

GROWING IDEAS

Word Play All Day – Early Literacy in Action



What is early literacy?

Early literacy is one term used to describe the stage of literacy development occurring before children are able to read and write. From infancy, children begin to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that influence lifelong reading and writing behaviors. These early literacy experiences help children discover the purposes of, and relationships between, speech and print.

Why is children's early literacy development important?

Research indicates that the literacy knowledge children have when entering school is an important predictor of their reading and academic success.

What are areas of early literacy that we should be focusing on with all children?

Oral language—Children develop the ability to listen to and understand what is being said to them, as well as to communicate verbally with others.

Print awareness—Children develop knowledge of how the print system works; directionality (left to right, top to bottom); that print can take the form of letters, words, and sentences; and that print has meaning.

Phonological awareness—Children gain an awareness of the individual sounds that make up words. Children who play with beginning and ending sounds, break words into individual speech sounds, and make up nonsense words are developing their phonological awareness. Being able to identify sounds in words helps children when they start to read and must make connections between these sounds and the letters that represent them.

Alphabet knowledge and writing—Children begin to realize that print is used to communicate and that drawings are different than print; they become interested in naming and writing the letters of the alphabet. Early writing efforts that look like scribbles may lead to scribbled print, the formation of letters, invented spelling, and conventional writing.

Learning and practicing early literacy skills can and should be FUN. When children and adults read stories, sing songs, have rich conversations, and engage in games, play, and literacy activities together, relationships and a positive feeling toward literacy experiences can develop.



How can we support children’s early literacy development?

Encourage literacy development by helping each child share ideas through language and print. Be intentional in choosing a variety of early literacy activities to help children with differing physical and developmental abilities, cultural, and literacy experiences participate and learn. Be informed, get creative, and involve families.

Oral language—Help children learn to listen to, understand, and use language.

- Read aloud regularly! Choose interesting stories, poems, magazines, and other forms of fiction and nonfiction, and read favorites repeatedly. Discuss and describe new words and ideas to help children expand their vocabulary and world knowledge.
- Invite guests and/or take field trips to provide children with new life experiences and language.
- Make up language guessing games. Ask children to name the “mystery fruit” for dessert: “It is round, juicy, and it has a peel.”

“Reading aloud with children is not only an important step in building the foundation for literacy, but it is a great time for sharing.”

Weston, M. (2001). *Preschool picks* (p. 7). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Center, Partnerships for Inclusion.

Phonological awareness—Help children notice the sounds of language.

- Play rhyming games: “I spy, something you drink that rhymes with silk.”
- Focus on beginning letter sounds with nursery rhymes like, “Peter Piper;” word games like, “Look around, what begins with an “rrr” sound?,” and silly songs.
- Chant and clap out syllable patterns in children’s names, foods, and other words.

Alphabet knowledge and writing—Help children recognize and write letters of the alphabet.

- Explore alphabet puzzles, blocks, and magnetic letters.
- Support children as “message makers.” Set up a writing center stocked with a variety of drawing materials, writing tools, name and word cards, and picture dictionaries so children can create mail, notes, books, and other forms of print.

Print awareness—Help children discover how print works and what it is used for.

- Be word explorers. Invite children to look for print in the world around them, from street signs to cereal boxes. Look at words they find and read them together.
- Mix print and play! Bring signs, shopping lists, menus, pads for taking orders, and other print and writing materials into dramatic play areas.

Frequent conversation throughout the day, story readings, songs, discussions, play, rhymes, and riddles can turn “wait times” into great times! Learn more about early literacy research and best teaching practices, share this information with families, and use these ideas to help children develop knowledge, skills, and an excitement about the reading and writing process.

Where to learn more:

Visit our Selected Resources page at <http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/ec/growingideas/literacyres.htm>.



Maine’s Network of Child Care Resource Development Centers

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