



POLICY BRIEF

Translating early childhood research evidence to inform policy and practice

Literacy in Early Childhood

Most children naturally develop verbal language skills by hearing others speak and by observing the communication process. However, the ability to read and write the *printed* text that represents spoken language – that is, to be literate (American Medical Association [AMA], 1999; Baker, 1999; Rowe & Rowe, 1999) – does not develop as a matter of course. Whether ‘literacy’ extends beyond the common definition of the ability to read and write to encompass all aspects of language in use in a range of social and cultural settings is widely debated. Such debate has resulted in important contributions to the study of literacy (see Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2000, 2001; Makin et al, 2006), however, the primary focus of this Brief is the development of literacy skills related to reading, and to a lesser extent writing. Reading and writing are key skills that contribute to children’s success at school and *after* school.

It is increasingly recognised that skills for literacy should be developed from birth, and not from the commencement of formal schooling. This Policy Brief emphasises the need to include an often overlooked and yet critical stage in a child’s journey toward literacy: the years prior to school entry (birth to five years of age). This Brief also highlights the important role of early childhood professionals, services and communities in supporting families to provide the conditions and experiences necessary for all children to develop a sound literacy foundation prior to school entry.

Why is this issue important?

Literacy is one of the most important foundations for success in school and life (ABS, 2006). Disturbingly, the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Aspects of Literacy Survey found that approximately 46% of Australians aged 15 to 74 years had very poor to poor ‘prose literacy’ (ability to read documents), and 47% had very poor to poor ‘document literacy’ (ability to understand and use information from a variety of text sources) (ABS, 2006).

Recently, Australia’s literacy performance against international standards was detailed in the 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study. The study indicated that 14% of Australian students aged 15 had failed to reach a baseline level of reading proficiency considered essential for future development in reading and other areas of knowledge acquisition, while 21% were functioning at the minimum baseline proficiency level. While this poor outcome was not limited to Australia, five out of 57 countries achieved significantly higher results: Korea; Finland; Hong Kong, China; Canada and New Zealand (Thomson & De Bortoli, 2008).

A poor foundation in literacy prior to school entry not only reduces the likelihood of later success in literacy, but also increases the risk of children ‘dropping out’ of formal education. Poor reading and writing skills are associated with lower self esteem, poorer educational and social outcomes,

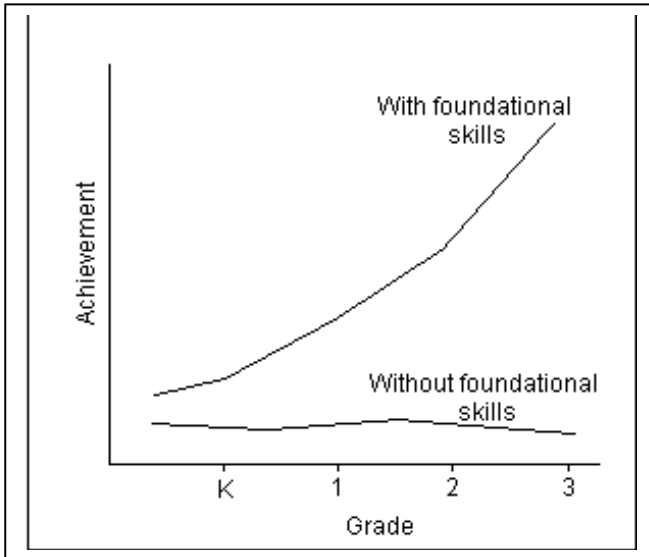
and higher rates of unemployment, welfare dependence and teenage pregnancy (Silverstein et al, 2002). Reading difficulties disproportionately affect children from disadvantaged homes (ABS, 1996; Freebody & Ludwig, 1995; Needlman et al, 1991), and those children who experience difficulties in learning to read are unlikely to catch up (Stanovich, 1986). Poor reading levels can also impact negatively on individuals’ health (AMA, 1999). All of these factors contribute to a perpetuation of the poverty cycle.

In contrast, literacy has many benefits for children, families, communities and society as a whole (ABS, 2006). High levels of literacy have been linked to increased academic and occupational success, increased self esteem and motivation to learn, participation in and a commitment to education, socially acceptable behaviour, positive regard for one’s abilities and prospects leading to empowerment, a reduction in the need for programs required to address illiteracy and a subsequent reduction in the social and financial costs associated with illiteracy.

What does the research tell us?

Some children come to school better off than their peers when it comes to early literacy skills. Students who start out with optimal literacy foundational skills tend to thrive and grow academically, while less advantaged students tend to get left behind (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Cumulative effects of reading



Source: Stanovich, 1986

A number of factors that facilitate a successful transition from pre-literacy to literacy have been identified and formalised into a framework known as *emergent literacy* (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001):

1. Language ability (speaking, listening and understanding), including vocabulary development and comprehension of the narratives, stories and conversations one is exposed to
2. Letter identification/knowledge (knowing the names and corresponding sounds of letters)
3. Phonological awareness/sensitivity (being able to identify and manipulate sounds in spoken language)
4. Conventions of print, or understanding the basic concepts of reading and writing text (for example, the left-to-right, top-to-bottom direction of print on a page and the progression of print from front to back across pages)
5. Literacy-promoting environments (keeping books in the home, conducting home literacy activities such as shared book reading)

Families and educators that draw their children's attention to print in the everyday world and to the uses of reading and writing in everyday life contribute to a literacy-promoting environment.

Research supports encouraging emergent literacy skills rather than treating poor literacy later. Many children who struggle with literacy in school have shown signs of poor emergent literacy skills prior to school entry, lending support to the idea of a 'critical period' for developing emergent literacy skills (Baydar et al, 1993; DEST, 2005).

Literacy has historically been conceptualised as a skill taught to children primarily by school teachers when children reach school age. This conception

carries with it four associated assumptions for literacy acquisition; that literacy development starts at school, the 'context' is the classroom, the 'messenger' is the teacher and the 'resources' consist of those available to the teacher in an academic context. The assumption implicit here is that children's years prior to school entry have no or little impact on literacy development and that all children commence school with equal opportunity to develop literacy skills.

In light of research highlighting the importance of developing literacy skills in children from birth to five years and the link between language development and literacy skills, this historical view of literacy acquisition has been reframed.

Messengers

Families, caregivers, early years teachers and school teachers play a critical role in the development of children's early literacy skills, as well as influencing children's life-long attitudes towards reading (Evan et al, 2000; Rickleman & Henk, 1991).

The extent to which families can support early literacy depends on their level of engagement with the child, their own level of education and literacy practices and their socio-economic status (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; DeBaryshe, 1992; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003, 2004). Research shows that children whose families are actively involved in literacy activities have larger vocabularies (Hart & Risley 1995), faster vocabulary growth over time (Huttenlocher et al, 1991) and better cognitive abilities overall than their counterparts (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002).

Context

While schools are specifically designed to facilitate the formal learning of reading and writing, studies have shown that the quality of the home and the quality of early years services' environments are the most important factors in literacy development (Hood et al, 2008; Melhuish et al, 2008; Weigel et al, 2006). Research shows significant correlations between preschool-aged children's language abilities and their literacy environment, including access to materials such as books, alphabet materials, crayons and paper; introduction to the local library; exposure to family, caregiver or teacher literacy-related activities such as reading newspapers and street signs; and access to environments that are language rich involving interesting conversations, stories and explanations (DEST, 2005).

Studies exploring literacy in disadvantaged families found that such homes were limited in the provision of literacy-promoting environments;

meaning that fewer books were found in the home, significantly less time was spent 'reading aloud' and providing the child with general language exposure and there were fewer library memberships and visits to the library (Anderson & Stokes, 1984; Teale, 1986). However, more recent studies have found that children from low-income families that provide or participate in higher levels of literacy activity (e.g. reading, visits to the library) can and do develop some emergent literacy skills (Evan et al, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Senechal et al, 1996).

This suggests that a literacy-rich home environment can override some of the educational disadvantages that lower-income families often face. *Let's Read*, an initiative of the Centre for Community Child Health, is one example of a program designed to promote literacy to all children, regardless of their socio-economic status. This program is being developed and implemented across Australia in partnership with The Smith Family.

Resources

Literacy activities found to be effective in improving and developing literacy skills include regular shared reading, selection of appropriate books, use of appropriate reading styles, the reciting of nursery rhymes and singing of songs, and the use of a variety of interactive literacy games.

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Shared reading. Regular shared reading from a young age has consistently been shown to correlate positively with language development (Senechal & Cornell, 1993). A study of children 18 months and older found significantly higher *receptive* and *expressive* vocabulary in children who were read to more often (High et al, 2000). Shared reading has also been found to have a significant impact on vocabulary development, listening comprehension and understanding of print concepts (High et al, 2000; Senechal & Cornell, 1993).

Book selection. There is growing research to demonstrate that the types of books selected to read with children impact on their emergent literacy (Stahl, 2003). *Predictable* or *patterned* books and *alphabet* books are the types of books most likely to engage young children in the activity of shared reading. They also assist in the development of word identification and help children develop an awareness of how letters map onto sounds (Jackson et al, 1988; Lonigan et al, 2000; Stahl, 2003).

Reading style. The style in which books are read is found to enhance the established language benefits of shared reading. In particular, reading techniques that encourage a dialogue with the child such as *interactive questioning* and *shared story telling* promote a number of important emergent literacy skills (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000; Huebner, 2000). The simple action of *finger pointing* at words or phrases during storybook reading is found to assist children to acquire important skills such as the ability to track print, and develop alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness and word recognition skills (Morris, 1993; Stahl, 2003).

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Studies have found that preschool-aged children with poor expressive vocabulary skills have improved their expressive skills, as well as their receptive skills and linguistic complexity, when they participate in reading groups using dialogic reading (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000; Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992).

Exposure to print. While deliberate exposure to print in the home or in an early years service is important, there are also other more incidental exposures to print that can be effectively utilised to assist children's early literacy development. Examples include: reading and interacting with environmental print such as road signs, logos/slogans, billboards and television advertisements; reading newspapers, manuals, maps, telephone directories, shop signs, labels and packaging; spelling and defining words; colouring and tracing letters; and making use of the computer for spelling and writing activities (Garton & Pratt, 1998; Ortiz et al, 1999).

Language games and songs. The use of interactive language games and song singing as part of a daily routine also provides opportunities for children to enhance their repertoire of developing literacy skills. Games such as 'I spy', card games and the reciting of nursery rhymes provide opportunities to develop listening and speaking skills which in turn are key to the development of vocabulary, letter identification and knowledge, and phonological awareness (Huebner, 2000; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

The singing of 'learning' songs, such as alphabet songs, provides children with examples of rhyme, rhythm and repetition and may act as an effective memory aid (Butzlaff, 2000; Forgeard et al, 2008).

What are the implications of the research?

- A historical view of literacy acquisition can fail to recognise the links between language development, early literacy activities, emergent literacy skills and later literacy success. Literacy acquisition is a process that begins from birth and requires input from families, caregivers and early years services teachers as well as school teachers.
- Literacy acquisition can no longer be thought of as the exclusive responsibility of schools. Families, communities, and health and educational professionals all have a role to play in ensuring that materials to promote literacy attainment are available to all children, and that all children are encouraged to use or explore these materials.
- Children entering school without emergent literacy skills may struggle to keep up with their peers' rate of literacy acquisition. This can affect children's engagement with school and in turn, affect overall successes in education and life, perpetuating a cycle of low literacy. However, the development of emergent literacy skills *is* attainable for most children, even those from disadvantaged families.
- Materials to encourage the emergence of literacy skills can be found in everyday surroundings, such as parks, shopping centres and community centres. Community libraries offer many free services such as access to reading materials and computers, and 'story-time' sessions for children. All families need to be made aware of and welcomed into these services.
- Families and early years professionals can encourage the development of emergent literacy skills in children through shared book reading, exposing children to various forms of print, playing language games and singing songs. Using these methods, literacy acquisition can become an enjoyable family or early years centre activity.

Considerations for policy and programs

- Literacy promotion programs need to be consistently aligned and consider the links between language development and literacy acquisition, and the importance of the early years (including prior to entering school) in developing emergent literacy skills.
- Literacy skills need to be proactively developed from birth; early literacy experiences are crucial to promoting literacy success in schools.
- All professionals (including child health nurses, early years services employees, teachers and community health care professionals) who have direct contact with families should be versed in the importance and development of emergent literacy skills.
- Families should be supported and encouraged to implement literacy activities, such as shared reading, in the home.
- Varied literacy activities, such as language games or computer usage, should be made available in order to increase children's interest and motivation to learn literacy skills.

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References

A full list of references and further reading used in the development of this Policy Brief is available from:

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