



Reading Aloud to Infants and Toddlers At Home and In the Classroom Promotes Early Language and Literacy Skills

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Developing Strong Readers Begins at Birth

Today, it is widely acknowledged that reading proficiency by the end of 3rd grade is the strongest predictor of high school graduation and later economic well-being in adulthood. Yet, two-thirds of children across the country every year fail to reach this benchmark. The origins of this national crisis are linked to the equally troubling trend that one in three children reach Kindergarten without the language skills in place that will enable them to become strong readers.¹

The early childhood field—from practitioners to policymakers—is more highly attuned than ever before to research clearly indicating that we must begin much earlier to support the development of language and literacy skills. We now know that that the foundations of early literacy begin at birth, and that reading aloud to infants and toddlers is an equally strong—and much earlier predictor—of preparedness for and success in school.² Early care and education policies, program models, professional development, classroom practices, and instructional strategies must keep pace with and reflect our evolving research-based understanding of developing strong readers.

Nationally, 76% of children under age five from families with employed parents spend some time in out-of-home care each week. Community early care and education providers that serve infants and toddlers of all income levels have an equally important role to play in supporting parents and the development of strong readers.

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Research Drives the Push to Begin Building Strong Readers from Birth

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that pediatric providers promote early literacy development for children beginning in infancy and continuing at least until the age of kindergarten entry by advising all parents that reading aloud with young children can enhance parent-child relationships and prepare young minds to learn language and early literacy skills.³

Too Small to Fail aims to help parents and businesses take meaningful actions to improve the health and well-being of children ages zero to five, so that more of America's children are prepared to succeed in the 21st century. The campaign promotes new research on the science of children's brain development, early learning and early health, and assists parents, businesses and communities to identify specific actions, consistent with the new research, that they can take to improve the lives of young children.⁴

are “age –appropriate” for babies. This is not the case—babies enjoy and engage in the interactive process of hearing text read aloud regardless of its complexity. Programs should also provide access to literacy rich environments, support caregivers and instructors in developing close, nurturing relationships that incorporate regular reading interactions, and offer parent outreach opportunities that increase early language and literacy engagement at home.

This ECEC Policy Brief provides early care and education programs with suggestions that will align their program design and instructional routines with research-based best practices to promote early language and literacy skills for infants and toddlers.

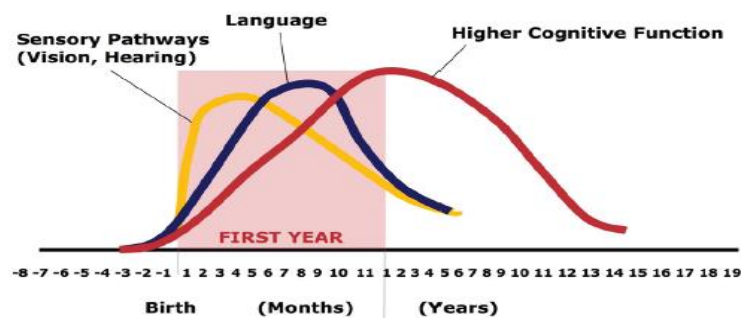
The Brain Science Behind Early Language and Literacy Development

The period between birth and age five is a time of rapid growth for emerging skills and competencies that are inter-related and set the stage for learning and success into adulthood. During this time, the development of children’s full range of cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral skills is highly dependent on early language and literacy development. Although the brain exhibits a great deal of flexibility in its growth and development—what neuroscientists refer to as “plasticity”—there are also age-based windows of development that are difficult to reopen in subsequent years. Early language and literacy development represents such a development window. Children who are not exposed to the richness and variability of language beginning at infancy have difficulty matching their peers who have had this exposure in vocabulary acquisition and preparedness to read.⁵

From infancy to age 3, early literacy development is driven primarily by exposure to and understanding of oral language. Relationships between children and caring adults shape these rapidly developing skills, with language-based interactions at their core. Beginning at birth, regularly reading aloud provides the context for nurturing and supportive experiences that expose infants and toddlers to an expanding vocabulary, the rhythm and patterns of speech, and a creative and imaginative introduction to the world around them. Over time, these elements build upon each other to give young children the language and early literacy skills they need to develop into strong readers.



Human Brain Development Neural Connections for Different Functions Develop Sequentially



Source: C.A. Nelson (2000)

When caring adults consistently read aloud with infants and toddlers, they are supporting their linguistic, as well as their social and emotional, development. Reading aloud to infants exposes them to an increasing number of words, the complexities of sentence structure and syntax, as well as an expanding understanding of images, concepts and ideas. All of these skills lay the foundation for strong early readers who more quickly master the building blocks of reading, including phonemic awareness or understanding sounds, phonological awareness or understanding syllables and letter combinations, and print awareness or familiarity with the idea that text suggests meaning.⁶ Studies show that infants who are faster at recognizing familiar words at 18 months have larger vocabularies at age two and score higher on standardized language assessments in kindergarten and elementary school.⁷

The act of sitting and reading with infants and toddlers also involves direct interaction that is facilitated by a close and supportive relationship. Relationships are the delivery mechanism by which young children absorb new information, interact with new stimuli, and experience the world around them. Like many early competencies, language development is an inherently relational experience. This explains why early language resources based in digital media have been largely ineffective in improving these skills among young children.⁸ The relational aspect of reading aloud to infants and toddlers has also been shown to increase executive function capacity among young children, which includes attention and self-regulation.⁹

Reading Aloud to Infants and Toddlers

Reading aloud to infants and toddlers may not appear to be a formal and structured early literacy activity, but it involves the transfer and modeling of key skills between adults and children. For infants, reading aloud serves primarily as an opportunity to be exposed to written and spoken language through interaction with books and reading adults. Babies will not be able to understand or interpret the letters and text but they are gaining important exposure to the components of spoken language and are learning to participate in book activities—

Effective interactions between adults and young children while reading aloud include¹⁰:

- **Directing the child’s attention:** e.g. “Look at this.”
- **Labeling:** Naming an object or commenting on its characteristics
- **Commenting:** Making general comments about the story and characters
- **Imitation:** Repeating back what a child says
- **Relating to Child’s Experience:** Connects a picture or part of the story back to the child’s own life
- **Correction:** Gently redirecting by clarifying facts, e.g. “No, that’s not a cat—it’s a rabbit; see his long ears?”
- **Positive Feedback:** Confirming accurate observations and other comments
- **Open-Ended Questions:** Asking children to imagine alternate plots or what-if scenarios
- **Follow-Up Questions:** Directly relating to a comment the child makes.

seeing how adults hold a book and turn the pages. A one year-old who has been read to may mimic how to hold a book right side up and turn the pages from front to back. Most importantly, children at this age are engaging in critical interpersonal interaction with adults. Babies enjoy listening to books in a comfortable place with familiar objects such as a favorite stuffed toy. Adults should hold books close enough to infants to encourage them to point and look intently at pictures and identify objects or even turn the pages.

Reading aloud to infants means just that: reading text as it is written, while providing additional engagement through questions and interactions. For many practitioners, this will seem counter-intuitive based on the common misperception that only picture books are “age –appropriate” for babies. This is not the case—babies enjoy and engage in the interactive process of hearing text read aloud regardless of its complexity. Books that include rhyming and repetitive text may be particularly enjoyable for infants to hear aloud.

As they grow and develop, toddlers become more interactive in read aloud sessions. Children this age enjoy listening to and talking about books. They are beginning to understand the relationship between print and meaning, and the relationship between symbols and pictures and the story. As they grow more familiar with the activities of reading, some toddlers will engage in pretend reading or tell the story in their own words to peers or stuffed animals. The relational aspect of this experience continues to be equally important for children at this age. Adults should continue to sit close enough to toddlers to actively engage them in the activity of reading, and encourage questions and discussion.

Throughout regular read aloud sessions, children are experiencing reading as a creative and enjoyable activity. From infancy, babies react to language play, including rhyming, song, and use of character voices. As children grow and begin to relate more directly with the structure of a story, adults can prompt imaginative and problem-solving thinking by asking ‘what-if’ and open-ended questions.

Parents and Early Care and Education Programs Partnering to Support Strong Readers

Parents are their children’s first and most influential teachers, and play a crucial role in supporting the development of strong readers. All parents, regardless of income and education level, may face limitations of time and understanding the importance of regularly reading aloud to infants, as well as competition for children’s attention from electronic media.¹¹ According to the most recent Kids Count data, 14% of families with children ages one to five read to them less than three days a week.¹² All families need to hear the message that reading aloud to children from birth is essential to supporting strong readers.

Yet, with 80% of 3rd graders below the federal poverty threshold failing to reach the benchmark of reading proficiently, the need for promoting early language and literacy strategies among low-income parents is particularly critical.¹³ Research clearly demonstrates how disparities in parent education levels and access to literacy rich environments correlate to poor school readiness outcomes, and challenge early language and literacy development among children from low-income backgrounds. Family literacy programs such as Reach Out and Read and First Book, as well as home visiting programs including Parents as Teachers, offer targeted literacy support to low-income families of young children beginning at birth, and serve as key evidence-based, effective early intervention strategies.¹⁴ Community providers and their staff are also important resources for families who may access their services with the assistance of the child

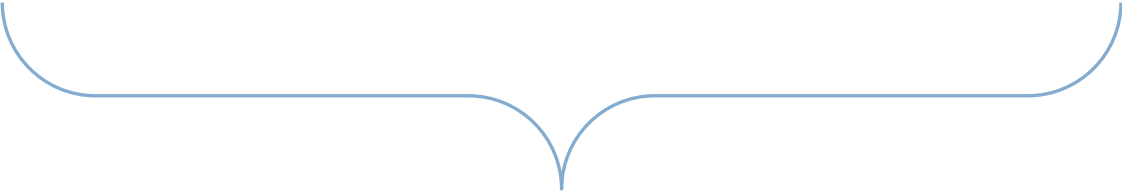


Family Literacy Programs Support Parents From Birth Through School Entry

First Book provides access to new books for children in need. To date, First Book has distributed more than 100 million books and educational resources to programs and schools serving children from low-income families throughout the United States and Canada. First Book is transforming the lives of children in need and elevating the quality of education by making new, high-quality books available on an ongoing basis.¹⁷

Parents as Teachers is an evidence-based home visiting model that offers parenting education and family support, especially for those families in vulnerable situations. At its core, Parents as Teachers' curriculum is relationship-based and parent-focused. Parents as Teachers serves a range of families with high needs—not just first time parents, pregnant parents or teen parents—and offers services throughout the continuum from prenatal to kindergarten entry. The model is one of thirteen recognized by the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program.¹⁸

Reach Out and Read prepares America's youngest children to succeed in school by partnering with doctors to prescribe books and encourage families to read together. The program serves more than 4 million children and their families across the nation, with a special emphasis on serving those in low-income communities.¹⁶



care subsidy program. Programs can enhance the early language and literacy experiences of low-income children by designing learning environments that bring together children from diverse backgrounds.

Suggestions for Programs

- Align program design with developmentally appropriate curriculum and state early learning guidelines and standards.
- Ensure staff have ample opportunity for improving their capacity to support early language and literacy by offering training, embedded mentoring and coaching, and educational experiences to enhance their qualifications and credentials.
- Partner with additional community resources that support early language and literacy including libraries and museums and conduct regular library visits.

- Engage families with home literacy supports, including regular feedback about child and adult reading interactions, opportunities to access additional literacy materials, and coaching.
- Create a classroom library that is cozy and inviting with multiple copies of reading materials in good condition. Keep favorite books that are familiar, and add new materials based on seasons, class activities, and events in children’s lives, e.g. a new baby brother.
- Develop a literacy rich environment by compiling:¹⁵
 - Books that increase attention and interest with photographs or drawings of animals, people and single brightly colored objects
 - Easy-to-hold board books that can withstand wear and tear and encourage children to seek out books for interactive or independent reading in addition to being read aloud to by adults
 - Interactive books
 - Bilingual books to appeal to English Language Learners
 - Books about familiar routines
 - Books with repeated phrases, predictable patterns, repetitive language, and rhyming
- Encourage staff to:
 - Time the length of read aloud sessions based on engagement and interest levels—for infants, this may be as short as 5 to 10 minutes throughout the day, and slightly longer for toddlers depending on their level of engagement.
 - Take advantage of readable moments, time between activities, quiet times, or moments when a story serves as a closing activity for the day.
 - Establish a close physical environment for reading. Sitting side by side with one or two children allows children to follow the text and pictures clearly, ask questions and point to their favorite characters. Cozy spots for reading away from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the classroom’s activity areas may help children to concentrate.
 - Use interaction to emphasize parts of the story and key characters, such as differentiating between characters using different voices, asking questions, relating the story to events in the children’s own lives, and imagining or predicting what happens next in the story.

Additional Resources

- Reach Out and Read’s Milestones of Early Literacy
http://www.reachoutandread.org/FileRepository/RORmilestones_English.pdf
- Zero To Three Tips and Tools for Early Literacy and Language
<http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/early-language-literacy/tips-tools-early-lit-and-lang>
- Text4baby is the first mobile information service designed to promote maternal and child health through text messaging. Text4baby is a free



The Early Care and Education Program (ECEC) is the nation’s leading voice for multi-site, community early care and education providers, state child care associations, and education support organizations committed to delivering high-quality programs and services. We strive for strong developmental and learning outcomes for children and their families by advocating for actionable federal and state policies that bring quality to scale.

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² Neuman, S. B. (2006). Literacy Development for Infants and Toddlers. *Learning to read the world: language and literacy in the first three years* (pp. 275-290). Washington, DC: Zero To Three Press.

³ American Academy of Pediatrics. (2014). Literacy Promotion: An Essential Component of Primary Care Pediatric Practice. *Pediatrics*, 134(2). Retrieved July 8, 2014, from pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2014/06/19/ped.2014-1384

⁴ Too Small to Fail. (2013). *Too Small To Fail*. Retrieved July 22, 2014, from <http://toosmall.org/>

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