



## Early Literacy

### First things first: What is early (or emergent) literacy?

We can think of early literacy as what children know about reading and writing before they can actually read and write. It encompasses all the experiences, good and bad, that children have had with books, language, and print, beginning in infancy. For example, one child is scolded every time he tries to reach out and grab the book his mother is reading to him, while another child is given a chunky board book and allowed to open and close it to her heart's content as her mother laughs alongside her. Which child is likely to have a better experience and more confidence with books?

Parents and caregivers are a vital component of the child's experience with reading and language. All of these variables—the child, the book, the parent, and the relationship—work together to support or discourage the development of emergent literacy skills.

Early literacy does not mean teaching reading to infants and toddlers. Reading, writing and language evolve from a number of earlier, age-appropriate skills, such as:

- ◆ physically manipulating or handling books;
- ◆ looking at and recognizing books;
- ◆ comprehending pictures and a story; and
- ◆ interacting with books verbally, e.g., babbling in imitation of reading

SOURCE: [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

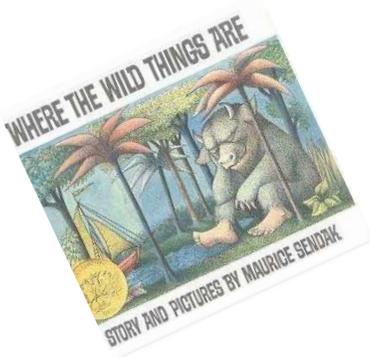
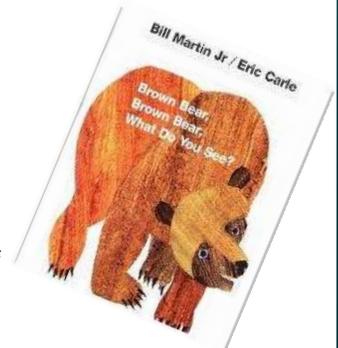
### What's Inside...

- ◆ First Things First
- ◆ Tips for Supporting and Encouraging Literacy
- ◆ Brain Development and Literacy
- ◆ Choosing Books

### Simply put, early literacy research states that:

- Language, reading, and writing skills develop at the same time and are intimately linked.
- Early literacy development is a continuous developmental process that begins in the first years of life.
- Early literacy skills develop in real life settings through positive interactions with literacy materials and other people.

SOURCE: [www.zerotothree.org/brainwonders](http://www.zerotothree.org/brainwonders)



### EARLY LITERACY DOES NOT MEAN EARLY READING!

Early literacy theory emphasizes the more natural unfolding of skills through the enjoyment of books, the importance of positive interactions between young children and adults, and the critical role of literacy-rich experiences.

*Books with rhythmical language may be the first books children encounter. Very young children focus on the comforting voice of the reader.*

### What is the relationship between early experiences with literacy and later, long-term literacy development?

There are as yet no definitive answers to this question, but as in other aspects of psychological development, we assume that there is a relationship between early literacy experience and later mature literacy. How this relationship unfolds for a particular child will depend on several factors which interact with one another in complex ways. These include the child's interests, temperament and personality, opportunities at home and in the neighborhood for writing and reading, as well as the nature and quality of the instruction the child encounters in school.

SOURCE: [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

## The Magic of Books

When young children are introduced to the magic of books, they develop a love of reading that can last a lifetime. Language is the foundation for literacy, and you can help your child get ready for reading by incorporating listening and talking into everyday activities. Even though infants and toddlers are still developing language, reading is very important at this age. When you read to your young child, you help her to learn about new words and concepts, learn letters, and learn about the way the printed word works. Reading to your child, talking about books and the printed word as much as possible, and providing many opportunities for her to experiment with writing will help her get ready to read.

SOURCE: PBS Parents—[www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)



### SUPPORT FAMILY LITERACY

- ◆ Establish a lending library of both children's books and adult reading material that parents may borrow.
- ◆ Provide information on how parents can apply for a library card and/or organize a family trip to the local library.
- ◆ Inform parents of literacy programs in the area.
- ◆ Partner with a local literacy group to offer services at your site.

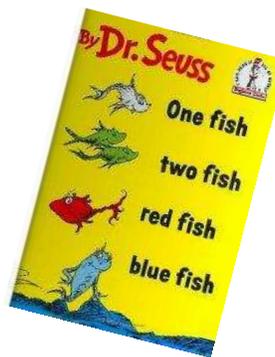


### Tips for Encouraging Literacy in Your Program

1. Ensure that books are visible and at the child's level.
2. Talk to children, even the youngest babies.
3. Encourage infants and toddlers to explore books freely—and in ways that may not necessarily reflect adults' ideas of how books "should" be used.
4. Use books as tools to help with transitions. In a child care center, a story about taking a walk can be read prior to a stroll outside.
5. Make reading part of children's routines.
6. Label the places and things that children come in contact with often, e.g., "door," "bathroom," "toys."
7. Select books that appeal to infants and toddlers. Look for bright colors, sharp contrasts between the picture and the page, rhythmic writing, and plots that are simple but engaging. As children grow, look for books (like "lift the flap" books) that capitalize upon their growing intellectual and motor skills.
8. Point out the written word in places other than books. Use toys like magnetic letters to reinforce the relationship between letters and sounds.
9. Allow older toddlers to begin exploring writing instruments (pens, markers and crayons). Provide them with other toys and activities (e.g., pouring water) that develop the hand-eye coordination and fine motor skill necessary for writing.
10. Make books! Preschoolers can create their own picture books while parents can make books for younger children. Books featuring family photos work especially well.

**Early Literacy Development Does Not Simply Happen;** rather, it is part of a social process, embedded in children's relationships with parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, caretakers, and teachers. To understand the beginnings of literacy, one must study the environments in which young children develop, and the ways in which these settings provide opportunities for children to become involved with books, paper, and writing materials. Early experiences with literacy are part of the relationships, activities, and settings of young children's everyday lives. It is people who make writing and reading interesting and meaningful to young children. Family members, caretakers, and teachers play critical roles in early literacy development by serving as models; providing materials; demonstrating their use; offering help, instruction, and encouragement; and communicating hopes and expectations. To their interactions with young children, these people bring their own attitudes and expectations, both conscious and unconscious, about writing and reading, and about the child's eventual development as a writer and reader.

[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)



### BEYOND THE BASICS

Tips that can be used to make sure children enjoy listening to us as we read:

- ♥ Use different voices
- ♥ Use illustrations
- ♥ Change speed and volume
- ♥ Build anticipation
- ♥ Leave off words
- ♥ Let kids see the print while you are reading the words
- ♥ Respond to questions and comments
- ♥ Have books available in a child's primary language
- ♥ If children grow restless—change the plan!

# Children's Development in Early Reading and Writing

## Awareness and Exploration:

Children explore their environment and build the foundations for learning to read and write.

### Children can:

- ◆ Enjoy listening to and discussing storybooks
- ◆ Understand that print carries a message
- ◆ Engage in reading and writing attempts
- ◆ Identify labels and signs in their environment
- ◆ Participate in rhyming games
- ◆ Identify some letters and make some letter-sound matches
- ◆ Use known letters or approximations of letters to represent written language (especially meaningful words like their name and phrases such as "I love you")

### What teachers do:

- ◆ Share books with children, including Big Books, and model reading behaviors
- ◆ Talk about letters by name and sounds
- ◆ Establish a literacy-rich environment
- ◆ Reread favorite stories
- ◆ Engage children in language games
- ◆ Promote literacy-related play activities
- ◆ Encourage children to experiment with writing

### What parents and family members can do:

- ◆ Talk with children, engage them in conversation, give names of things, show interest in what a child says
- ◆ Read and reread stories with predictable text to children
- ◆ Encourage children to recount experiences and describe ideas and events that are important to them
- ◆ Visit the library regularly
- ◆ Provide opportunities for children to draw and print, using markers, crayons and pencils

SOURCE: *Young Children*, July 1998

### What books are best?

It is the sound of a reader's voice that get the young child's attention even before he can focus on the pictures. Toddlers love the repetitive language of predictable books, such as Bill Martin Jr.'s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (1967). Repetitive language patterns and phrases invite children to actually participate in the story. Other types of books that are inviting to young children include:

- \* Point-and-Say books
- \* Touch-and-Smell books
- \* Board books
- \* Lift-the-Flap books
- \* Early Picture Story books

SOURCE: *Young Children*, January 1997



### All children are enriched by books.

Equally important, the relationship between the child and the adult is enriched. So the next time you are considering sharing a book with a child, no matter how young, think no more. Do it! Both reader and listener will be glad you did!

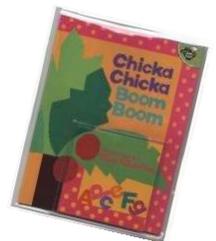
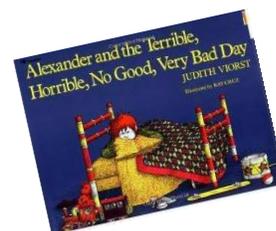
### Brain Development and Literacy Skills

Reading to young children, even babies, helps make their brain ready to learn. Young children have brains that are hungry for the experiences and associations that reading aloud to them can provide.

- A person's vocabulary is largely determined by speech heard within the first 3 years of life. As you read and talk to a child, the brain tunes in to the sounds that make up words and then builds connections that allow it to find and get those sounds as vocabulary grows.
- The more words a child hears, the faster he learns language. The sounds of the words a child hears while you read create the connections in the brain that children need to develop language skills.
- The brain calls on these connections to make sense of the world. When we read to young children, we are helping the brain make connections between spoken and printed words.
- When you read to a young child, she learns that reading is a pleasurable experience. The close physical interaction and adult attention to what a child is interested in creates an excitement about reading.

### SOURCES

- Early Literacy—<http://www.zerotothree.org/BrainWonders>  
*Sharing Books with Infants and Toddlers: Facing the Challenges* by Kupetz and Green—*Young Children* January 1997  
*Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children*—*Young Children* July 1998  
 PBS Parents—[www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)





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**WE KNOW WHERE TO LOOK FOR ANSWERS.**



### Workshops of Interest

The ECDC can provide information and workshops on a variety of topics tailored to the interests and needs of parents and early childhood professionals. Resources are available on such topics as general child development, developmental issues for children with special needs, coping strategies, and specific disabilities.

#### Workshops include:

- Including All Kids
- Making Parent Partnerships
- Early Childhood Development: The Meaning of Red Flags
- Positive Guidance and Behavior Strategies
- Moving On: Children and Families Facing Transition
- What Are Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education?
- What is an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?
- Getting Ready for Kindergarten

### Who We Are

The Early Childhood Direction Center (ECDC) is a regional technical assistance center for the State Education Department providing information, referral and support to families, professionals, and community agencies concerned with young children birth to five. We are located at Syracuse University's Center on Human Policy, Law and Disability Studies.

ECDC services to families are  
free and confidential.

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