



Autism Spectrum Disorder and Early Literacy: Common Misconceptions

By Lauren Lowry

Hanen Certified SLP and Clinical Staff Writer

If you have a young child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), you may think that it's too early to start thinking about reading and writing. That is not the case, however. It's never too early to start thinking about your child's literacy skills!

Children with ASD don't always develop early literacy skills in the same order or along the same timeline as other children. Some children with ASD know their alphabet letters at a very young age. However, they may lack other important early literacy skills, such as understanding *why* people read and write, or understanding the characters' actions or intentions in a story. A small percentage of children with ASD (5-10%) can sound out letters and read words better than they can understand what they read (this is sometimes referred to as "hyperlexia") [1]. But many children with ASD struggle with both reading words and understanding what they read.

There are some common misconceptions when it comes to helping young children with ASD develop reading and writing skills. Below you will find some of these misconceptions, along with some helpful tips that you can use with your child.

Misconception #1:

You shouldn't work on literacy skills with a child with ASD until he/she can talk.

We don't hesitate when it comes to promoting a child's language, play, or social skills. But there is a common misconception that a child with ASD needs to be able to talk before he or she can develop some early literacy skills. Dr. Elizabeth Lanter from Radford University, VA, conducts research in this area, and argues that not only should we avoid this type of

thinking, but that in some cases, promoting literacy skills can improve the verbal (talking) abilities of children with ASD [2].

Misconception #2:

Learning the names of the alphabet letters in the most important literacy skill you can teach your young child with ASD.

There are many early literacy skills that are essential for children to develop later reading and writing skills, including [2,3]:

- conversation (speaking, understanding)
- vocabulary (knowing a variety of words)
- understanding stories
- knowledge about print (noticing print within familiar logos or signs, knowing how to hold a book, knowing the letter names, pretending to read a book, attempting to print his/her name)
- sound awareness (understanding that words can be broken down into syllables and sounds, and knowing that letters make sounds)

When children begin preschool or kindergarten, there is an emphasis on learning letter names and sounds. This is because children have usually started to develop many of the other early literacy skills on the list above by the time they begin school. However, for many children with ASD, learning the letter names comes easily. So, the focus for these children may need to be on some of the *other* early literacy skills, such as understanding stories or attempting to print during play or everyday routines.

Misconception #3:

The best way to help your child learn to read and write is to sit down at a table and work on exercises in workbooks or use flashcards.

Dr. Lanter emphasizes the importance of working on early literacy during natural, everyday activities and routines. In this way, children will learn about the *purpose* of reading and writing (a concept that is challenging for many children with ASD) [2,4]. There are some suggestions in The Hanen Centre's More Than Words® [5] and TalkAbility™ [6] guidebooks about things you can do at home to incorporate early literacy skills into everyday life, such as:

- drawing attention to print in your everyday environment, such as in the TV guide, menus, signs, toy boxes, package labels, birthday cards, To Do lists, or billboards.

- labeling key items in your child’s everyday environment (e.g. putting a label that says “coat” next to his coat hook)
- making placemats with family members’ names to use at mealtimes
- having your child write his name on his artwork
- writing cards for special occasions (birthday cards, etc)
- referring to a calendar of daily events
- having paper, pencils, and crayons available for your child to scribble or write

There are many everyday routines that provide opportunities for your young child to practice early reading and writing skills. One example is going to the grocery store. For tips about encouraging your child’s language and early literacy skills at the grocery store, have a look at our article [“A’ is for Apple: What Kids Can Learn at the Grocery Store”](#).

Misconception #4:

Children with ASD should be discouraged from reading “non-traditional” reading material and should focus on storybooks.

Many children with ASD enjoy reading books or magazines related to their special interests, such as nonfiction books about dinosaurs, auto magazines, or subway maps. They should not be discouraged from reading such material as it motivates them to interact with the printed word. Therefore, don’t be afraid to share a variety of reading material with your child. Follow your child’s lead and have conversations about whatever reading material interests him or her.

If your child enjoys storybooks, encourage this by choosing storybooks that have:

- simple pictures
- a predictable story line with a logical sequence of events
- events that can be related to your child’s everyday experiences

Don’t feel that you have to read the book exactly as it is written. You can make stories easier to understand and more interactive by:

- using shorter sentences
- not reading the words in the book, telling the story in a simpler way
- pointing to the pictures while you read
- using your voice and face to add interest and meaning
- pausing and waiting during the story to allow your child a chance to participate in his or her own way (by pointing, vocalizing, looking at you, or saying something about the story).

For children who understand and use sentences, you can:

- **act out the story together** with props like puppets or figurines. Help your child tell you the story, ensuring that he or she includes a clear beginning, middle, and end.
- **ask questions and make comments when you read together** to help your child think beyond the pages of the book. You can ask about what might happen next in the story, or how the character might be feeling.

You don't need to wait until your child starts school to promote early literacy skills – the earlier you start, the better! By pointing out print in your everyday life, by including your child in routines that involve print (such as making a shopping list), and sharing motivating reading material with your child, you will foster a love of books and an interest in print that will pave your child's path to reading and writing.

References

1. Newman, T. M., Macomber, D., Naples, A. J., Babitz, T., Volkmar, F., & Grigorenko, E. L. (2007). Hyperlexia in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 37, 760–774.
2. Lanter, E. & Watson, L. (2008). Promoting literacy in students with ASD: The basics for the SLP. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 39, 33-43.
3. Greenberg, J. & Weitzman, E. (in press). *I'm Ready! How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success*. Toronto: Hanen Early Language Program.
4. Lanter, E., Watson, L.R., Erickson, K. A. & Freeman, D. (2012). Emergent literacy in children with autism: An exploration of developmental and contextual dynamic processes. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 43, 308-324.
5. Sussman, F. (2012). *More than words: A parent's guide to building interaction and language skills for children with autism spectrum disorder or social communication difficulties*. Toronto: Hanen Early Language Program.
6. Sussman, F. (2006). *TalkAbility: People skills for verbal children on the autism spectrum: A guide for parents*. Toronto: Hanen Early Language Program.