

## Supporting Early Literacy Experiences in the Early Years

### Definitions

**Emergent Literacy** recognises the importance of early language experiences in supporting literacy development among children. Such experiences include talk, reading stories, mark-making and play. E.g. a child using a book to 'read' a story to a doll even though he or she can't actually read and the story doesn't match with what is in the book. This provides an important base for later literacy. The child has learned how a book can be used to tell a story.

**Emergent Speech** includes all sounds that children vocalise from birth, including babbling, gurgling, and as they progress, attempting words in order to communicate. Careful listening, understanding and when appropriate re-phrasing those early communications ("you'd like the cup") facilitates language development.

In early childhood settings, educators do not need to be concerned about teaching letters and phonics in a formal way.

*Adapted from Early Literacy and Numeracy Matters – Enriching Literacy and Numeracy Experiences in Early Childhood, Geraldine French (2012), Barnardos.*

### **Phonological Awareness**

"Phonological awareness is the ability to focus on the sounds of speech as distinct from its meaning; on its rhythm, the patterns of intonation and most importantly on the individual sounds."

*D Konza, 2011, Supporting Oral Language and Reading development in the Early Years. Spotlight research into practice: research monograph 5, Victorian Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, February, p. 2.*

The earliest phonological skills children begin to develop are an understanding of the concept of rhyme. When children learn to recognise, match and then produce rhyming words they are demonstrating initial phonemic awareness because to produce words that rhyme, (e.g. "cat", "fat", "bat") they are actually deleting the first sound in a word (the "onset") and replacing it with another.

Supporting language and early literacy practices in kindergarten, Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline, June 2011.

## The Myths

***Learning the ABCs/alphabet is crucial to school readiness.*** The Truth: Learning the ABCs/alphabet is a memorization skill. While it is important, and will help children understand the idea of alphabetical order in the future, learning to recognize and name letters and identify their sounds is even more important.

***Learning to write is all about letter formation.*** The Truth: While letter formation is one part of learning to write, equally, or even more important, is understanding the idea of recording one's ideas on paper. When a child makes some scribbles and says "This is my daddy," write your child's words on the picture and she will begin to make the connection between the spoken and written word. Regularly record what your child says. Longer dictated stories can become illustrated "books" which can be laminated to read again and again.

*Bright Horizons® Education & Training*

## Letter of the Week Approach

There is no research base for a 'letter of the week' approach, even though it is a common practice and several formal commercial programs are based on it.

One letter at a time approaches do not give children the opportunity to compare and contrast one letter with others.

Approaches that introduce one letter at a time (i.e., one per week, usually) create barriers to using children's names as the basis for activities designed to help children learn letter names.

Using programs that teach children one letter at a time (i.e., one per week) sometimes deters preschool teachers from providing alphabet books, alphabet puzzles, sets of magnetic letters, alphabet charts, and games, such as alphabet Bingo or memory games.

"Letter of the week" approach conflicts with children writing freely with support from adults at the writing table, during choice time, for example.

*Judy Schickedanz and Molly Collins on Feb 06, 2013 responding to questions on <http://www.naeyc.org/event/so-much-more-than-the-abc> Authors of *So Much More than the ABCs: The Early Phases of Reading and Writing (2013)*.*

## Early Childhood Literacy Skills

- Oral language – listening, comprehension, oral language vocabulary and being capable of explanatory talk.
- Alphabetic code – alphabet knowledge (knowledge of letters) and phonological knowledge (e.g. recognising rhyme, sounds that make up words).
- Print knowledge/concepts – includes knowledge and experience of print in the environment and how print is organised and used for reading and writing.
- Mark making, emergent writing and invented spelling – includes how marks are representations of ideas and can develop into letters and then words which can be read.

*Adapted from Early Literacy and Numeracy Matters – Enriching Literacy and Numeracy Experiences in Early Childhood, Geraldine French (2012), Barnardos.*

### **For more information on:**

#### **Oral Language with Babies**

#### **Reading with Babies**

#### **Reading with Toddlers**

See P.44, 45 and 47 of Early Literacy and Numeracy Matters – Enriching Literacy and Numeracy Experiences in Early Childhood, Geraldine French (2012), Barnardos.

# The Stages of Emergent Writing

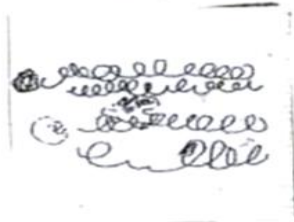
Drawing :  
children draw/scribble pictures



Random scribbling :  
children scribble and can say  
what their marks mean.



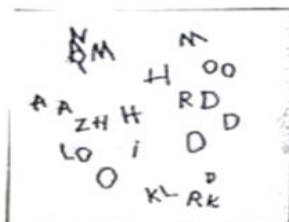
Controlled scribbling:  
Children scribble in rows across  
the page left to right and top to  
bottom and give meaning to lines of  
their writing.



Letter like forms :  
Children use unconventional  
letter forms and familiar  
symbols such as circles but  
Still give meaning to their  
writing.



Random letters :  
Children begin to use random letter  
shapes to convey meaning.



Patterned letters :  
Children begin to use strings  
of unrelated letters,  
sometimes the letters from  
their name appear.



Taken from Highscope Education Research Foundation, 1996

## Ideas for Supporting Early literacy Experiences in the Early Years

**Proof your library/book area and involve the children in this. Consider the following:**

- Have you a nice cosy area where children can choose to go to explore books alone or with others?
- Is there comfortable seating for children and adults?
- Are the books displayed in an accessible and inviting way to entice children into this area?
- Is there a good range of books that are appropriate for the age group in the service?
- Do the books reflect the diversity of children in the service for example in terms of family structure, background, skin colour, religion, culture, and ability?
- Do the books represent a variety of interests and link to the variety of play areas in the room?
- Do the books relate to different transitions that children of this age may be experiencing?
- Do you have books with nursery rhymes?
- Do the books cover the topic of feelings?
- Have you books in different textures, materials and sizes?
- Do you have any reference books which can be used when questions arise?
- Do you have any books that challenge stereotypes e.g. in terms of gender – do all the princesses have to be rescued, are all the step mothers evil?

## **Create a story sack**

A story sack is a large cloth bag containing a favourite children's book with supporting materials to stimulate language activities and make reading a memorable and enjoyable experience. It may also be referred to as a prop box.

- Select a bag/basket to keep the props in.
- Children can have access to this after the story to retell the story themselves.
- Pick a story – if you want to begin with a favourite story the children may have or one that you know they will enjoy, for example The Gingerbread Man, The Three Little Pigs.
- Select props for the main characters – these can be pictures, puppets, figures etc.

**Click on link below to download the National Literacy Trust Guide to Story Sacks (U.K.)**

[http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/7685/Story\\_sack\\_guidance.pdf](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/7685/Story_sack_guidance.pdf)

## **Set up a writing area**

Encourage children to use emergent forms of writing, such as scribble writing, random and invented spelling, by providing:

- A writing area stocked with pens, pencils, markers, paper, post its, envelopes and book-making materials.
- Shared writing demonstrations in which the pre-school teacher writes down text dictated by children.
- Functional writing opportunities that are connected to class activities. (e.g., sign-up sheets for popular play areas, library book check-out slips, post box with post cards)
- Play-related writing materials (e.g. pencils and notepads for taking orders in a restaurant play centre and making shopping lists, receipts, tickets and maps).

*Adapted from the Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction, Roskos, Christie and Richgels, Young Children NAEYC, 2003.*

## **Promote an awareness of print**

Read Big Books and other enlarged texts to children, and point to the print as it is read. While introducing and reading the text, draw children's attention to basic concepts of print such as:

- the distinction between pictures and print;
- left-to-right, top-to-bottom sequence; and
- book concepts (cover, title, page).

Read favourite stories repeatedly, and encourage children to read along on the parts of the story they remember.

Introduce functional print linked to play areas and activities:

- label play areas including text and a photo/picture/symbol
- label storage areas for toys and equipment using text and a photo/picture of the item
- Write text beside art work or photos of activities dictating what the children said
- Ask children to make drawings relating to the daily routine and signs in the service
- Include books related to play areas such as recipe books, telephone books, catalogues in home corner.

Support name recognition with pre-schoolers:

- Label areas with the child's name where their personal belongings are kept.
- Ask the children to sign in on arrival and assist them to find their name on the sign in sheet.

*Adapted from the Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction, Roskos, Christie and Richgels, Young Children NAEYC, 2003.*

## **Create an interactive story time and follow on activities**

The term **dialogic reading** is used to describe a method of interactive reading where the child becomes the teller of the story. Dialogic reading is based upon three main techniques which are designed to encourage children to talk more and give descriptions of what they see:

1. Ask 'what' questions. Let the child know their answer is correct by repeating it back saying 'yes that is...'
2. Ask open-ended questions. When children are comfortable answering 'what' questions ask more open-ended questions that encourage children to use their imaginations and require more thought to answer. No right or wrong answer more wanting to know what the child thinks.
3. Expand on what the child says – keep it short and simple.

*Early Literacy and Numeracy Matters – Enriching Literacy and Numeracy Experiences in Early Childhood, Geraldine French (2012), Barnardos.*

Encourage children to re tell a story using the story sack/prop box or maps drawn out of the story showing the beginning and then end and linking each piece of the story with arrows.

Encourage children to come up with a different ending to the story.

Draw pictures of the characters and attach them with pegs to a rope like a washing line and use this as another way to tell the story with the help of the children, move the characters along the rope as the story evolves (Nina Birch, 2012).

Support children to carry out pretend reading where they may work from memory with a familiar story or make up a story to match with the pictures in a book.

Link nursery rhymes to the stories that are being told.



## Guided play – tell a story that links to setting up a new play area

### Taken from the Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction – *Young Children NAEYC, 2003*

With the teacher's help, the children are creating a gas station/garage play center as part of an on-going unit on transportation.

**Before play.** The teacher provides background knowledge by reading *Sylvia's Garage*, by Debra Lee, an information book about a woman mechanic. She discusses new words, such as *mechanic, engine, dipstick, oil*. Next, the teacher helps the children plan the play center. She asks children about the roles they can play (e.g., gas station attendant, mechanic, customer) and records their ideas on a piece of chart paper. She then asks the children to brainstorm some props that they could use in their center (e.g. signs, cardboard gas pump, oil can, tire pressure gauge) and jots these down on another piece of chart paper. The children then decide which props they will make in class and which will be brought from home, and the teacher or a child places an *m* after each make-in-class item and an *h* after each from home item. During the next several days, the teacher helps the children construct some of the make-in-class props, such as a sign for the gas station ("Let's see. . . gas starts with a *g*. Gary, your name also starts with a *g*. Can you show us how to write a *g*?"). The list of props from home is included in the classroom newsletter and sent to families.

**During play.** The teacher first observes the children at play to learn about their current play interests and activities. Then she provides scaffolding that extends and enriches children's play and at the same time teaches important literacy skills. She notices, for example, that the mechanics are not writing out service orders or bills for the customers, so she takes on a role as an assistant mechanic and models how to write out a bill for fixing a customer's car. She monitors her involvement to ensure close alignment with children's ongoing activity.

**After play.** During small group activity time, the teacher helps children with a picture-sort that includes pictures of people and objects from their garage play. They sort the pictures into labeled columns according to beginning sounds—  
*/m/ (mechanic, man, map, motor); /t/ (tire, tank, top, taillight); and /g/ (gas, gallon, garden, goat)*. They explore the different feel of these sounds in the different parts of their mouths. They think of other words they know that feel the same way. After modeling, the teacher gives the children a small deck of picture cards to sort, providing direct supervision and feedback.

The excerpt above is an example – in carrying out such an activity staff will link to the children's interests and terms associated with the Irish context. This activity can be child-led and the staff are there to guide them and facilitate the learning potential.

These activities can allow for rich conversations between staff and children when new and rare words can be introduced to the children in a meaningful and relevant way. Staff can also extend children's comments by saying back what they have said and introducing new words when doing this.

## Create a book nook for babies and toddlers

Older babies will enjoy a special book nook. Crawlers and walkers can get to an area where attractively arranged books are easy to reach. The typical upright book-display racks, so popular in preschool classrooms, are not very functional in an infant room. First, babies are not tall enough to reach the higher shelves. A second problem is that unseasoned crawlers and walkers may lose their balance if they must reach to obtain materials. Third, and more serious, the bookshelf itself can topple over if toddlers try to climb on it. (Furniture should, of course, be bolted or otherwise secured to walls or the floor.)

A book nook for babies can be made by standing some books up on the floor and laying others flat nearby. Because the opened and standing books can be seen from a distance, they will catch the children's attention. A corner of the room will serve best, as traffic will not go through the area. Make sure the area is covered with carpeting or a rug to make sitting comfortable.

Pillows are not necessary in a book area for babies, nor are they very safe. Babies often don't watch the floor when they walk, and they are unable to raise their feet very far off the floor. (Were they to do so, they would lose their balance.) As a result, babies can trip over pillows. Moreover, a book is easiest for a baby to handle in his or her lap, while sitting. Leaning against a pillow or sitting halfway on top of one puts a baby in a position that makes manipulating a book difficult.

Although a special place in the room is provided for books, books do not have to stay there. Babies often get a book, look at it for a short time, and then carry it with them as they go to another area of the room. They might set the book aside while they engage in another activity and then pick it up again. Toddlers might be gently encouraged and helped to return books to the book nook when they truly have finished with them. However, it is good to remember that a toddler does many things while on the run. A book nook can be thought of not so much as where books *belong* but as a place where books can be *found*. If sturdy books only are provided (that is, books with thick cardboard, rather than paper, pages), they will be able to withstand the wear and tear of traveling throughout the room with a crawler or toddler. A book nook also provides an out-of-the-way place where adults know they can read to children without being in the way of other activities. While some children between 12 and 18 months sit quietly on a lap to look at books for extended periods of time, many infants enjoy books only for a few brief minutes at a time. They return periodically for several such episodes over a period of time.

Of course, positioning oneself in the book nook will probably draw infants to it, and they might stay longer if an adult is there to share books with them.

Special understanding, patience, and sensitivity are required when we interact with babies and books. If we can learn to respond to babies' signals and to share books with them on their own terms, books can be the basis for many happy moments together.

*Source: Excerpted from Judith A. Schickedanz, Much More than the ABCs: The Early Stages of Reading and Writing (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1999), 35–36 in the Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction – Young Children NAEYC, 2003*

### **Provide phonological awareness activities**

Provide activities that increase children’s awareness of the sounds of language. These activities include playing games and listening to stories, poems, and songs that involve:

*rhyme*—identifying words that end with the same sound (e.g., Jack and Jill went up the hill);

*alliteration*—recognizing when several words begin with the same sound (e.g. Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers);*sound matching*—deciding which of several words begins with a specific sound (e.g., show a child pictures of a bird, a dog, and a cat and ask which one starts with the /d/ sound).

Try to make these activities fun and enjoyable.

### **Provide alphabet activities**

Engage children with materials that promote identification of the letters of the alphabet, including

- ABC books
- magnetic letters
- alphabet blocks and puzzles
- alphabet charts

Use direct instruction to teach letter names that have personal meaning to children (“Look, Jennifer’s and Joey’s names both start with the same letter. What is the letter’s name? That’s right, they both start with j”).

*The Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction, Roskos, Christie and Richgels, Young Children NAEYC, 2003.*

## Five a day: Developing Literacy

- 1. Listening** (Discrimination of sound, social listening, developing aural attention span, developing auditory memory)
- 2. Talk** (repeating and innovating sentences, vocabulary, use of expressive language, daily conversations)
- 3. Music** (sing and learn songs, action songs and rhymes off by heart)
- 4. Storytime** (reading and story-telling, children to make up stories)
- 5. Writing/mark making** (develop gross, medium and fine motor skills) & awareness of print (environmental, singing of alphabet song-linked to chart)



**Nina Birch (2012)**

Think of an activity to develop in each area once every day.

## References

Dramatic Progress in the Early Years, Presentation by Nina Birch (2012).

Early Literacy and Numeracy Matters – Enriching Literacy and Numeracy Experiences in Early Childhood, French (2012), Barnardos.

Key Experiences Participant Guide, Highscope Educational Research Foundation (1996), MLL Highscope Press.

National Literacy Trust Guide to Story Sacks, No Year Given.

Ready for School, Bright Horizons. No Year Given.

So Much More than the ABCs: The Early Phases of Reading and Writing, Schickedanz and Collins (2013), NAEYC.

Supporting Oral Language and Reading development in the Early Years. Spotlight research into practice:research monograph 5, D Konza, (2011), Victorian Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, February, p. 2.

Supporting Language and Early Literacy Practices in Kindergarten, Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline, June (2011).

The Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction, Roskos, Christie and Richgels, (2003) Young Children NAEYC.

## Online Links:

At Home with Family Learning, Fun and useful ways to improve reading, writing and maths skills for all, NALA 2009:

[http://www.nala.ie/sites/default/files/publications/At%20Home%20with%20Family%20Learning%20-%20fun%20and%20useful%20ways%20to%20improve%20reading,%20writing%20and%20maths%20skills%20for%20all\\_1.pdf](http://www.nala.ie/sites/default/files/publications/At%20Home%20with%20Family%20Learning%20-%20fun%20and%20useful%20ways%20to%20improve%20reading,%20writing%20and%20maths%20skills%20for%20all_1.pdf)

Judy Schickedanz and Molly Collins on Feb 06, 2013 responding to questions on Letter of the Week Approach:

<http://www.naeyc.org/event/so-much-more-than-the-abcs>

NALA's campaign, Help My Kid Learn:

[www.helpmykidlearn.ie](http://www.helpmykidlearn.ie)

National Literacy Trust Guide to Story Sacks (U.K.) No year given:

[http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/7685/Story\\_sack\\_guidance.pdf](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/7685/Story_sack_guidance.pdf)

Ready for School, Bright Horizons:

<http://ziptivity.wordpress.com/2011/02/16/school-readiness-myths-from-bright-horizons/>

Supporting language and early literacy practices in kindergarten, Queensland Kindergarten learning Guideline, June 2011:

[http://www.gsa.qld.edu.au/downloads/p\\_10/qklg\\_pd\\_resource\\_supporting\\_literacy.pdf](http://www.gsa.qld.edu.au/downloads/p_10/qklg_pd_resource_supporting_literacy.pdf)

The Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction, Roskos, Christie and Richgels, Young Children NAEYC, 2003:

<http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200303/Essentials.pdf>