books, and books that broaden a child's concept of the world. Look for books with clear, accurate photographs and illustrations. Encourage children to make connections between what you are reading and their daily lives.
- Explore vocabulary by introducing new words and concepts. Ask open-ended questions and keep conversations moving. For example:

  Teacher: Wow! A huge butterfly just landed on our dill plant. It's a black swallowtail. Let's check it out.

  Child: Look, it's flying around. Is it looking for something to eat? I don't see its mouth.

  Teacher: Maybe it's going to lay eggs. In a few weeks we'll be able to watch the larva eat the dill leaves.

Compare the richness of this conversation to the barrenness of "Look, a butterfly." Introduce descriptive words, and invite children to share their own ideas. Talk with, not at, children. Always communicate there is more to learn about a topic.

- Maintain a rich dramatic play or pretend play center. Invite children to invent and construct new activities that help them incorporate new information with what they already know.
- Explore the sounds of spoken language. Tell stories with different voices and sound effects. Sing chants and rhymes, and play word games.
- Take field trips. Or invite field trips to come to you in the form of speakers. These broaden a child's view of the world and introduce new concepts and words. A walk around the block—especially to watch a road being paved or a house being built—can open new topics for conversation and discovery.
- Encourage children to talk as well as listen to adults and other children. Conversations about meaningful experiences—curiosity and discovery—drive children's interests in reading and writing.

Goals for oral communication

Successful oral communication—and conversation—relies on the ability to:

- distinguish among different kinds of communication. You listen differently to radio news, for example, than to someone giving directions to the bank, or to hum of the air conditioner.
- use spoken language for a variety of purposes. You speak to share a variety of emotions, concepts, and ideas.
- give and get, or reciprocate. You follow and give simple directions, for example, and ask and answer questions.
- use appropriate volume and speed. You know to talk softly in a library, for example, and to talk fast to warn of an impending bump, "Watch your elbow!"
- follow the rules of polite conversation. You know to stay on topic and take turns, for example.

Enriching, meaningful conversations

Most early care and education teachers know that talking with children is important—we've moved beyond "Children should be seen and not heard." But idle classroom chatter isn't enough. A teacher's voice that demands, "No, the blue one," and one-way observations like "That's good" don't encourage vocabulary or engaging conversation. We need to move to the next, meaningful level of conversation: that which builds a foundation for literacy.

Researchers David Dickinson and Patton Tabors offer ideas on conversations that matter. They distinguish between language that is contextualized (here and now) and decontextualized (not tied to the immediate context or environment).

Most conversations in early care and education programs are contextualized. Teachers typically focus on concrete, immediate, and simple directions and observations. Some examples: "Put your coat in your cubby." "Put your bottom on the chair." "Wash your hands before you come to the snack table." Dickinson (2001) found that "only 20 percent or less of the time children talked with adults in preschool was spent in conversations that went beyond the here and now. The rest of the time teachers were giving directions or asking children for specific information, such as the names of colors or letters."

Literacy—successful reading and writing—relies on the ability to decontextualize language. It's not tied to the immediate. Instead it may reflect past events, embellish or fictionalize activities, analyze events, or predict what's next. This language forces children to use vocabulary to represent ideas and concepts. It goes far beyond the typical conversation: "What did you do at school today?" "Nothing."

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Instead, decontextualized conversations encourage children to share information about different times, places, events, and people. It helps children move beyond vocabulary that names objects (red ball) to the more abstract and symbolic world of ideas (game we play), concepts (small and lightweight), expectations (bounces when thrown down), and explorations (how it feels in my hand).

Many early care and education teachers rely on decontextualized language when they stop to ask questions about a book: "Where do you think Miss Rumphius got her lupine seeds?" "Why do you think she liked traveling?" Asking such open-ended questions challenges children far more than passively reading the text word-for-word.

Here are other ways researchers have found to support emergent literacy through conversation:

- Allow a balance of teacher and child input. Conversational partners take turns speaking.
- Listen attentively and respectfully. Partners maintain eye contact, allow time to respond, and add ideas to the topic.
- Engage in extended conversation that stays on a topic that interests the child.
- Introduce vocabulary in a focused way.

All contribute to a child's developing vocabulary, language skills, and knowledge about how the world works—essentials in early reading success.

Chatter: Make it matter

As you consider the complex issues and demands of emergent literacy, remember that early conversation—filled with meaning and respect—forms a concrete foundation for all future literacy activities.

Immediate tips? Ask open-ended questions, listen to the response, add to the information with vivid, descriptive vocabulary, and help broaden children's knowledge of the world and how it works. Keep it rich—talk is never cheap.

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