

Early Literacy: Building the Foundation for Lifelong Learning

FACT SHEET

2026 Annual Lesson Series



It's never too early to help children develop the skills they need to be successful in life. Literacy skills are critical for brain development, school readiness, and lifelong success. During the early years of a child's life, parents and other adults can all play a role in supporting children's love of reading and give them a head start on lifelong success.

Why Early Literacy Matters

Children grow a lot before they even start school, and how adults talk and play with them before the age of 5 has a big impact on how their brains develop.

It's never too early to expose children to the enjoyment of reading. Talking to and reading with children strengthens the connections in their brains that help them learn, talk, and get ready to read.

Reading books with children and engaging them in conversation strengthens brain pathways and sets the stage for learning. Developing kids' early language not only affects school performance — it also helps with cognitive development, social skills, and their ability to understand and regulate emotions.

Reading introduces new words and ideas, helping children think and solve problems. Sharing a book together strengthens the bond between child and caregiver. Additionally, turning pages and pointing to pictures improves motor skills. You don't need special tools to support literacy. You can talk to your child about everyday activities, like cooking or going for a walk. Point out objects, read signs, and use descriptive words while you're in different places like the home, the park, or even the grocery store. These little choices add up over time!

Key Early Literacy Milestones

From the moment babies are born, they begin to absorb language and learn through their interactions with people around them.

Birth to 12 Months: During the first year, babies begin to develop foundational literacy skills through listening and observing their surroundings. They coo, babble, and respond to voices. They also begin to explore books by reaching, grasping, and even mouthing them. You can support their development at this stage by:

- Talking to them about what you're doing throughout the day, including changing diapers.

- Reading books with bold, high-contrast images to capture their attention.
- Encouraging back-and-forth vocalizations by responding to coos and babbles like a conversation.
- Providing board books for them to explore through touch and sight.

12 to 24 Months: At this stage, toddlers begin to understand more words and may start pointing to pictures and mimicking sounds. They recognize common objects and begin to use some words and phrases. You can encourage them at this stage by:

- Reading simple picture books with repetitive phrases and rhymes.
- Labeling objects in daily activities to build basic vocabulary.
- Singing songs and nursery rhymes with them.
- Encouraging participation in reading by asking simple questions like, “Where is the dog?”

24 to 36 Months: As children approach their third birthday, they begin developing stronger pre-reading skills. They should start recognizing letters, understand rhyming, and retell simple stories in their own words. You can support them at this stage by:

- Asking open-ended questions about a book, like, “What do you think happens next?”
- Pointing out letters and their sounds when reading.
- Encouraging pretend play that involves a story or plot.
- Pointing out and reading words in the environment like signs and labels.

Everyday Experiences and Outings

Newborns know the sound of their parents’ and siblings’ voices. Therefore, those voices are familiar and calming to them. Children need to hear language as babies – it is how they learn to talk. Terms such as parallel talk and self-talk are used to explain ways parents and others can talk to babies. Parallel talk is talking to your baby about what they are paying

attention to or what they are doing. For example, if the baby is kicking their legs, talk to them about how they are kicking their legs so fast and strong. If the baby is smiling at you, the caregiver can say, “Oh look at that pretty smile!” as they are smiling back to the child.

Self-talk can also be used when talking to your baby. Self-talk is defined as talking about what you are doing. For example, if mom is changing the baby’s diaper, then mom can say, “I’m going to change your diaper. It is wet. We will get a nice, clean, dry diaper on you, so you feel better!” The important thing is to just talk to your child about everything since that is how they will learn the language and eventually be able to read. It is exposure to language that will help them be successful. Don’t be afraid to use silly voices with young children, even when talking about wet diapers. Infants and toddlers pay more attention to big differences in the pitch you use to talk, so it’s okay to exaggerate the highs and lows to show emotions like disgust, interest, joy, and others.

It is also important for babies and children to have new experiences. New experiences help them learn. This also opens opportunities for language and literacy learning. Going to stores, parks, museums, and libraries introduces babies and children to new experiences. It can give them a chance to learn across many developmental areas, not just language and literacy. In the grocery store, children can learn about healthy eating, names of foods, numbers, colors, and counting. When they go to the park they get to move their muscles, which is crucial for brain development, but also gives them a chance to learn new words, talk to new people, and learn proper social skills. It is important to note that if toddlers or preschoolers are taken to other places, but are still using electronic devices, these real-world skills are not practiced and, therefore, do not develop. If their focus is on an electronic device then they don’t have those learning opportunities that are right in front of them.

Make Your Own Book

There are many different ways for parents and caregivers to make their own books. Some of these include a touchy-feely book that might be used for young babies to stimulate the sensory system. As the child grows and is practicing more tummy time, an accordion book that can be propped up will visually stimulate the baby. Next, as babies get mobile, a book made from a cylindrical container with pictures on

it can give them visual stimulation and encourage movement by the book moving when they touch it. Finally, ziplock bag books allow changing up pictures and stories as the child's interest and age permit.

There are many different reasons to make your own books. When you make your own books, you can provide more developmentally appropriate books and change them as your child grows. You can also change the book based on the child's interests and/or what parents and caregivers would like them to be learning. Making your own books allows for creativity for the caregiver and child.

Brush, Book, Bed: Make Reading Aloud a Habit

The American Academy of Pediatrics promotes the combination of healthy habits with education habits in their program, Brush, Book, Bed. The program is recommended for birth to age 6. It begins with brushing teeth, followed by reading a book (or two), and finally going to bed at a regular time each night. This is an easy program to remember, and hopefully helps create a routine for children that includes reading to them every day. Of course, reading doesn't have to always happen at night, but finding a way to read aloud to your children every day gives a big return on investment. Children who are read to every day are more likely to be successful in school, develop vocabulary, learn letters and their name, and be able to retell a story. The takeaway is to find a way to make reading to your children part of your everyday routine.

Reading Aloud

- Practice identifying letters and their sounds.
- Use storytelling to enhance comprehension and narrative skills.
- Introduce environmental print (ex: labels, signs) for real-world connections.

Best Practices for Families and Caregivers

Supporting early language development is one of the most important things caregivers can do to help children become successful readers. Consider how the following best practices can be incorporated into a regular routine. Setting a reminder or a calendar invite on your phone can be a good way to get into a new habit with your child.

Daily Reading: Read with your child for at least 15 minutes a day to build vocabulary and strengthen bonds. Choose books that are engaging and interactive. It's okay to re-read favorites. Repetition helps children learn.

Talk and Listen: Engage in back-and-forth conversations, even with infants. Describe what you see and do throughout the day to help children develop language and listening skills.

Play with Words: Use songs, rhymes, and word games to make learning fun. Singing helps children hear the rhythm and sounds of language.

Create a Print-Rich Environment: Provide books, labels, and printed materials at home. Seeing words in their surroundings helps children recognize letters and understand that print carries meaning.

Be a Good Role Model: Children who see their caregivers reading are more likely to develop a love for books. Show excitement about reading and let children see you enjoying books and written materials.

These activities can help caregivers support children's development of strong language skills that will serve as the foundation for academic and social skills they need later.

Indicators of Potential Delays

Although children develop at their own pace, there are some things you can watch for that mean they might need more support. Pay attention if you notice:

- Limited or no joint attention.
 - This is when parents and children are looking at the same thing (like a book) and sharing the experience.
- Limited or no response to sounds or voices by 6 months.
- Lack of babbling by 12 months.
- Difficulty recognizing familiar words or following simple instructions by age 2.
- Limited interest in books or printed materials by age 3.

Early intervention is key in addressing developmental concerns. If a child is not meeting the expected milestones, you should reach out to your pediatrician, an early childhood educator, or a speech-language pathologist for further evaluation. Many early intervention programs offer free assessments and support to help children catch up. Typically, better outcomes are likely if support is provided sooner rather than later. You know your child better than anyone else and are the best advocate for them.

Resources and Support

There are many resources available to help caregivers support early literacy development. These programs provide guidance, free books, and educational activities to encourage literacy at home.

Parents as Teachers/Early Head Start/Head Start: These programs offer developmental screenings, home visits, and early education support for families.

- parentsasteachers.org/program-locator/
- headstart.gov/center-locator/embedded?redirect=eclkc

Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library: This program provides free books to children from birth to age 5, helping build a strong home library. Available in all counties in Kansas.

- kschildrenscabinet.org/imaginationlibrary/

Local Libraries: Most public libraries offer free story times, literacy programs, and access to a wide selection of books for young children.

- libraryfinder.org/

Zero to Three: A website dedicated to providing research-based information on early childhood development and learning.

- zerotothree.org

Reach Out and Read: A pediatric literacy program where doctors provide books to young children and encourage parents to read aloud.

- reachoutandread.org/

Infant Toddler Early Intervention Services: These programs offer evaluations and support for children who may have developmental delays.

- www.itsofks.org/

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