



From Birth...For Life

This resource kit is based on the latest research into how young children develop the ability to use language and to read and write.

You may find that some of the ideas here are different from what you thought you knew about language and literacy, but one important thing has not changed: child care practitioners play a vital role in fostering language and literacy skills.

The latest research

For many years, child experts believed that literacy, narrowly defined as the ability to read and write, was something that children were naturally ready for at about age six or seven, and that first grade was the right time to start providing children with formal literacy instruction. Parents and child care practitioners were not expected to do anything much to encourage literacy; it was just a matter of waiting.

Over time, this theory gradually gave way to the reading-readiness theory. This theory also suggests that there is a particular time when a child is ready to learn to read, but that child care practitioners and parents should help prepare children to read by teaching them pre-reading skills, such as the letters of the alphabet (writing skills should wait until later).

Today's experts, however, have moved away from reading readiness and toward a much broader definition of literacy – the ability to listen and speak as well as to read and write – and a much broader view of when children develop essential literacy skills. The latest research reveals that learning to listen, speak, read and write, to become a literate human being, is a gradual process that begins at birth and continues through life.

Emergent literacy

New Zealand researcher Marie Clay introduced the phrase *emergent literacy* in 1966 to describe what children know about reading and writing before they actually learn to read and write in the conventional way.

Child experts today agree with Dr. Clay that a child begins to acquire language and literacy when he hears his first word and makes his first sound. They also agree that literacy includes all the skills the child continues to pick up before he begins formal instruction, including such skills as making up rhymes or nonsense words, “pretend reading” (perhaps just holding a book or looking at pictures) and “pretend writing” (usually just scribbling at first). All of these are legitimate literacy skills, and all help provide the foundation for a child to become a successful reader and writer.

The experts also see learning to listen, speak, read and write as equal and interrelated skills: the development of one skill relies on the development of the others. For example, a child's ability to use the word “taller” is related both to her ability to hear the word and to understand how adults use it (“Maude is taller than David”). In addition, because all these skills are interrelated, there is no reason why a child cannot learn the alphabet and learn to write at the same time, as and when that particular child is ready, without formal instruction.

The basics of emergent literacy

Talking and listening

Children acquire language by listening. For them, every word is new and they must try to figure out what each new word means. Sometimes children learn the meaning of words from the context in which they are used: “Your name is Maude. My name is Mommy.” Or from an example: “This is your toe.” Or a picture: “That is a bluebird.”

Gradually, children progress from cooing and babbling to using the words they have heard and speaking in simple sentences. It is a social activity: they learn new words and how to put them together in more and more sophisticated ways by interacting with the children and adults around them.



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Becoming aware of print

Children become aware of print very early, as soon as they see a logo on a toy box or an adult reads them a story. They learn how to hold a book and which way is right-side-up just by watching. Soon, they begin to understand that the words they see in print and the words they speak and hear are related. Through shared reading, children also get a sense that someone wants to be with them, to give them their full attention, to hold them close and make sure they understand what is being talked about – and they learn to associate print with good feelings, such as warmth and affection.

Becoming aware of letters, sounds and words

It takes time, but children gradually begin to notice and understand that words are different: some rhyme, others don't; some start with the same sound, but end differently (like bag and ball); or start and end with the same sound (like bag and bug), but mean very different things. This is called “phonological awareness” – the ability to recognize that words consist of many sounds, including syllables and phonemes. (Phonemes are the smallest sounds in words – for example, the word “big” has three phonemes, /b/, /i/, and /g/.)

With a little help from adults – singing the alphabet song, for example, reading an alphabet book, or spelling out a STOP sign – children also begin to recognize letters. From there, they eventually come to understand the connection between written letters and spoken sounds, single letters and complete words.

Beginning to write

Over time, children will want to write because they see adults writing. They will usually begin by scribbling nonsense, but as they start to understand letters, they will often make up their own words or invent their own spelling for words they have heard – like “kr” for “car.” Finally, they will put it all together and write using the conventional (but much less interesting!) spelling rules.

The vital role of child care practitioners and parents

Child care practitioners and parents are vital to a child's development of language and literacy – but they do not need to “teach” the skills that lead to literacy. They just need to open the door.

Caregivers can support and encourage literacy skills in the early years through day-to-day activities that are both easy and natural – starting with the simple acts of talking and of reading out loud. Caregivers can also provide print-rich environments, with lots of books, magazines, posters, and make sure there are many opportunities for children to hear and learn new words, make connections between sounds and letters, see adults write and experiment with writing themselves, and make up their own stories.

With this vital help in the most important early years, more and more of our children will make the transition from non-readers to readers, scribblers to writers, with ease.

This resource kit

This resource kit contains a paper that summarizes the latest research on emergent literacy, along with six resource sheets intended to bring to life the findings outlined in the research paper. These resource sheets focus on a child named David, his parents, his friend Hamid, and Beth, his child care practitioner. David is three years old through most of the sheets, so the information is geared to that age. The advice and the suggested activities can, however, be easily tailored to other ages.

The kit also contains a list of recommended language and literacy resources, as well as a series of six PowerPoint workshops. We have developed these six workshops to help you inform and train other child care practitioners – in your workplace, at conferences or community events – in the key elements of how young children, from birth to age six, learn language and literacy. You (and your participants) may also want to use some of the resources included here with the parents of the children in your care.

Through this resource kit, we hope that you will discover many new and effective ways to enhance what you are already doing in your day-to-day practice to support children in the literacy journey that starts at birth, and provides a solid foundation for life.

We would like to hear your feedback on the resource kit *Language and Literacy: From Birth... For Life!*
We encourage you to take a few minutes and send us your comments. Visit the CCCF website to complete a brief online survey: www.cccf-fcsge.ca/language_and_literacy.html.