

A BRIDGE TO READING AND WRITING LITERACY

Developing Oral Language Skills in Young Children

By Jan Jenner

What is a “literate” person? Historically, reading and writing literacy has been defined in terms of the following skills:

- reading and writing one’s own name;
- reading and writing (with understanding) a short, simple statement about one’s life;
- reading the daily newspaper.

Today’s expectations, however, encompass more than the ability to read, write, speak, and listen. These expectations include use of oral and written language to make sense of the world and to communicate, problem-solve, and participate in decision-making. The foundation for these literacy skills is language and an understanding of how language works.

At the White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development held in July 2001, Dr. Patricia Kuhl of The Center for Mind, Brain, and Learning at the University of Washington talked about her research on language development in the infant brain. Field studies conducted in Japan, Russia, Sweden, Finland, France, and the U.S. show that as infants get older, they no longer respond to foreign languages. As Kuhl explains, “By 12 months of age, young infants are very focused on the patterns of their own language . . . They become more culture-bound, just like us. This specialization is essential for language learning, and illustrates how powerful early learning is” (from “Born To Learn: Language, Reading, and the Brain of the Child,” available at www.ed.gov/PressReleases/07-2001/07262001-kuhl.html). By the time they are 1 year of age, infants are familiar with many language components, including sounds, sound combinations, and the tempo and cadence of words and phrases. Children’s source of information about these language components is their parents and caregivers.

A National Research Council report titled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (available at www.nap.edu/html/prdyc/ch4.html) describes studies that explore family factors that influence children’s language and literacy development. These factors include parents’ beliefs,

attitudes, and behaviors about reading, including answering children’s questions, employing literacy concepts, responding to children’s behavior toward print, providing reading material, and conducting language activities with their children. Children whose parents sing or chant nursery rhymes with them not only help children develop a positive view of reading, but an understanding of sound patterns and what those patterns look like in print. Because a child’s knowledge of oral language precedes and forms the basis for knowledge of written language, it is vital that those who work with young children be aware of and help develop children’s oral language skills.

Promoting Reading and Writing Literacy

Family habits and traditions regarding oral language lay the groundwork for children’s ability to apply language principles to written language.

To assist young children’s oral language development:

- Provide a warm and rewarding atmosphere when using oral language.
- Use language in a social, child-centered context.
- Use language that is meaningful and purposeful.
- Present the entire language system at once.
- Provide opportunities to learn simultaneously rules for both language and communication.

Source: An address by Dorothy Strickland titled “The Role of Parents and Grandparents in Children’s Cognitive Development: Focus on Language and Literacy” delivered at the White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development, July 27, 2001. Available online at www.ed.gov/PressReleases/07-2001/07272001-strickland.html.

(See the sidebar that accompanies this article for more on how parents and caretakers can help young children develop skills that promote reading and writing literacy.)

The Reading First initiative established a national imperative: all students must read on grade level by grade 3. Research shows that there are tools available to help us meet this challenge. It will take active partnerships among researchers, schools, and families, however, if that goal is to be attained.

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