



Why are Early Literacy Skills Important?

Authors:

Kelsie Muller, MS
Extension Specialist
Human Development
and Family Science
College of Health and
Human Sciences
Purdue University

Inga Nordgren, MS
Graduate Research Assistant
Department of Human
Development and Family Science
College of Health and
Human Sciences
Purdue University

Remember your favorite storybook as a child? Some memories may be about the story, or the experience. Perhaps closeness with a caregiver or a family member is a friendly memory. This experience may have instilled a love for reading or taught you important early literacy skills. Families and caregivers are key participants in helping children develop the skills needed for future success in school and life.

Reading aloud with children is one of the most important things you can do to help a child succeed academically. Reading skills are right behind early math skills as one of the strongest predictors of later achievement in school! When done often, reading with children – also called shared reading – can lead to emergent literacy (i.e., the skills that provide the foundation for how to read). These include²:

Print awareness: Understanding that print carries meaning and works in certain ways (e.g., knowing books contain letters and words; that print is typically read from left to right, top to bottom).

Alphabetic knowledge: Recognizing, naming, and identifying the sounds of letters (e.g., B is the capital letter B and sounds like “bee”; i is the lowercase I and sounds like “eye”).

Phonologic awareness: Recognizing and using the sounds of a language (e.g., identifying words that rhyme, counting

syllables, recognizing alliterations).

Vocabulary knowledge: Understanding words and their meanings (e.g., ground is what we stand on; down means closer to the ground).

Reading with children creates an understanding of how books work and introduces children to new vocabulary – sometimes even after a single reading³. Adults change their own language to encourage learning (i.e., speaking slower, enunciating more, using repetition) and promote skill development (i.e., using longer, more complex sentences) as a child ages⁴. Focusing on reading skills when children are young can reduce the possibility of reading problems later⁵. There is evidence that the number of words a child hears is important. The number of conversational turns that take place between children and adults matters too⁶. This highlights the importance of being in dialogue with children. One way adults can enhance reading together is by engaging in a strategy called *dialogic reading*.

What is Dialogic Reading?

Dialogic reading is when adults support children’s participation by asking them questions about the story, making connections, and following the child’s lead. Making reading a conversation will create dialogue and get children actively involved.

Think of this as reading with a child and not to.

Dialogic reading simply means using children's books in interactive ways to have a "dialogue" or conversations with young children. Research confirms that this technique encourages and supports a variety of children's school readiness skills⁷. Children learn by doing; involve them in the activity as a reading partner.

How can you start using dialogic reading? On each page, try using open-ended questions such as "why" or "how" questions, or get creative on your own. Depending on the story, you might ask:

Who is going on this adventure? Why are they going on this adventure? Where do you think the bears will go next? How do you think the frog got so high on that log? Will they be in time to help their friends? Was that the nice thing to do?

Benefits of Reading with Children?

1. Prepares children for future academic success
2. Strengthens the bond between you and the child
3. Supports cognitive development
4. Improves literacy skills
5. Increases vocabulary
6. Develops a love for reading

Making Early Literacy Fun

To keep conversations fun, you can incorporate songs or rhymes or even become a sports broadcaster by describing and explaining everything you see and do. Asking questions, expanding on words, and introducing novel or interesting words into a child's day-to-day help children learn. Back-and-forth exchanges or making connections through higher-level thinking can help you and encourage a language-rich environment⁸.

Let the child be the guide. Give them a selection of books to choose from, let them turn the pages, ask them to alter the ending, or encourage them to tell their own story. The most valuable takeaway for building early literacy skills is to keep talking, keep reading, keep asking questions, and keep being curious about what children have to say.

Additional Resources

<https://www.readingrockets.org/reading-101>

<https://davidpurpura.com/educational-picture-books>

<https://hhs.purdue.edu/center-for-early-learning/>

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