

Supporting children's development

Literacy skills

In this second article in a series on child development, Anne Stonehouse explores how children's literacy skills expand from birth and how quality child care programs can effectively support this.

A one year old gazes at a picture of a ball in a board book. She looks around for the blue ball on the floor, and points to it.

A two year old exclaims 'big bird!' as a plane flies overhead.

A four year old asks his carer to 'tell me what the words say' on a cereal box.

A six year old writes 'hapi burthda' on a card she has made for her dad.

An eight year old Vietnamese child teaches the other children a traditional lullaby in Vietnamese.

Three ten year old children work for several days writing a play and perform it after gathering props and making scenery.

These are examples of children showing important literacy skills. Increased attention to literacy in young children in recent years has led to a greater understanding that, although reading and writing are very important literacy skills, there are many other literacy skills. Some of these early literacy skills precede and lay the path for reading and writing.

There are many theories and debates about literacy, but there is general agreement that literacy skills begin to develop from birth. They begin when children listen to, recognise and



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.4, 3.6 and 3.7

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 3.1, 3.3, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.3 and 5.4

QIAS Principles: 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 3.3 and 4.1-4.5

then gradually begin to use sounds, gestures and eventually words to communicate their needs, wants, feelings and thoughts.

Toddlers and preschool aged children become increasingly competent communicators as they play and participate in everyday experiences with adults and peers. They also begin to learn the power of words and gestures in conveying meaning and communicating with others.

School age children become even more competent communicators as they learn to read and write, which enhances their ability to both receive information and communicate effectively with others. Language development, so dramatic in the early years, is a critical part of literacy.

What is literacy?

A useful definition of literacy comes from the Early Childhood Australia Language and Literacy Policy Statement (2005, n.p.):

Literacy can be seen as language in use - in speaking, listening, reading, viewing, writing and drawing. What is involved in each of these language modes varies according to context, purpose and audience.

This definition indicates that literacy includes a range of skills and understandings that children acquire in their daily lives at home, in child care, in school and in the community. Literacy experiences in childhood are influenced by what families and communities consider to be important to learn about and participate in.

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Some communities and cultures place a strong emphasis on oral literacy skills or on being able to 'read' people's body language or gestures. Indigenous children who live in remote communities need to learn how to 'read' the signs and sounds of the land in order to develop survival skills in what is often a harsh environment. A toddler from a Sudanese-speaking family in Melbourne learns to identify picture symbols for tram stops, pedestrian crossings, and take-away food shops. Literacy development depends very much on experience – it doesn't just happen automatically (Centre for Community Child Health, 2004).

Why is literacy important?

Being able to read the world and, eventually, text and symbols is critical. Communicating through language and in other ways is vital for self-expression, having needs met, and self-esteem. Communication affects children's social development, interactions and relationships. Cognition, problem solving and creativity are minimal without successful language comprehension and use.

How can literacy be supported and strengthened in child care?

Interest in literacy and attention to the importance of experiences in the early years for children's learning and success in school and life have in some cases led to the development of some prescriptive programs and strategies for teaching literacy skills. Sometimes inappropriate, highly formalised, adult directed literacy activities are recommended. This can result in ignoring important opportunities to embed engaging literacy experiences into play, daily life and planned learning experiences for children in child care.

There are many ways that child care professionals can meaningfully incorporate literacy experiences in children's daily lives.

Some of the following suggestions for supporting literacy are specific to particular age groups, while others will apply to all settings and to children of any age.



Talking and conversation

- Talk to children in meaningful ways. Aim to have one-to-one time with each child every day.
- Listen and respond to children when they talk.
- Provide opportunities for children to hear you talk to others – to share information, convey feelings, solve a problem, find out information, and show empathy.
- Give children lots of opportunities to see you reading and writing for different, and real, purposes.
- Play with language and encourage children to do the same, for example, saying rhyming words or making up new words.

Books and printed material

- Make a range of books and other printed materials available, and match these to children's interests and developmental levels. Include books and print from the 'real world' (for example, telephone books, take away menus, catalogues, newspapers). Add new material to rekindle interest. Books have a particularly important place in lives of children, starting in infancy. Children 'read' pictures before they read words.
- Look at books with children.
- Read to and with children.
- Encourage children to read to each other.
- Make books with children.

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Stories

- Tell simple stories in everyday conversations, including stories about the past, present and future.
- Tell more formal stories, including myths, fables and stories that have been told for generations.
- Encourage children to tell stories to each other and to create stories. Get them to write down the stories if they can. If they cannot, then write them down for them.
- Make stories available through carefully selected audio recordings, television, videos or DVDs.

The physical environment

- Try to ensure that the noise level makes it possible to speak, hear and have conversations.
- Use printed materials such as posters, signs, labels. Encourage children to develop some of these.
- Include reading and writing materials in the home corner or dramatic play area, for example, note pads and pens, phone books, take away menus, an old computer.

Experiences

- Organise cooking experiences that require reading recipes, following written instructions, getting information from food labels.

- Choose board games that require letter or number recognition or reading that is appropriate to children's skills.
- Sing and listen to songs. Encourage children to listen carefully and closely. Make up songs, or put text from books to music.
- Support the beginnings of children's own story making through dramatic or pretend play. Provide props and dress ups that encourage dramatic play.
- Provide materials and encouragement for children to scribble, mark and draw. Children can pretend to write and then genuinely write, either just for fun or, as they get older, for a genuine purpose.
- Provide materials and encouragement for children to communicate and express themselves in a variety of ways – through media, art and craft, movement, drama, as well as through language and show that you value different ways of communicating.
- Ensure that you find ways to enable children with additional needs to communicate effectively, for example using visual aids or signing.
- Document children's shared experiences and encourage them to contribute. Share this documentation with children and their families.



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- Enable children to engage in literacy activities that have a real purpose, for example, taking orders for afternoon tea, making invitations to a family function, creating a poster for a community display, reading instructions to assemble a piece of equipment or making a written plan to create a garden.

How can the literacy skills of children whose first language is not English be supported?

Being able to speak and understand more than one language is an important strength for a child. Supporting literacy skills in children whose first language is not English is crucial. Some ways to do this include:

- Having books and music in the child's first or home language.
- Providing opportunities for the child to communicate in her or his first language.
- Avoiding pressuring the child to communicate in English.
- Communicating with the child in ways other than using words when the child is learning English, for example, using visual aids.
- Matching the service's resources and child care professionals' expectations to the child's level of competence in English.

How can child care professionals work with families to support children's literacy?

Literacy is best supported and promoted when child care professionals communicate and

collaborate with families. The focus in the media on early literacy has made many families feel anxious and unsure about what they should be doing to support their child's literacy learning. Child care professionals can reassure families and suggest strategies that will help them to incorporate important language and literacy experiences into everyday family life.

Some families may also expect services to engage in formal literacy activities such as teaching toddlers to recite the alphabet or teaching four year old children to read. Families using outside school hours care may request that their child be required to complete homework or spend a certain amount of time reading each day. It is important that child care professionals recognise that families will have these concerns and requirements because they want the best for their child. It is the child care professional's responsibility to hear families' concerns and to explain how literacy is being nurtured and supported meaningfully in the child care program.

Conclusion

Literacy experiences underpin every part of daily life, and opportunities to support children to use the literacy skills they have and to acquire new ones are everywhere in child care. The challenge for child care professionals is to recognise these opportunities and to capitalise on them ■

References and further reading*

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* Note: Some of the information in this article has been adapted from a resource on sharing books and stories with infants and toddlers, *From Lullabies to Literature: Stories in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers*, by Jennifer Birckmayer, Anne Kennedy and Anne Stonehouse, which will be published in 2008 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (USA).