



**LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF**

# What Effective Pre-K Literacy Instruction Looks Like

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**Children are active  
constructors of meaning.**

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**T**he early years are times of wonder for children. Curious about everything, they seek to explore and understand their world. During these early years, they attempt to interpret their world and make meaning through pretend play, drawing, and conversations with those closest to them. Although these first steps toward literacy may not look much like what we consider literacy to be, children are actively trying to use and make sense of reading and writing long before they have mastered the technical skills associated with print.

For young children, reading and writing is literally a mixed medium, chock-full of different symbolic activities like singing, dancing, talking, and playing, and this has important ramifications for what literacy instruction should look like. If we take a narrow, somewhat limited view of reading, then we might say that it is all about learning the letter names, letter sounds, and the conventions of print. But if we begin to think from a child's point of view, literacy and the ways in which we should teach it include so much more.

What is important to recognize is that children are active constructors of meaning. Adults play a critical role in their lives by engaging their interests, creating challenging but achievable goals, supporting their efforts to understand through their many questions and unique interpretations. The adults in children's lives are their first literacy teachers, and educators' collaboration with families and communities is critical to children's well-being and their school success.

## **How Literacy Learning Begins**

Literacy learning begins early in young children's lives. As children gain facility with different symbol systems, they begin to develop the insight that specific kinds of marks—print—represent meanings. At first, they will use the physical and visual cues, like logos in environmental print, to determine what something says. Many parents will delight in watching their children recognize common labels in the grocery store and see how they are beginning to make the assumption that print is permanent. Soon after, children will begin to understand that within these signs, there are letters and sounds. Although it may seem as though some children acquire these understandings magically or on their own, studies suggest

that they are the beneficiaries of considerable, though playful and informal, adult guidance and instruction.

Nevertheless, there is great diversity in children's oral and written language development. Just like walking and crawling, the timetable for when children begin to talk and write varies dramatically. Some children will begin talking as early as 18 months; others, not until much later. Furthermore, children encounter many different resources and types and degrees of support for early reading and writing. Some children may have ready access to a wide range of books, whereas others may not. Some children will observe their parents writing and reading frequently, and others only occasionally. Some children will receive direct instruction, whereas others will receive much more casual, informal assistance.

What this means is children come to schools with many different experiences and skills. Consequently, no one teaching method or approach is likely to be the most effective for all children. Rather, good teachers bring into play a variety of teaching strategies that can encompass the great diversity of children in our schools. Excellent instruction builds on what children already know and can do, and it provides knowledge, skills, and dispositions for lifelong learning.

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## **Strategies for Building Literacy Skills**

Children will need to learn the technical skills of reading and writing. Letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and an understanding of speech–sound correspondences are essential for children to learn how to become readers and writers. However, it is critical for children to also learn how to use these tools to better their thinking and reasoning. Developing oral language comprehension and engaging children in meaningful oral discourse is crucial because it gives meaning to what they are learning.

### **Shared Reading Experience**

One of the most powerful strategies for building these skills in early childhood is the shared reading experience. In listening to stories, children begin to pay attention to print (e.g., print referencing), which reinforces print conventions and concepts in the context of a meaningful experience. But children also hear words outside of their day-to-day discourse, which can

help them build vocabulary. The conversational duets that occur around shared book reading can affect children's vocabulary growth and comprehension of stories. Children may talk about the pictures, retell the story, discuss their favorite actions, and request multiple readings, which will enhance their understanding. These exchanges help children to bridge what is in the story and their own lives. Providing children with a rich array of information books is likely to enhance their conversations as they try to learn and understand more about their world.

### **Discovery Areas**

Young children also need the opportunity to make choices and to practice what they have learned about print with their peers and on their own. Creating discovery areas for children to explore their understandings, with attractive stories and information books, help children to integrate play and print. In these engaging discovery areas, children will often pretend to be scientists, veterinarians, or environmentalists, using books to support their understandings. Play is a crucial feature in developing early literacy for young children because it helps them to interpret their experiences. Play allows young children to assume the roles and activities of more accomplished peers and adults.

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### **Drawing and Writing on Paper**

Classrooms that provide children with regular opportunities to express themselves on paper, without feeling too constrained for correct spelling and proper handwriting, also help children understand that writing has real purpose. Teachers can organize situations that both demonstrate the writing process and get children actively involved in it.

Some teachers serve as scribes and help children write down their ideas, keeping in mind the balance between children doing it themselves and asking for help. In the beginning, these products likely emphasize pictures, with few attempts at writing letters or words. With encouragement, children begin to label their pictures, tell stories, and attempt to write stories about the pictures they have drawn.

Such novice writing activity sends the important message that writing is not just handwriting practice—children are

using their own words to compose a message to communicate with others.

## Reading and Comprehension

For children to become skilled readers, they will also need to develop a rich conceptual knowledge base and verbal reasoning abilities to understand messages conveyed through print. Successful reading ultimately consists of having a tool kit of procedural skills (e.g., alphabet skills), accompanied by a massive and slowly built-up store of conscious content knowledge. It is the higher order thinking skills, knowledge, and dispositional capabilities that enable young children to come to understand what they are reading.

Children's earliest experiences become organized or structured into schemas, or building blocks of cognition. Schemas provide children with the conceptual apparatus for making sense of the world around them by classifying incoming bits of information into similar groupings. Well-read-to children internalize a form of story grammar, or a set of expectations of how stories are told that enhances their understanding. Knowledge becomes easier to access, producing more knowledge networks. And those with a rich knowledge base find it easier to learn and remember.

Quality indicators of a rich content base for instruction in early childhood programs include a content-rich curriculum in which children have opportunities for sustained and in-depth learning including play; different levels of guidance to meet the needs of individual children; a masterful orchestration of activity that supports content learning and social-emotional development; and time, materials, and resources that actively build verbal reasoning skills and conceptual knowledge.

In brief, the picture that emerges from research in these first years of children's reading and writing is one that emphasizes wide exposure to print and to developing concepts about it and its forms and functions. Classrooms filled with print, language and literacy play, storybook reading, and writing allow children to experience the joy and power associated with reading and writing while mastering basic concepts about print that research has shown are strong predictors of achievement.

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## Policy Recommendations for Early Literacy Achievement

Today, the field of early childhood remains a fractured set of programs with little consistency, operating in widely differing contexts with varying levels of funding and resources. Some programs are in public schools, whereas others are in community-based organizations and family childcare homes.

Policymakers need to integrate funding streams better to ensure that the workforce in early childhood is adequately compensated and that children receive highly qualified teachers and the appropriate resources in all contexts. Specifically, to enhance early literacy we need the following.

### Professional Development

A comprehensive, consistent system of early childhood professional preparation and ongoing professional development is needed urgently in every state to ensure that staff in early childhood programs and teachers in primary schools receive content-rich, college-level education that informs them about developmental patterns in early literacy learning and about research-based strategies to intensify the content that children are learning during the early childhood years. Ongoing professional development is essential for teachers to stay current in an ever-expanding research base and to continually improve their teaching skills and the learning outcomes for children.

### Smaller Class Sizes

Sufficient resources are needed in early childhood to ensure adequate ratios of qualified teachers to children and small groups for individualizing instruction. For 4- and 5-year-olds, adult-child ratios should be no more than one adult for eight to 10 children (with a maximum group size of 20). Small class size increases the likelihood that teachers will be able to accommodate children's diverse abilities and interests, strengths and needs.

### Reading Materials (Books and Digital Media)

Sufficient resources are needed to ensure classrooms, schools, and public libraries have a wide range of high-quality children's books, computer software, and multimedia resources at various levels of difficulty and reflecting various cultural and

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family backgrounds. Studies have found that a minimum of five books per child is necessary to provide even the most basic print-rich environment). Digital media such as e-books should also be available to provide alternative, engaging, enriching literacy experiences.

## Resources for Individualized Instruction

Finally, we need policies that promote children's continuous learning progress. When individual children do not make expected progress in literacy development, resources should be available to provide more individualized instruction, focused time, tutoring by trained and qualified tutors, or other individualized intervention strategies. These instructional strategies are used to accelerate children's learning instead of either grade retention or social promotion, neither of which has been proven effective in improving children's achievement.

We cannot underestimate the importance of the early childhood years in children's overall development and literacy learning. What we do in these early years will make a difference in their reading patterns, interests, and lifelong desire to learn.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *Ladders to Literacy* by Rollanda E. O’Connor, Angela Notari-Syverson, and Patricia F. Vadasy (Brookes, 2005)
- Learn With Homer: [learnwithhomer.com](http://learnwithhomer.com). This is a great app that is both fun and educational; available through iTunes.
- *The Read-Aloud Handbook* by Jim Trelease (Penguin, 2013)
- Reading Rockets: [readingrockets.org](http://readingrockets.org). A terrific website with wonderful ideas for teachers and parents.



## International Literacy Association: Literacy Research Panel 2016–2017

### Principal Author

Susan B. Neuman, New York University

### Panel Chair

Diane Lapp, San Diego State University

### Panel Members

Donna Alvermann, University of Georgia

Jim Anderson, University of British Columbia

Christine Garbe, University of Cologne, Germany

Gay Ivey, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Robert Jiménez, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

Melanie Kuhn, Purdue University College of Education

Stuart McNaughton, University of Auckland, New Zealand

Heidi Anne E. Mesmer, Virginia Tech

Ernest Morrell, Teachers College, Columbia University

David Reinking, Clemson University

Deborah Rowe, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

Misty Sailors, University of Texas at San Antonio

Sheila Valencia, University of Washington

Amy Wilson-Lopez, Utah State University

Jo Worthy, University of Texas, Austin

Douglas Fisher, San Diego State University, President and Board Liaison, International Literacy Association

William Teale, University of Illinois at Chicago, Immediate Past President, International Literacy Association

Marcie Craig Post, Executive Director, International Literacy Association

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**Media Contact:** For all media inquiries, please contact [press@reading.org](mailto:press@reading.org).

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#### About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 78 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit [literacyworldwide.org](http://literacyworldwide.org).



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