

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 skills children have when entering school is an important predictor of their school readiness, social adjustment and academic success.

What are areas of early literacy that care and education professionals 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 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 interesting and engaging. A positive feeling toward literacy experiences can develop when children and adults read stories, sing songs, listen to music, have rich conversations, and engage in games, play, and explore together.

How can care and education professionals support children's early literacy development?

Encourage literacy development by helping each child share ideas through language and print. Intentionally choose a variety of early literacy activities to help children with differing physical, cultural, developmental, and communication abilities, and literacy experiences participate and learn.

Children communicate in many different ways. While most young children use words, some children with disabilities are not able to talk or communicate verbally. Be informed, get creative, learn about and use multiple forms of communication to support all children's literacy development.

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.
- Find developmentally appropriate computer software to provide children with another way to listen to stories, learn interesting words, respond to directions and communicate.
- Invite guests and/or take field trips to provide children with new life experiences and language.
- Make up language "clue" games. Ask children to name the "mystery fruit" for dessert: *"It is round, juicy, and it has a peel."*

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.

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.

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 all children develop knowledge, skills, and an excitement about the reading and writing process.

Where to learn more:

See "[Word Play All Day - Early Literacy in Action — Selected Resources](http://ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/literacyres/)" online at <http://ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/literacyres/>

See "[Word Play All Day - Early Literacy in Action — Virtual Toolkit](http://ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/literacyvtk/)" online at <http://ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/literacyvtk/>



Paul R. LePage, Governor

Department of Health
and Human Services
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Mary C. Mayhew, Commissioner

This update and expansion of the Growing Ideas Resources for Guiding Early Childhood Practices was completed by the University of Maine Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies with funding from the Maine Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Child and Family Services, Early Childhood Division. © 2011

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Updated: 02/27/14