

Promoting Literacy Activities in Early Childhood Settings

by Stephen Green, Ph.D.

Learning to read and write are skills that are essential to a child's success in school and later life. In a joint position announcement issued by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the authors state, "One of the best predictors of whether a child will function competently in school and go on to contribute actively in our increasingly literate society is the level to which the child progresses in reading and writing" (IRA/NAEYC, 1998, p. 1). For decades, many researchers, educators, and parents operated under the assumption that learning to read and write were processes that began with formal school-based instruction in kindergarten or first grade; however, we now understand that the preschool years serve as a foundation for developing these essential literacy skills.

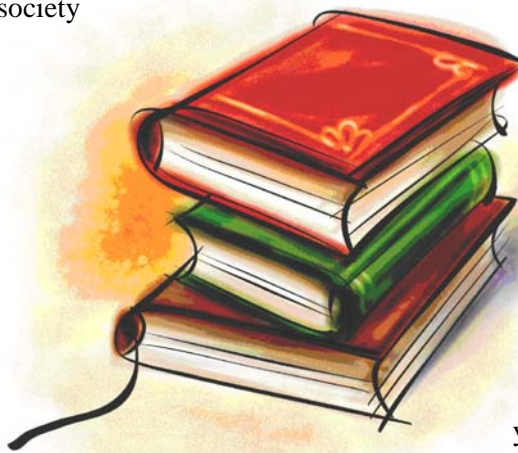
While parents are one of the most significant influences on a child's literacy development, a growing number of preschool-age children are spending a good portion of their time being cared for by non-family members. The latest statistics indicate that 52 percent of children birth to age 2 and 74 percent of children ages 3 to 6 (not yet in

kindergarten) spend time in non-parental care arrangements such as Head Start, Early Head Start, and a variety of other home- and center-based day care programs. In addition, there are millions of children growing up in home environments that fail to provide the support needed to foster children's early literacy development. This is especially true for children living in poverty (Barnett, 2001). Children who do not receive adequate support from parents and other adults in the home

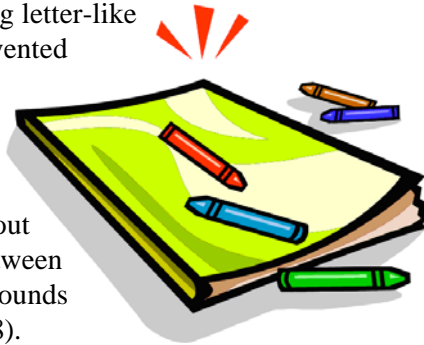
environment must depend on outside sources to fill the gap. As a child care provider, you have a tremendous opportunity to help children develop the literacy skills they need to be successful in life.

Emergent Literacy

Emergent literacy refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities that children develop during the preschool years that serve as precursors to conventional reading and writing (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). Children begin to develop emergent literacy skills very early in life. In fact, during the first few months of their lives, children begin to experiment with language. Their understanding of important literacy concepts expands rapidly during their early childhood years, especially as they are given opportunities to interact with caring adults and various forms of print. According to literacy researchers, emergent literacy is made up of several key components:



- *Phonemic Awareness.* Phonemic awareness is an understanding that speech is composed of units, such as spoken words, syllables, and sounds. As children become more familiar with letter names, shapes, and sounds, they develop the ability to take spoken words apart sound by sound (segmentation) and put together sounds to make words (blending).
- *Alphabetic Principle.* The alphabetic principle refers to a child's knowledge of letters of the alphabet and their corresponding sounds. Knowledge of the alphabet at school entry has been found to be one of the best predictors of eventual reading achievement (Adams, 1990).
- *Print Awareness.* Print awareness involves a child's understanding that print carries the meaning of the story, that printed words correspond to spoken words, and that print moves from left to right and from top to bottom on a page (in the English language). Enhancing children's exposure to and concepts about print should be one of the central goals of an early childhood educator.
- *Writing Development.* Another key component of emergent literacy is early writing development. Before children begin the formal process of writing, they experiment with activities such as scribbling, producing letter-like forms, and using invented spelling to attempt to write words. These precursory activities help children to think about the relationships between letters, words, and sounds (IRA/NAEYC, 1998).
- *Oral Language Skills.* Oral language skills refer to a child's vocabulary and his or her understanding of the uses and conventions of spoken language. Researchers have consistently found that children who have larger vocabularies and a greater understanding of spoken language at a young age tend to do better on measures of reading ability later in life (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001).



Strategies for Promoting Children's Early Literacy Development

In recent years, several efforts have been undertaken to summarize important research on children's emergent literacy development with the goal of providing educators

and parents with research-based instructional strategies for enhancing children's literacy experiences during their preschool years. Two of the most comprehensive syntheses were released in 1998 and include the National Research Council's *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow et al., 1998), and the joint position statement of the IRA and the NAEYC on early literacy (IRA/NAEYC, 1998).



In both of the above works, the authors suggest that a single approach to promoting children's literacy development would not be in the best interest of children. They argue that because children come from such a wide array of backgrounds, including having diverse language and literacy experiences, the best approach for facilitating children's early literacy development is to employ a range of teaching strategies. The National Research Council (Snow et al., 1998) suggests that the main emphasis for preschool programs should be to create environments that are rich in language and literacy activities.

The following strategies have been shown to be effective at promoting children's early literacy development:

Read aloud to children in an interactive style. Many experts believe that the single most important teaching strategy for promoting children's early literacy development across multiple domains is reading aloud to children in an interactive style that engages them as active learners (Halle, Calkins, Berry, & Johnson, 2003). Reading is activity that stimulates children's imaginations, enhances their vocabularies and print awareness, introduces them to components of stories, and provides them with useful information about the surrounding world. As you reflect on your current reading practices in your program, consider the following suggestions:

- Set aside a special time each day to read to children. Children who are read to frequently tend to become superior readers and do better in school. If you set aside a special time each day to read to the group, they will come to expect it and look forward to it with eager expectations.
- Make reading time a fun experience for the children. Show enthusiasm when you read. Change your voice to match the characters in the story.

- Help children learn as you read. Ask children questions about the book as you read. Point out words, letters, numbers, colors, and shapes. One approach developed by Whitehurst and his colleagues that has been shown to be effective is “dialogic reading.” This approach involves asking analytical questions (e.g., what is the child doing in the book?), providing feedback (e.g., praising, correcting errors), and adapting your reading style to the children in your program. When children are encouraged to become active participants rather than passive listeners, they are more likely to experience improvements in their vocabularies and comprehension abilities.



- Have children help you select books. Children will be more interested in the process if they have a say in what books are read; however, select age-appropriate books.
- Read and re-read a variety of books. Read storybooks, informational books, alphabet and number books, and nursery rhymes.

Teach children about books and other print materials.

The parents of the children in your care may or may not work with their children to help them understand why books and other print materials are important. You have a great opportunity to enhance their knowledge of print materials by sharing with them some key concepts.

Examples include:

- How to handle books properly. Children learn how to use books, not only by what you tell them, but also how you interact with them (e.g., how you hold the book, how you turn pages, etc.).
- How to recognize features of a book (e.g., books have a front and back cover, top and bottom, and title, author, and illustrator).
- Teaching children that printed letters and words run from left to right across the page and from top to bottom in the English language. These concepts can be taught effectively during one-on-one and small group reading times. As you're reading to children, place your finger under the beginning word in a sentence and follow along as you read.

Familiarize children with letters of the alphabet and their corresponding sounds. As mentioned earlier, a key factor in the development of children's early literacy skills is knowledge of the alphabet and their corresponding sounds. As you work with the children in your care, help them to:

- Learn to say the alphabet.
- Recognize and name letters.
- Distinguish between capital and lowercase letters.
- Understand the sounds that letters make.
- Recognize beginning letters in familiar words (e.g., their names).

Alphabet books and alphabet puzzles are effective tools for helping children begin to identify and distinguish between the various letters of the alphabet (IRA/NAEYC, 1998).

Arrange the child care environment so that children have an opportunity to interact with books and other print materials. Children need to be exposed to a variety of books and other print materials. They also need to be given opportunities to interact with the materials on their own. Studies have found that a minimum of five books per child is necessary to provide a basic print-rich environment for children. The following suggestions can help you create a print-rich environment:

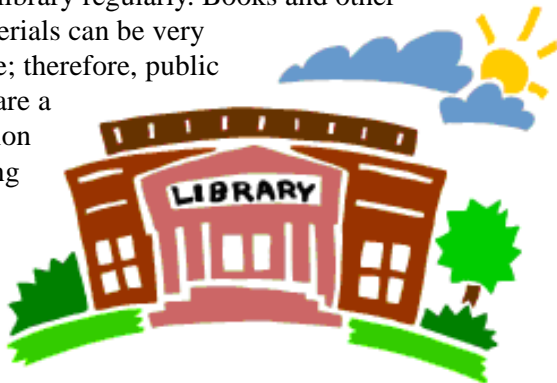
- Build up a large collection of children's books and other print materials.



- Arrange the classroom or child care environment in a way that encourages children to interact with print resources. Studies indicate that how a room is physically arranged can promote or hinder a child's ability and/or willingness to interact with books. Set aside a clearly identified space where children can look at books and other print materials. Make sure children can access these materials on their own if so desired.
- Label items and different parts of the room(s). Children learn a great deal about reading by being exposed to

labels, signs, and other kinds of print they see around them. Clearly label objects, signs, and bulletin boards in your facility. Children tend to incorporate literacy into their dramatic play when the environment is rich in print.

- Visit the library regularly. Books and other print materials can be very expensive; therefore, public libraries are a great option for gaining access to high-quality children's literature. Organize special field trips to the library, and allow the children to explore. Encourage the children's parents to obtain a library card for their children.



Provide opportunities for children to experiment with writing. Early writing activities, even if rudimentary, significantly contribute to children's early literacy development. To promote early writing activities:

- Keep writing materials, including paper, pencils, crayons, and markers, handy.
- Encourage children to scribble, draw, and write letters.
- For infants and toddlers, allow them to experiment with crayons, markers, and large paper.
- For preschool-age children, encourage them to incorporate writing activities into their dramatic play (e.g., making a grocery list).
- Help children learn to write their names.

Involve children in activities that promote children's phonemic awareness and oral language skills. Phonemic awareness (i.e., a child's understanding and conscious awareness that speech is composed of identifiable units) is strongly linked to children's subsequent reading achievement. The IRA and the NAEYC recommend that educators use "songs, fingerplays, games, poems, and stories in which phonemic patterns such as rhyme and alliteration are salient" to development in this critical area (IRA/NAEYC, 1998, p. 9). Singing or saying familiar nursery rhymes and choosing books that focus on sounds, rhyming, and alliteration are two specific strategies for promoting children's phonemic awareness.

The only way that children will learn about the sounds of language is when they are exposed to language. The moment they are born, children need relationships with caring adults who engage them in frequent verbal interactions that support their oral language development. By making a conscious effort to talk to, sing to, and play with the children in your care, you facilitate children's oral language abilities and lay an important foundation for later literacy learning.

Dr. Stephen Green is an Assistant Professor and Child Development Specialist with Texas AgriLife Extension Service. His areas of speciality include child development, child care, and father-child relationships.

References

- Adams, M. (1990). *Beginning to read*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Barnett, W.S. (2001). Preschool education for economically disadvantaged children: Effects on reading achievement and related outcomes. In S.B. Neuman, & D.K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research* (pp. 421-443), New York: The Guilford Press.
- Halle, T., Calkins, J., Berry, D., & Johnson, R. (2003). Promoting language and literacy in early childhood care and education settings. *Child Care and Early Education Research Connections* [On-line: <http://www.childcareresearch.org>].
- International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998). Learning to read and write: Developmentally appropriate practices for young children. *Young Children*, 53, 30-46.
- Snow, C.E., Burns, M.S., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Whitehurst, G.J., & Lonigan, C.J. (2001). Emergent literacy: Development from prereaders to readers. In S.B. Neuman, & D.K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research* (pp. 11-29), New York: The Guilford Press.

Child Care Center Connections Editorial Staff Texas AgriLife Extension Service

Stephen Green, Ph.D.
Managing Editor
Susan Lee, B.A.
Design Editor