



Literacy in the Early Years: What Children Need to Learn and How You Can Help Them Learn It

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There are many ways we can prepare young children for school. One of the keys to academic success is strong literacy skills, or the ability to read and write.

A child's journey towards literacy begins at birth, although it may be several years before they are actually ready to read and write. When infants and toddlers scribble with crayons or play with their books by lifting the flaps or pointing to pictures, they are already building emergent literacy skills. As professionals who work with young children, there are many **emergent literacy skills** that we can support in these early years that pave the way to later



What is emergent literacy?

Emergent literacy can be divided into two sets of skills: meaning-related skills and code-related skills. Meaning-related skills have to do with building an understanding of what is written in a book. Code-related skills are the skills that will help children understand that the squiggly lines they see on a page are actually letters and words that have meaning.

Meaning-related skills

Vocabulary: The size of a child's vocabulary is important since the more words a child knows, the easier it will be for him to understand what he is reading. Furthermore, books often include words that children don't hear in everyday conversations, so we have to really support vocabulary development in order for children to make sense of what they hear. For example, a child could hear the sentence "Butterflies are simply exquisite," but if he doesn't know what a butterfly is or understand "exquisite", the sentence will have no meaning for him.

Children begin to learn about words as their understanding grows and they begin to say words on their own. Vocabulary development begins as children are exposed to words, and then learn to understand familiar, everyday words in conversation and daily routines. You'll know children are starting to understand words when they react to hearing them. At first, you might notice a very young child getting excited when mom calls out "bath time!" because it is his favourite routine. As the child gets older, he will start to say the word, "bath," and point to objects or pictures when he hears the word for them. For example, when looking at a book, he might point to a dog when his father asks, "Can you find the dog?"

Story comprehension: Before children are ready to read, tell and write stories on their own it is also important for them to have an understanding of how stories unfold. This means understanding that stories have a beginning, middle and an end, as well as common elements (such as characters, settings, problems, actions, and resolutions). Children start to develop story comprehension as they hear stories being read aloud. Children will first start to understand that events happen in a specific order in their own lives (for example, that they have to put on clothing before they can go outside), and then they will start to understand sequences of events in books. Over time, they will understand the plot, or point to a story, and will react appropriately to events in a story (for example, being happy when there is a positive resolution or ending to a story).

Inferencing: To fully understand the stories they hear and the stories they'll eventually read on their own, children need to draw on what they already know and use problem-solving and reasoning skills in order to fill in the gaps for what is not directly stated in the text or shown in the illustrations. Young children are starting to develop this skill when they relate to how a character feels and why he might feel that way, when they can connect the events in a story to their own experiences, and when they can suggest solutions to problems in the story. Very young children may start to relate what they hear or see in a book to what they have heard or seen in real life (for example, pointing to a picture of a dog in a book, and then pointing to a toy dog in their room), demonstrating that they are beginning to make connections between what is happening in the story and what is happening in their real lives.

Code-related skills:

Print knowledge: Children need to learn a lot about how print works before they are able to read on their own later. For example, they need to understand that print is meaningful, print is different from the illustrations, print goes from left to right, and that print consists of words that are made up of letters of the alphabet. These skills start to develop as children learn how to use books, point to pictures, recognize book covers, point to words and start to scribble with crayons.

Alphabet knowledge: Children need to recognize the letters of the alphabet in order to read and write. Early indicators of this skill include pointing to letters, recognizing letters in logos (for example, referring to the McDonald's logo as the big "M"), and singing the ABC's.

Sound awareness: Although knowing the alphabet is important, children also need to understand that letters correspond to certain sounds in order to be able to sound out words and spell. This means children first must realize that the speech they hear can be broken down into individual sounds. Children start to build sound awareness when they listen to speech and songs, and when they start to enjoy (and perhaps imitate) silly sounds, rhyming words, and alliteration (words that start with the same sounds).

Letter-sound knowledge: Once children understand that the words they hear are made up of separate sounds, they then are ready to connect individual sounds with individual letters – for example, they'll understand that "sun" starts with the letter S that makes "sss" sound.

Supporting emergent literacy skills with interactive book reading.

Reading books with young children is one of the best times for building emergent literacy skills. But just reading books to young children isn't enough – it's how the book is read that can really make a difference. Rather than reading a book from start to finish while the child sits and listens, there are more opportunities to support emergent literacy when the child is actively engaged in an interaction throughout the reading. Depending upon the child's stage of language development, he could take turns in the conversation with sounds, pointing, gestures or words.

Step 1 - OWL™

The first step is to *OWL*, or Observe, Wait and Listen. This means waiting before or after you turn a page, or after you make a comment or ask a question. You are waiting to observe the child's interest, and to provide the child with an opportunity to take a turn in the interaction. This is important, because once you know the child's interest, you can build on it to add vocabulary, enhance comprehension, or even to talk about letters, sounds or print awareness. For example, perhaps you're reading *Goodnight, Gorilla* with a young child and you pause on the first page, before starting to read. Maybe the child will point to the gorilla stealing the keys out of the zookeeper's pocket. That point is the child's way of taking a turn in the interaction and showing you what he is interested in.

Step 2 - Follow the Child's Lead

The next step is to follow the child's lead by making a comment or asking a question based on the child's message and interest. In this example, you could make a comment by saying "That's a gorilla. It looks like he's stealing the zookeeper's keys." This simple comment is helping develop the child's vocabulary by labeling the pictures he's interested in. It's also helping him start to understand the story structure by talking about what's happening in the book.

Step 3 - Keep the conversation going

Start by waiting again to see if the child will take another turn in the conversation. Perhaps he will point to the gorilla again. If that's the case, you could make a comment like, "That's the gorilla. He looks just like the gorilla we saw at the zoo yesterday." This comment is helping to link what's happening in the story with what is happening in the child's real life, which will help build his inferencing skills.

When you *OWL* you provide a child with opportunities to take a turn in the interaction. Then, when you respond to the child's turns by making comments or asking questions based on his interests, you are helping him to better understand the story, talk about his interests, and to help connect what he knows with what he is learning. It is through these conversations that you can introduce many different early literacy skills.

For more information on specific strategies you can use during interactive book reading to support emergent literacy skills, take a look at our newest e-seminar, **[Never Too Soon for Literacy: Paving the Way to Literacy Success.](#)**

References

1. Greenberg, J. (2019). Hanen online training: Never Too Soon for Literacy: Paving the Way to Literacy Success. Retrieved from www.hanen.org/Professional-Development/Online-Training
2. Greenberg, J. & Weitzman, E. (2014). "I'm Ready!™ How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success." The Hanen Centre: Toronto.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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