

# Supporting early literacy in early childhood education



ECE resources

Literacy is the way that we communicate with each other using symbol systems. Traditionally the term 'literacy' has been used to refer to skills in reading, writing and maths, but many in the field of early childhood education now consider 'literacies' as encompassing a wider range of ways that young children communicate meaning with others including oral language, play, movement, mark-making and technologies. Literacies vary across cultures, and children learn to communicate in ways that reflect their home learning environments. The development of literacy begins from birth, well before children formally learn to read, write or talk. This is sometimes referred to as emergent literacy. Teachers, family members and peers all play a significant role in helping young children to develop literacy in early childhood education settings.

## How can early childhood education teachers support early literacy development?

The development of children's language and literacy skills are essential for their cognitive development, literacy achievement and academic skills, as well as for their social skills and mental wellbeing. Research shows that teacher-child interactions are a critical aspect of supporting children's language and literacy learning in educational settings. Teachers can foster and extend the development of early literacy development in many ways.

### Oral language and social interaction

Teachers and peers are communicative partners who play an important role in supporting children's early literacy development in ECE settings. [Communication](#) encompasses oral language and social interaction, including the understanding and use of spoken words (receptive and expressive language) as well as non-verbal aspects of communication such as body movements, gestures and facial expression. Communication also involves the sounds used in language (phonological awareness).

Engaging in reciprocal interactions provides opportunities for children's oral language and social skills to develop. This supports literacy development, because **children learn that communicating face-to-face with others involves using symbols that represent and express their thoughts and feelings**, just as in other forms of literacy. Spoken or signed words are examples of symbolic systems that represent concepts such as people, places, actions and things. Gestures like pointing or waving are also symbolic actions that allow us to communicate our intended meanings. A child's vocabulary, encompassing both the words that they can understand and those they can use, is one important foundation underpinning early literacy development.

Interactive play provides an important context for young children to build their literacy skills, especially if teachers **intentionally provide play opportunities that extend language and communication through social relationships**. Through play, children can interact with their peers and adults using a range of symbolic forms of communication involving listening, taking turns and expressing themselves using their body movements, gestures, speech sounds, words, and printed pictures or words. Pretend and sociodramatic role play also provides children with the opportunity to take on roles and make up stories, linking characters to actions or events as their stories unfold.

## Listening and making sounds

Listening and speech-sound awareness (phonological awareness) are also an important foundation for literacy, particularly in terms of **supporting language comprehension and the understanding of the sound system needed for later spelling and reading skills**. Locating and identifying environmental sounds in the presence of other background noise is a playful way of introducing the notion of listening to speech sounds in words and sentences. Stop what you are doing every so often and pause for at least five seconds, asking children to listen: 'what can you hear?' You can do this while you are inside or outside. You might hear traffic noises, people talking, the wind, rain on the roof, music playing, or the phone ringing.

Point out the noises, sounds and rhyming words you can hear as you are singing, playing, talking and reading with children (for example, 'The cat sat on the mat... hey, cat and hat rhyme!'). Play around with making different sounds and noises too (for example, in Old MacDonald, 'The cow says "moo" – can you make that noise too?'). Encourage children to think about the sounds they can hear in words, and see if they can think of more ('What else starts with M? Does anyone have a name that starts with M?'). Think up silly sentences that use alliteration or start with the same sound ('My mum makes muddy muffins!'). It is important to keep this fun, rather than the repetitive drilling of sounds and letters!

## Engaging with a range of texts

Texts can be oral, visual and aural. They are forms of communication that can be spoken, sung, read, written and listened to in different languages and modes. Children learn about literacy by **exploring their senses of looking, hearing, touch and through movement**. Waiata (songs), rhymes, poems and purakau (oral stories) all include important forms of literacy that children enjoy and that connect them to their family and cultural backgrounds. In all cultures there are songs and stories that primarily involve speaking and listening without using written texts, so it is important to talk to families about what kinds of literacy are important to them and experienced by children at home in order for them to be incorporated in ECE settings.

Songs and rhymes support early literacy by providing children with opportunities to listen and express themselves using rhythm, rhyme, gestures, sounds and words. Young children particularly enjoy action songs and rhymes with repeated gestures, noises, words such as 'Willoughby wallaby woo', 'Tohora nui', 'Slippery Fish', 'An old lady who swallowed a fly', and 'Old MacDonald'.

Telling stories and reading books allows for emotional closeness and connection while also **supporting the development of children's listening, imagination, vocabulary, comprehension, expression, print awareness and understanding of narrative forms of literacy**. Teachers can support children to remember and retell stories of everyday things they have experienced using objects, photos or videos (for example, 'Do you remember when we visited the beach? Look at all the shells you found'). Tell stories that include children as the main characters, using either real or fantasy versions. Reading books with children also allows them to develop concepts about print and reading. Find books that support children's interests or that they enjoy the most - this might include picture books, lift-the-flap books, Dr Seuss-style rhyming books, books about favourite characters, or photo albums and learning stories that have personal significance for children.

## Exploring modes of self-expression

Children develop literacies through exploring a variety of modes of self-expression in their home and ECE environments. Creative arts such as **drama, art and music are forms of communication that allow children to create meaning and express their thoughts, ideas and feelings in a range of symbolic ways**.

Mark-making, drawing, writing and gross-motor body movements are all forms of expression related to literacy development.

Sociodramatic play allows children opportunities to express themselves using representational objects, words and gestures as they take on roles and create scenarios and sequences of story events in collaboration with others. Music and dance also allow young children to listen and express themselves through singing or moving their bodies in meaningful, symbolic ways. Music, movement and dance enable children to explore and **develop literacy through the use of rhythm, patterns and sequencing, phonological awareness, vocabulary and story-telling** as they communicate with others in embodied ways. Find out from families if there are cultural or traditional styles of dance, movement or music that children experience at home (such as songs, haka, or sasa). Ask if there are symbolic gestures or words that carry cultural meaning and think about ways this might be incorporated into ECE centre activities to support literacy.

Access to print materials and forms of technology in play areas allows children to **explore aspects of using literacy for different social purposes** (such as making a shopping list, writing a birthday card, reading a book, sending an email, or searching for information on the internet). Children start to experiment with mark-making, creating patterns and using symbols (such as shapes and letters) through opportunities to draw, paint, write and talk. Providing open-ended, holistic experiences for children to paint, draw, sculpt or engage with visual images encourages them to represent and communicate meaning through exploring and manipulating a variety of materials.

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## Further reading

Makin, L. (2003). Creating positive literacy learning environments in early childhood. In N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood literacy* (pp. 327-337). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Makin, L., & Spedding, S. (2012). *Learning literacies birth to three: Positive approaches for early childhood educators*. Baulkham Hills, N.S.W.: Pademelon Press.

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