

Early Literacy

Early Literacy Development: A Focus on Preschool

Introduction

The importance of children's early literacy development cannot be overstated. Children's success in school and later in life is to a great extent dependent upon their ability to read and write.



One of the best predictors of whether a child will function competently in school and go on to contribute actively in an increasingly literate society is the level to which the child progresses in reading and writing.

NAEYC 1998, 30

The early childhood years are crucial in children's literacy development because the development of language and literacy begins at birth and is a lifelong process. The primary function of language is to communicate. In infancy, children use cries, gurgles, various gestures and facial expressions to communicate. Throughout the toddler years, children progress in their ability to communicate by babbling, saying important words and continuing to expand their vocabulary. Language development accelerates rapidly in the preschool years. The growing ability to use language to communicate is a landmark of development that distinguishes preschoolers from infants and toddlers. As children's vocabularies increase and they use more complex sentences, their literacy skills emerge.

By the age of 3, a preschooler's vocabulary consists of approximately 2,000-4,000 words and by age 5, approximately 5,000-8,000 words (Bredenkamp and Copple, 1997, 107-109). Oral language ability is significant because of the strong link with learning to read and write. In addition to preschoolers' vocabulary growth, 3- and 4-year-olds have progressed to the stage of using language to convey their feelings and desires, interact with others, ask questions, think about things, represent what they know, and talk about imaginary situations. At the same time, they are mastering grammar, constructing the meaning of specific words, and "writing" and "reading" in their own particular, though unconventional ways. However, it must be pointed out that some preschool children may already be readers.

The process of becoming literate — learning about all the print forms of language and using them to communicate — begins at birth. In literate communities children come into contact with written language from infancy. This occurs when adults consciously bring children into contact with print (e.g., when they read to children or provide toys with print). Further, children may see print on television or in the environment in general. This exposure to print is the beginning of the process of learning to read and write that continues to emerge throughout the early childhood years. Children's growing ability to construct meaning from print is viewed by educators as emergent literacy. This paper takes an emergent literacy perspective in discussing literacy development in preschoolers. It looks at how early childhood programs and families can support children's language and literacy development and considerations for assessing literacy learning. The terms *reading* and *writing* are used throughout these pages to refer to all stages of the literacy development process.

Understanding Literacy Development

An understanding of how children develop as literacy learners is needed in order to provide appropriate support to enhance this development. Contemporary research on how children learn to read and write examines literacy development from the child's perspective. Teale and Sulzby (1989) point out that:

- ◇ Learning to read and write begins very early in life, that is for almost all children in a literate society.
- ◇ The functions of literacy are an integral part of the learning process that is taking place.
- ◇ Reading, writing (and speaking) develop concurrently and interrelatedly in young children.
- ◇ Children learn through active engagement, constructing their understanding of how written language works.

(Teale, W. and E. Sulzby, 1989. Emerging literacy: New perspectives. In *Emerging literacy: Young children learn to read and write*, eds. D. Strickland and L. Morrow. Copyright © 1989 by the International Reading Association. All rights reserved.)

Children begin to learn about reading and writing in infancy where they come into contact with print in their environments. Because we live in a print-rich society, young children are able to read environmental signs, such as labels on cereal boxes, names of restaurants and logos on clothing. In addition, young children who have been read to, who have had opportunities to “read” their own stories, who regularly see others reading and writing and who tend to experiment with writing, begin to understand that print has meaning. Many children, therefore, enter preschool programs with extensive exposure to reading and writing as a functional process.

Children grow in their ability to read and write when they understand that reading and writing are purposeful activities that are used to accomplish goals. This awareness that literacy is functional evolves when children observe adults using reading in functional ways (e.g., writing notes, referring to shopping lists, reading for pleasure, stopping a vehicle at a stop sign and using coupons to select food items). Skills associated with learning to read and write are acquired by young children, with the support of adults, as children engage in purposeful activities.

The processes of reading and writing, together with speaking, develop simultaneously and are interdependent. For example, positive oral language experiences contribute to preschoolers' developing abilities to read and write. On the other hand, reading experiences influence oral language development as witnessed when children who encounter new words in print add these to their speaking vocabularies. This perspective that reading and writing develop concurrently, with each element supporting the development of the other as children engage in literacy experiences, is contrary to that of “reading readiness,” “prereading” or drilling in skills. Educators cannot pinpoint a time at which literacy begins. Furthermore, the development of literacy does not follow a linear pattern. Literacy develops as children gain experience with oral language and print.

As children are actively engaged in using language to read and write and to explore print in their play, they learn how written language works. When children have opportunities to participate in meaningful literacy activities in supportive literacy-conscious environments, they refine their understanding and knowledge of print. A child may use self-determined symbols or letters to represent whole words or syllables, or scribbles which may be meaningless to an adult, but which the child can read to tell about the drawing that was made. Some older preschoolers also may be able to represent their thoughts by writing a few words without paying attention to grammar or spelling. In other instances, children may extend a familiar story that they have read or reconstruct stories by departing from the actual text and substituting their own words. In these examples, children who spend time with books and printed materials are beginning to construct their own understanding of the reading and writing process. This occurs before they can actually read or write in conventional ways.

Promoting Literacy in the Preschool



The foregoing discussion holds implications for how reading and writing should be addressed in the curriculum of preschool programs. Administrators and teachers of preschoolers need to focus on what children know and are curious about to build a program that moves them ahead in their growth as speakers, readers and writers. Such a program does not focus on developing specific skills such as letter recognition or auditory discrimination in isolation of content. Early childhood teachers should be facilitators of children's existing literacy knowledge, supporting and extending it to greater levels of complexity. The program must provide an environment that is rich in opportunities to engage children in language and literacy experiences where children feel comfortable and confident in their growing abilities as readers and writers. These experiences should occur throughout the day and in all aspects of

the program. Since children's first experiences with reading and writing occur in their homes and communities before they enter child-care and education programs, parents and caregivers should continue to be a part of children's literacy learning in preschool programs. The following are recommendations for promoting literacy in the preschool.

Establish a Positive Climate that Supports Children as Literacy Learners

Preschool programs, whether in schools or in the community settings outside of schools, must create a climate where children's efforts at learning to read and write are positively supported and expanded. A positive literacy learning program provides opportunities that enhance children's desires to communicate, their curiosity about the world around them and their sense of competence as readers and writers. Further, it respects and supports the use of the primary language of all children and provides opportunities for children to communicate in their primary language while acquiring English.

An important consideration in facilitating the process of learning to read and write is that preschoolers are more likely to want to read and write and be less inhibited about taking risks in trying to read and write when the mechanics of reading and writing are not the primary focus. Through a supportive literacy learning climate, young readers will experience the joy of communicating through speaking, reading and writing.

Use Children's Play to Facilitate Reading and Writing

Play is a natural and very important part of a young child's world. Through play, children engage in representational and symbolic thoughts and actions. For example, a cylindrical block from the block area becomes a microphone for dramatic play and small cubes in a pot on the stove in the housekeeping area becomes a meal. Using one object or symbol to represent another is necessary for learning to read and write, because words that are used to read and write are symbols or representations of thoughts and objects. Children should have opportunities to read and write while they play. By using books, various writing media such as pencils, markers, crayons, and paints and brushes, children will extend their knowledge of the reading and writing process.

Create a Physical Learning Environment that Promotes Reading and Writing

The physical environment must beckon children to speak, read and write and support their natural disposition to progress as readers and writers. Here are some guidelines for creating a physical environment that appeals to young readers and writers.

✧ Create a comfortable, cozy, well-lit area away from the very active areas in the classroom, where children can read on their own, read to one another or be read to by an adult, without being interrupted. Provide a variety of books about different subjects that appeal to the interests of children and with texts comprising varying levels of difficulty. Books must also reflect the identity, primary language and culture of the children.



✧ Provide opportunities for reading and writing and oral communication throughout the day and in various activities. The art area can offer children a variety of writing tools and materials, including paper of various colors, markers, paint brushes and crayons. Include pencils, crayons and paper in the block and housekeeping areas for children to use to make signs, develop shopping lists and write captions and notes. Offer dramatic play props, such as laundry tickets, cash register receipts and menus.

✧ Provide non-English materials and resources wherever possible to support children's primary languages while they are learning English.

✧ Display writing materials—paper, pencils, crayons and markers in areas near tables or other surfaces where children can access them easily for writing.

✧ Provide a variety of age-appropriate and culturally diverse materials around the room. These should be well displayed so that children can readily find what they want. Books can be placed in the housekeeping area and newspapers, magazines and reading games also can be used.

✧ Display a variety of written materials that have been created by children, teachers and parents that reflect the interests of children (e.g., a class book that has been created based on an experience that children have had, photographs and stories from the community that were produced after a walk in the community). Materials can include those that have been purchased.

✧ Provide tape recorders for children to listen to themselves as readers or record themselves as they retell a familiar story that was read to them, record nursery rhymes or record for other purposes.

✧ Use teaching strategies and experiences that develop an awareness of differences in spoken words, syllables and sounds, such as songs, finger plays, games, poems and stories in which phonemic patterns such as rhyme and alliteration are prominent (NAEYC 1998, 42).

◇ Use computers that are equipped with age-appropriate software to offer satisfying, child-friendly writing tools. While many software programs use letters and numbers incidentally, preschool word processing programs allow children to produce enlarged print and in some instances children can hear what they have written. Children also may be able to use the mouse to draw and make scribbles and marks to accompany their drawings. (Hohmann and Weikart 1995, 361)



- ◇ Use everyday, natural occurrences where children can visually compare letter shapes and sound similarities of words and letters. For example, using alphabet sorting boxes, alphabet books and puzzles, and listening to patterned, predictable texts and nursery rhymes.
- ◇ Develop written messages or instructions on charts or on other materials that are read to children, as appropriate.

Make Reading and Writing a Part of the Daily Routine of the Classroom

All areas of the classroom and all topics offer opportunities for children to engage in oral communication and to read and write. Children communicate best about subjects that interest them. Children can be helped to write captions to drawings they make or they can write on their own using letters or scribbles or other symbols or letter-like forms as identifying marks. In programs where meals are served, children can refer to daily menus which are written and displayed for easy use. Classroom cooking will also present opportunities to read and write recipes. Highly visible and clearly printed labels for objects can also be used. Teachers, therefore, should be aware of and capitalize on all opportunities for reading and writing and oral communication in the daily lives of children.

Encourage Children to Read and Write to One Another

When children read and write to one another in a comfortable, nonthreatening way, they develop confidence in their growing literacy abilities. Children may read books with or without print that are familiar to them. They may read their own drawings and writings and other materials that are of interest to them. Activities in which children have opportunities to write to one another include writing birthday cards and letters and making “signs” in the block area of the classroom that alert other children not to knock blocks over. The idea behind having children write to one another is that children see that they can use written language to make things happen.

Read Aloud to Children on a Regular Basis

Children need to experience the joy of being read to by an adult and also by other children. This interaction between the reader and the listener enhances children's interest in books and their ability to read. It allows children to empathize with characters in the story and relate their own personal experiences to the story. Children are also able to acquire and extend many skills that they use as independent readers. They learn the left to right and top to bottom sequence in reading, learn that pictures provide context clues and build a sight vocabulary, among other things. Children also learn to predict the sequence of a story. Acquiring such skills, however, are secondary to the experience of being read to, a satisfaction that enhances children's interest in books.



Engage Parents in Literacy Activities

Literacy learning activities that occur in preschool classrooms should be a natural link to the literacy learning that occurs in the home and communities before children enter the preschool years. Parents and teachers must work together and adopt childhood literacy as a common goal, so that they can be mutually supportive of children as emergent readers and writers. Reading and writing activities occurring in children's homes can be extended to the classroom, and those occurring in the classroom can be reinforced at home. The following suggestions can be used by teachers.

- ❖ Discuss with parents books that children enjoy.
- ❖ Provide feedback to parents on how children are using reading and writing by showing and discussing writing and reading in the context of art, housekeeping and so on.
- ❖ Share written recipes that children have used for a cooking project and encourage parents to use these recipes at home.
- ❖ Use favorite recipes in the classroom that children have brought in from home.
- ❖ Encourage parents, older siblings or other relatives to read stories to groups of children in the classroom.
- ❖ Use parents who speak other languages to read books in their own language to groups of children.
- ❖ Establish a classroom lending library so that children can take their favorite books home to read with family members. Non-English books written in the primary language of children must be included.
- ❖ Provide workshops on literacy development for parents.
- ❖ Connect parents with programs to help them improve their own literacy.

In general, preschool teachers can provide families with ideas on how to expand children's development as literacy learners, while building on parents' knowledge of and experience with their children to help them succeed as readers and writers. Programs should support parents in improving their own literacy skills by providing information on appropriate opportunities and agencies that address adult literacy.

Assessing Literacy Development

It is essential to have realistic expectations of children's abilities to read and write based on their ages and stages of development. Preschoolers will vary greatly in their emerging literacy abilities. They differ in the way they acquire the skills of reading and writing, the styles and strategies they use for dealing with texts and the rate at which they progress as emerging readers and writers. Assessment of where children are in the process of becoming literate must take these variations into account. Such assessment can be documented through observation and performance sampling.

As children engage in meaningful experiences involving oral and written language in the range of daily activities, the teacher may make anecdotal records or notes about children's literacy activities or use checklists to record frequently observed behaviors. This information can be used to make modifications to the literacy learning environment and to further enhance children's involvement with reading and writing.

Teachers may assess children's progress in reading and writing by using samples of how children perform over time. Listening to children as they read or attempt to read storybooks, and noting their responses and comments to stories that are read, can provide records of children's reading abilities. Cumulative samples of children's writing can present evidence of their progress from scribbling and using letter-like forms, to words (for example, their own names), invented spelling and other writing strategies. Efforts to document children's learning should be seen as describing their emerging literacy abilities and not an evaluation of these abilities.

Assessment of literacy development must occur on an ongoing basis, during children's engagement in meaningful everyday activities. Information obtained through assessment should be used in curriculum and literacy development.

Conclusion

Children's development as readers and writers occurs as they engage in a variety of literacy experiences and through interactions with literate persons. Because preschool children come to school with a limited knowledge of reading and writing and they live in a literate society, teaching literacy must be a part of the curriculum. The challenge is to understand how children develop as literacy learners, to provide a curriculum that actively involves them in literacy and where the focus is on children's learning, rather than teacher-centered methods of instruction. Early childhood preschool programs must engage parents and use community resources to support children in their literacy development.

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