

Early language and literacy: What skills and understanding do young children need?

From birth, every child should have access to high quality learning opportunities for language, literacy and mathematics. These should be available in all early years settings, including the home, and facilitated by parents and ECD practitioners who are equipped with the right knowledge and resources.

It is well known that South African children are underperforming significantly in literacy and mathematics. Many children still fail to reach the minimum expected level, and our results lag behind even other low-income African countries. The reasons for this are complex, but part of the solution is to ensure that in the early years, children's opportunities to learn keep pace with their desire and capacity to learn.

In order to break entrenched cycles of poverty and underachievement and to give all children an equal chance to achieve their fullest potential, the right foundations for learning must be laid in the period before children begin formal schooling. This includes giving all young children the opportunity to start developing the different skills and understanding involved in learning to read and write.

Improving knowledge of what these early literacy competencies are and how they can be nurtured must therefore be a principal component of any strategy to boost literacy rates.

A unique developmental period for language and literacy

Efforts to improve literacy in South Africa have been held back by a widespread belief that learning to read and write begins in school. The truth is that the process starts at birth. An infant's brain is very impressionable and it is much easier to learn some skills, including language, during the early years. What's more, learning is cumulative; early skills provide the building blocks for the acquisition of new skills.

This means that children who miss out on opportunities to build early language and literacy skills often start school already behind. The result is that the achievement gap puts down deep roots early on, and school-level strategies to tackle low literacy levels may be too late to make up for lost opportunities in the preceding years.

Language-rich environments that support early literacy have been shown to be an important feature of the kinds of high quality ECD programmes that bring lasting benefits for children. And research shows that children who benefit from such programmes not only have later academic advantages, but are also less likely to repeat grades, to drop out of school or to require special educational support.

What do mean by 'early literacy'?

We use the term 'early literacy' to refer to the skills, understanding and behaviours of young children that develop into conventional reading and writing. Because the development of language is integral to early literacy, the process of becoming literate starts at birth. Importantly, early literacy development is rooted in everyday activities and interactions and exposure to books and print.

Research on early literacy

There is now a vast body of evidence showing that children who have more developed language and literacy abilities at the point they start school, go on to become better readers and writers. In particular, experts have found that in order to learn to read and write successfully, children need to master two sets of skills in the early years – language skills and code-related skills.

In terms of language skills, studies have shown that infants who are spoken to more have a bigger vocabulary at age three, and that this is linked to better language and reading comprehension scores at age nine. Research also suggests that the ability to understand and create narratives relates to academic achievement, especially to literacy outcomes. Other studies have revealed that interactive booksharing not only contributes to good language skills and awareness of how print works, but also to children's motivation to engage with literacy activities.

In terms of code-related skills, knowledge of letters and awareness of sounds in words at school-entry have been shown to be two of the best predictors of early reading ability.

One of the key challenges for policy-makers is found in another discovery by researchers; that in each of the above areas, the experiences and skills of young children from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to lag behind those of other children.

"Just as young children need nourishing food to build physical strength, they also need linguistic nutrition for optimal development of language and cognitive abilities."

Stanford University

The role of early language

Literacy starts with language – and language skills are acquired from the day a child is born, through activities, interactions and routines at home, in preschools and in other everyday contexts. Young children should be encouraged to use their home language as much as possible, building a strong foundation in their mother tongue which will in turn help them to learn other languages in multilingual settings.

Listening, understanding, and speaking all rely on language and, in turn, facilitate new learning. Language enables children to be part of a conversation, to follow instructions, to ask questions, and to express ideas, needs and opinions. These skills enable them to interact with the people and things around them in a way that helps them to make meaning of their world and to solve problems.

Language is also essential for early mathematics learning. It provides both the specialised terminology, and the general comprehension and communication skills that facilitate reasoning, describing, justifying and representing.

"Acquiring the early building blocks of executive function skills is one of the most important and challenging tasks of the early childhood years."

Centre on the Developing Child

The importance of wider skills for learning

Successful literacy learning depends on a wider set of cognitive and social-emotional skills that include attention, working memory and self-control. These skills enable children to follow instructions, to plan, to stay focused, and to persevere. In these ways, they are the building blocks of the habits and attitudes that create life-long learners, as well as helping children to build relationships and to cope with adversity.

This set of competencies is sometimes referred to as 'executive function' or 'self-regulation' and can be seen in children whose behaviour is becoming less impulsive and more intentional. As their skills develop, children will get better at holding in mind different information relevant to the task in hand, changing perspectives as they absorb new findings, and coping with transitions.

Research suggests not only that early childhood adversity impairs self-regulation, but also that children with better self-regulation achieve higher literacy scores, do better at school and are even more likely to get a degree. These skills, like so many others, do not develop automatically but need to be strengthened through practice.

Early learning does not mean formal teaching

Learning in the early years is not about formal teaching or isolated skill development. Playing, talking and interacting, doing and imitating, exploring, singing and moving, and sharing stories and books are the main learning tools of the young child.

Above all, learning at this age should be fun! The child's perspective is paramount and young children do not necessarily see play and learning as separate. They are most interested in 'here and now' questions that help them to make sense of their immediate situation and experiences through open-ended exploration.

ECD practitioners and parents can create the right conditions for children's self-initiated explorations, and be alert to 'teachable moments' when they help the child to reflect and extend their thinking. Adults can also initiate playful learning experiences that have certain learning goals in mind.

Seven strands of early literacy

Learning to read and write are processes that involve different but related sets of understanding and skills. All children should have opportunities to start developing this range of competencies before they start school.

Vocabulary and comprehension

Children need to know what words mean, so that they can comprehend what they hear and read and can communicate through spoken and written language. In order to understand a written text a child needs good vocabulary and to be familiar with the type of complex language that occurs in books, which is different to everyday speech and particularly important for school learning.

In practice: *Parents and caregivers can create multiple opportunities for conversational talk with children which extends their language. Songs, rhymes and storybooks are also good ways of introducing new vocabulary.*

Narrative skills

Children need to develop their ability to describe things and events and to tell stories. Oral storytelling helps children to become familiar with language that is removed from the 'here and now' and bridges the gap between oral and written language. As they practice their narrative skills, children learn how to order their stories, provide context and describe and explain. They also start to make inferences – an important aspect of reading comprehension.

In practice: *Pretend play is a good way for children to develop narrative skills by assigning roles, creating a context and making up a story about someone or something that might not be present.*

Enjoyment of books and print

Children should see print as both valuable and a source of fun. A child with print motivation enjoys being read to, is interested in print and pretends to write. By experiencing that we read for enjoyment or to get information, children start to develop a love of books and an appreciation of the purposes of print, which motivates them to engage with literacy activities.

In practice: *Shared storybook reading that is interactive and creates plenty of opportunities for children to comment and ask questions will help to build language and foster a love of reading.*

Print awareness

In our alphabetic writing system, children will need to learn that print conveys a message and is made up of words and letters. They will discover that print does not literally represent the things that we see, but usually denotes the sounds in the words of spoken language. Children will also need to become familiar with some of the key features of books and print, such as that we read from left to right.

In practice: *Parents and caregivers can stimulate children's curiosity by pointing out print in books and in the environment. They should also affirm early reading and writing behaviours that imitate adult uses of print.*

Drawing and writing

Drawing, scribbling and pretend writing are an important foundation for learning to write. In order to understand that real objects can be represented in two dimensions (symbolic representation), children need to have many opportunities to draw what they see around them. As children become more aware of print, they might start to write with scribbles, and then to invent spelling by using letters to represent sounds in words.

In practice: *Including children in everyday activities that involve writing will encourage them to incorporate pretend writing into their games (e.g. shopping lists, messages and notes).*

Awareness of sounds in words

Young children need to develop a language skill which involves focusing on sounds in words rather than the meanings of words. This is referred to as phonological awareness and includes skills such as matching words that start with the same sound, breaking up spoken words into syllables or sounds, and blending sounds to make words.

In practice: *Activities such as 'I spy...'; clapping out syllables in words, singing songs and reciting nursery rhymes all help children to become aware of sounds in words.*

Letter knowledge

Children's experiences with print help them to notice letters and to learn that letters have different shapes and names and represent different sounds. Knowing the sounds that letters make is critical for learning to read and write. Once children know some letter-sounds they may use this knowledge to predict what words say or to represent sounds in their writing.

In practice: *Parents and caregivers can point out letters and explain the sounds that they make, as well as encouraging children to make letter shapes with paint, sand or playdough.*

Growing young readers and writers



This briefing was written by Rebecca Hickman and Shelley O'Carroll for Wordworks, with funding from the DG Murray Trust. Wordworks aims to strengthen early language and literacy learning among children from historically disadvantaged communities in South Africa. By sharing our materials, know-how and enthusiasm with teachers, parents, volunteer tutors and home visitors in a respectful and inclusive way, we seek to ensure that all our children can learn to read and write successfully. For a full list of references for this briefing and more information about our work, visit our website at www.wordworks.org.za.

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