About early literacy

Defining early literacy

Public libraries, young children and literacy

Public libraries promote early literacy by:

- making the library a language- and literacy-rich environment with a wide variety of quality reading, audio-visual and multimedia resources
- acting as a ‘media mentor and curator’ for families keen to engage with online and electronic resources
- providing free early literacy programs that engage children and their carers in picture book reading, singing, talking, writing/craft activities
- educating families in how and why to support early language and literacy
- encouraging a love of reading

They also build a community of library patrons by:

- helping children become familiar with the library (layout, staff, resources)
- connecting books and the library to a child’s everyday life
- encouraging children to socialise with other children and families
- strategies for connecting young families with community resources

To effectively promote early literacy, public libraries need to:

- critically evaluate the quality of new resource materials before including them in the children’s collection
- develop strategies for reaching socio-economically disadvantaged families who would significantly benefit from library programs and resources
- support library staff to enhance their knowledge and qualifications in early childhood and early language and literacy education, so they can be more confident in their role as educators who design and model for families practices for promoting early language and literacy development.

Contemporary definitions of literacy have expanded significantly to acknowledge that:

- language and literacy learning support each other as literacy now includes talking and listening as well as reading and writing
- literacy, like all communication, is multimodal, and includes engagement not only with written text but also with music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media and drama through print as well as electronic media
- positive dispositions are key to success in language and literacy learning, as they promote the confidence and attitudes that help children develop a love of reading, writing and other literacy practices
- early literacy is the foundational experiences and knowledge that children build before children learn to read and write
- early literacy is the responsibility of many people (families, educators, and communities)
- both formal early childhood education settings and informal education contexts such as public libraries can support early language and literacy learning.

Early literacy components

Skilled reading involves two simultaneous and inter-related processes: **decoding** and **comprehension**. This is
reflected in the two phases of reading instruction and development:

- **learning to read**, which focuses strongly on decoding and
- **reading to learn**, where the focus shifts exclusively to comprehension.

**Decoding** involves ‘translating’ writing into speech and depends on:

- phonemic awareness (perceiving individual sounds in words)
- phonics (knowledge of sound-letter correspondences)
- fluency (the ability to read with speed, accuracy and expression)

**Comprehension** involves understanding what is read and depends on:

- vocabulary: can be divided into receptive vocabulary (words understood) and expressive vocabulary (words used)
- oral language: refers to understanding grammar and genres
- background knowledge about the physical and biological world, social relations, attitudes, social structures and so forth.

**Reading development**

Developmentally, ‘Learning to read’ is the main focus of the first grades of primary school, while ‘reading to learn’ gains significance in the middle years of primary school, where the focus shifts considerably towards building knowledge in specific disciplines such as science and the humanities.

Differences in early literacy skills emerge well before children begin school and many lead to an ever-widening gap (termed ‘the 4th grade slump’) when some children, typically from disadvantaged backgrounds, experience a drop in reading test scores. This drop reflects poor comprehension skills due to low levels of vocabulary and background knowledge.

Given the importance of reading comprehension for learning, public libraries could focus their programs on building oral language, vocabulary and background knowledge of the physical and biological world, social relations etc.

**Early literacy: Foundations for success in reading and writing**

- Foundational early literacy skills, which are essential for learning to read and write, include: alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness, concepts of print, oral language, background knowledge and print motivation.
- Research into emergent literacy has found that the strongest predictors of success in literacy (decoding, comprehension and spelling) are alphabet knowledge and phonemic awareness, while concepts of print (print awareness) is a key precursor for learning to read. Children’s motivation to engage with print (print motivation) is also an important predictor of success in learning to read and write.
- Oral language skills and background knowledge have a pervasive long-term impact on reading comprehension and academic achievement, yet are often overlooked in the beginning stages of reading instruction and very difficult to address.
- One essential contribution libraries could make to the development of children’s literacy and lifelong academic success is to help expand their oral language skills, including vocabulary, and their knowledge of the world by providing access to wide ranging resources such as stories and non-fiction books as well as a supportive learning environment. The other is to understand that motivation is pivotal and that a love of books develops through access to both relevant books and the rich oral language interactions around these that are responsive to children’s interests.

**Oral language learning and literacy**

Key milestones in the language development of children include:
Birth to 9 months: pre-linguistic phase – crying, cooing, babbling

9-18 months: early proto-words – signs consisting of sound and/or gestures that children invent to interact with close others and fulfill broad communicative functions

12-24 months: transition to linguistic communication – children begin to use words, and then string them together, and develop the ability to refer to past and future events

2-3 years: early mother tongue develops – vocabulary expands and mastery of grammar increases; children develop the ability to engage in conversations and express different functions simultaneously

3-5 years: expanding linguistic repertoire – children develop the ability to use more abstract language and communicate across different communicative contexts.

Caregivers and educators can promote children’s language development by creating opportunities for children to experience and use language in a range of communicative contexts that vary in:

- **field**: the subject matter, participants and activities involved
- **tenor**: relationships between the participants, their feeling and attitudes
- **mode**: the channel of communication, the different communication modes it supports, and whether the language is more spoken-like or written-like.

Communicative contexts vary across cultures and communities.

### Family and community influences on language and literacy

There are four key factors that educators must consider when seeking to promote the language and literacy development of children in Australia.

**1. Home literacy environment and social positioning**

The home literacy environment includes:

1. the quantity and quality of the language interactions with adults that children experience, and
2. the literacy artefacts, events and activities available to children at home.

Parental beliefs about what literacy is and how it is learned strongly shape the home literacy environment they provide for their children. These beliefs fall into two main perspectives:

1. ‘emergent literacy’, where literacy is viewed as enjoyable, embedded in everyday life and learnt through shared reading
2. ‘skills-based literacy’, where literacy is viewed as consisting of distinct skills with emphasis on rote learning, flashcards and workbooks.

Research has shown that emergent literacy perspectives are associated with higher parental education levels and family socio-economic status, while skills-based perspectives are associated with lower parental education levels, literacy and lower socio-economic status.

**2. Gender**

Gender equity initiatives are needed to promote literacy success for all children by questioning stereotypes, actively engaging fathers in young children’s literacy development, employing male presenters for early literacy sessions and showcasing stories/books with positive representations of fatherhood and masculinity.

**3. Children speaking English as an additional language (EAL)**

Promoting the early language and literacy of children for whom English is an additional language involves
supporting them to learn English and to maintain their community language(s). Learning EAL is enhanced by:
shared reading at home, regardless of the language used; explicit teaching of new words; provision of a variety of
authentic, language-rich experiences in early childhood education settings, home and community contexts; and use
of non-verbal resources and routines to promote comprehension.

4. Indigenous Australian children and English as an additional dialect

Effective educational programs for Indigenous children include: integrating Aboriginal cultures into various
programs through storytelling, art, dance; engaging Elders and the community in processes of program design,
delivery and evaluation; and selecting picture books that reflect Indigenous cultural heritage and the everyday
experiences of Indigenous children. Many public libraries have a strong connection with the Indigenous
communities they serve, and this gives them an advantage in addressing social disadvantage related to early
language and literacy learning in Indigenous communities.

Public libraries as early literacy environments

Public libraries play an important role in promoting early literacy in the communities they service by providing:

- welcoming and comfortable spaces for learning
- free access to diverse reading materials that are both high quality and developmentally appropriate
- early literacy sessions (e.g. Storytime) designed to support early language and literacy development, and to
  promote positive attitudes towards books, reading and public libraries themselves.

Early literacy sessions at public libraries include many activities that research has shown to have benefits for
children’s language and literacy development:

- **Singing and nursery rhymes** can help develop children’s phonological and phonemic awareness and
  vocabulary, and create a sense of belonging to a community.
- **Shared picture book reading** allows children: to hear patterns of written language read aloud, while
  viewing the illustrations and print on the page; to engage with captivating topics or stories presented in
  picture books; and to discuss and better understand the ideas picture books construct through language
  and images with adults. In these ways shared reading can support all aspects of early language and literacy
  development.
- **Oral storytelling**, a cross-cultural precursor of literacy, is especially important for communities with strong
  oral language traditions such as the first Australians, and provides strong support for children’s oral
  language and narrative skills.
- **Craft activities** can support active listening and problem solving, and reinforce storytime themes (e.g.
  friendship) by engaging children in meaningful exchanges, as well as developing their fine motor skills.

All these activities and early literacy sessions as a whole are rich opportunities for exposure to a range of
experiences and fields within the culture and oral language interactions with adults, which can support
children in building background knowledge and skills in using literacy- and learning-oriented language.

Source

early literacy programs at NSW public libraries [2]. Department of Educational Studies, Macquarie University.

About early literacy
Published on State Library of NSW (https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au)

libraries/about-early

Links