



I struggled through the alphabet as if it had been a bramble-bush; getting considerably worried and scratched by every letter.

— Charles Dickens  
*Great Expectations*

# The Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction

**T**he cumulative and growing research on literacy development in young children is rapidly becoming a body of knowledge that can serve as the basis for the everyday practice of early literacy education (IRA & NAEYC 1998; National Research Council 1998; Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray 2000; Neuman & Dickinson 2001; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2002). Although preliminary, the knowledge base outlines children’s developmental patterns in critical areas, such as phonological and print awareness. It serves as a resource for designing early literacy programs and specific instructional practices. In addition, it offers reliable and valid observational data for grounding approaches to early reading assessment.

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That we know more about literacy development and acquisition, however, does not let us escape a central issue of all early education: What *should* young children be learning and doing before they go to kindergarten? What early literacy instruction should children receive? What should it emphasize—head (cognition) or heart (motivation) or both?

Real-life answers to these questions rarely point directly to this or that, but rather they are somewhere in the middle, including both empirical evidence and professional wisdom. While we will continue to

wrestle with these complicated questions, we must take practical action so that our growing understanding in early literacy supports the young child as a wholesome, developing person.

What then are the essentials of early literacy instruction? What content should be included, and how should it be taught in early education settings? Our first response to these complex questions is described below in a skeletal framework for action. We briefly define early literacy, so as to identify what young children need to know and be able to do if they are to enjoy the fruits of literacy, including valuable dispositions that strengthen their literacy interactions. Then we describe two examples of instruction that support children’s reading and writing learning before they enter the primary grades.

With the imagery of Pip’s remark from *Great Expectations* in mind, we hope to show that well-considered early literacy instruction is certainly not a bramble-bush for our very young children, but rather a welcoming environment in which to learn to read and write.

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## The learning domain

Today a variety of terms are used to refer to the preschool phase of literacy development—emerging literacy, emergent reading, emergent writing, early reading, symbolic tools, and so on. We have adopted the term *early literacy* as the most comprehensive yet concise description of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that precede learning to read and write in the primary grades (K–3). We chose this term because, in the earliest phases of literacy development, forming reading and writing concepts and skills is a dynamic process (National Research Council 1998, 2000).

Young children’s grasp of print as a tool for making meaning and as a way to communicate combines both oral and written language. Children draw and scribble and “read” their marks by attributing meaning to them through their talk and action. They listen to stories read aloud and learn how to orient their bodies and minds to the technicalities of books and print.

When adults say, “Here, help me hold the book and turn the pages,” they teach children basic conventions of book handling and the left-to-right, top-to-bottom orientation of English. When they guide children’s small hands and eyes to printed words on the page, they show them that this is the source of the reading and that the marks have meaning. When they explain, “This says ‘goldfish’. Do you remember our goldfish? We named it Baby Flipper. We put its name on the fishbowl,” they help children understand the connection between printed words, speech, and real experience.

Children’s early reading and writing learning, in other words, is embedded in a larger developing system of oral communication. Early literacy is an emerging set of relationships between reading and writing.

**What early literacy instruction should children receive? What should it emphasize—head (cognition) or heart (motivation) or both?**

## Essential Early Literacy Teaching Strategies

Effective early literacy instruction provides preschool children with developmentally appropriate settings, materials, experiences, and social support that encourage early forms of reading and writing to flourish and develop into conventional literacy. These basics can be broken down into eight specific strategies with strong research links to early literacy skills and, in some cases, with later elementary-grade reading achievement. Note that play has a prominent role in strategies 5, 6, and 8. Linking literacy and play is one of the most effective ways to make literacy activities meaningful and enjoyable for children.

### 1. Rich teacher talk

Engage children in rich conversations in large group, small group, and one-to-one settings. When talking with children,

- use rare words—words that children are unlikely to encounter in everyday conversations;
- extend children’s comments into more descriptive, grammatically mature statements;
- discuss cognitively challenging content—topics that are not immediately present, that involve knowledge about the world, or that encourage children to reflect on language as an object;
- listen and respond to what children have to say.



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### 2. Storybook reading

Read aloud to your class once or twice a day, exposing children to numerous enjoyable stories, poems, and information books. Provide supportive conversations and activities before, during, and after reading.

Repeated reading of favorite books builds familiarity, increasing the likelihood that children will attempt to read those books on their own.



Bill Geiger

(cont'd on p. 3)

## Teaching Strategies (cont'd)



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### 3. Phonological awareness activities

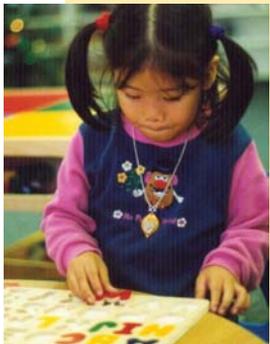
Provide activities that increase children's awareness of the sounds of language. These activities include playing games and listening to stories, poems, and songs that involve

*rhyme*—identifying words that end with the same sound (e.g., Jack and Jill went up the hill);

*alliteration*—recognizing when several words begin with the same sound (e.g., Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers);

*sound matching*—deciding which of several words begins with a specific sound (e.g., show a child pictures of a bird, a dog, and a cat and ask which one starts with the /d/ sound).

Try to make these activities fun and enjoyable.



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### 4. Alphabet activities

Engage children with materials that promote identification of the letters of the alphabet, including

- ABC books
- magnetic letters
- alphabet blocks and puzzles
- alphabet charts

Use direct instruction to teach letter names that have personal meaning to children ("Look, Jennifer's and Joey's names both start with the same letter.

What is the letter's name? That's right, they both start with j").



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### 5. Support for emergent reading

Encourage children to attempt to read books and other types of print by providing

- a well-designed library center, stocked with lots of good books;
- repeated readings of favorite books (to familiarize children with books and encourage independent reading);
- functional print linked to class activities

(e.g., daily schedules, helper charts, toy shelf labels);

- play-related print (e.g., signs, menus, employee name tags in a restaurant play center).

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**Young children need writing to help them learn about reading, they need reading to help them learn about writing; and they need oral language to help them learn about both.**

These relationships are situated in a broader communication network of speaking and listening, whose components work together to help the learner negotiate the world and make sense of experience (Thelen & Smith 1995; Lewis 2000; Siegler 2000). Young children need writing to help them learn about reading, they need reading to help them learn about writing; and they need oral language to help them learn about both.

### Necessary content and dispositions in early literacy

Early literacy holds much that young children might learn. Yet we cannot teach everything and must make choices about what content to teach and which dispositions to encourage. High-quality research provides our best evidence for setting priorities for what to address and how.

Recent reviews of research indicate at least three critical content categories in early literacy: oral language comprehension, phonological awareness, and print knowledge. They also identify at least one important disposition, print motivation—the frequency of requests for shared reading and engagement in print-related activities, such as pretend writing (Senechal et al. 2001; Layzer 2002; Neuman 2002; Lonigan & Whitehurst in press).

## Teaching Strategies (cont'd)

Children need to learn mainstay concepts and skills of written language from which more complex and elaborated understandings and motivations arise, such as grasp of the alphabetic principle, recognition of basic text structures, sense of genre, and a strong desire to know. They need to learn phonological awareness, alphabet letter knowledge, the functions of written language, a sense of meaning making from texts, vocabulary, rudimentary print knowledge (e.g., developmental spelling), and the sheer persistence to investigate print as a meaning-making tool.

### Content of Early Literacy Instruction

Teaching preschool children

- what reading and writing can do
- to name and write alphabet letters
- to hear rhymes and sounds in words
- to spell simple words
- to recognize and write their own names
- new words from stories, work, and play
- to listen to stories for meaning

### Valuable Dispositions of Early Literacy Instruction

Cultivating preschool children's

- willingness to listen to stories
- desire to be read to
- curiosity about words and letters
- exploration of print forms
- playfulness with words
- enjoyment of songs, poems, rhymes, jingles, books, and dramatic play

### 6. Support for emergent writing

Encourage children to use emergent forms of writing, such as scribble writing, random letter strings, and invented spelling, by providing

- a writing center stocked with pens, pencils, markers, paper, and book-making materials;
- shared writing demonstrations in which the teacher writes down text dictated by children;
- functional writing opportunities that are connected to class activities (e.g., sign-up sheets for popular centers, library book check-out slips, Do not touch! signs);
- play-related writing materials (e.g., pencils and notepads for taking orders in a restaurant play center).

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### 7. Shared book experience.

Read Big Books and other enlarged texts to children, and point to the print as it is read. While introducing and reading the text, draw children's attention to basic concepts of print such as

- the distinction between pictures and print;
- left-to-right, top-to-bottom sequence;
- book concepts (cover, title, page).

Read favorite stories repeatedly, and encourage children to read along on the parts of the story they remember.

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### 8. Integrated, content-focused activities.

Provide opportunities for children to investigate topics that are of interest to them. The objective is for children to use oral language, reading, and writing to learn about the world. Once a topic has been identified, children can

- listen to the teacher read topic-related information books and look at the books on their own;
- gather data using observation, experiments, interviews, and such;
- use emergent writing to record observations and information; and
- engage in dramatic play to consolidate and express what they have learned.

As a result of such projects, children's language and literacy skills are advanced, and they gain valuable background knowledge.

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## Written language is harder to learn than oral

Learning an alphabetic writing system requires extra work. Both spoken and written language are symbol systems for representing and retrieving meanings. In spoken language, meaning making depends on phonemes or sounds. As children gain experience with the language of their community, they learn which words (or sequences of phonemes) stand for which concepts in that language. For example, children learn that the spoken word *table* in English or *mesa* in Spanish names a four-legged, flat-topped piece of furniture.

Writing and reading with an alphabetic system involve an extra layer of symbols, where the phonemes are represented by letters. This means that beginners must both learn the extra symbols—the letters of the alphabet—and raise their consciousness of the phonemes (because, while speaking and understanding speech, we unconsciously sequence and contrast phonemes).

Speakers, for example, understand the two very different concepts named by the words *nail* and *lane* without consciously noticing that those words are constructed from the same three phonemes (/n/, /A/, and /l/), but in different sequences. When children learn to read, however, they must pay attention to those three phonemes, how they are sequenced, and what letters represent them.

Invented spelling is a phonemic awareness activity that has the added advantage of being meaningful and functional (Richgels 2001). Children nonconventionally but systematically match sounds in words that they want to write with letters that they know. For example, they may use letter names and sounds in letter names (/ch/ in *H*, /A/ as the name of the letter *A*, and /r/ in *R*) when spelling *chair* as *HAR*.

Invented spelling begins before children's phonemic awareness is completely developed and before they know all the names of the letters of the alphabet. With encouragement from adults, it develops through stages that culminate in conventional spelling.

The meanings of both spoken and written language serve real purposes in our daily lives (Halliday 1975). We usually do not speak without wanting to accomplish something useful. For example, we might want to influence others' behavior ("Would you turn that down, please?"), express our feelings ("I hate loud music"), or convey information ("Habitual listening to loud music is a danger to one's hearing"). Similarly, with written messages we can influence behavior (NO SMOKING), express feelings (I♥NY), and inform (Boston 24 mi) while serving such added purposes as communicating across distances or preserving a message as a record or a reminder.

These added purposes require that written messages be able to stand on their own (Olson 1977). Written language is decontextualized; that is, the sender and receiver of a written communication usually do not share the same time and space. The writer is not present to clarify and extend his or her message for the reader. This means that young readers' and writers' extra work includes, in addition to dealing with phonemes and letters, dealing with decontextualization.

### Why do the extra work?

Historically, societies have found the extra work of writing and reading to be worthwhile. The extra functions of written language, especially preserving messages and communicating across distances, have enabled a tremendous growth of knowledge. Individual children can experience similar benefits if

teachers help them to acquire the knowledge and skill involved in the extra work of reading and writing while always making real to them the extra purposes that written language serves. We must cultivate their dispositions (curiosity, desire, play) to actively seek, explore, and use books and print. As they learn what letters look like and how they match up with phonemes, which strings of letters represent which words, and how to represent their meanings in print and retrieve others' meanings from print, they must see also how the fruits of those labors empower them by multiplying the functionality of language.

With speech, children can influence the behavior of others, express their feelings, and convey information. A big part of motivating them to take on the extra work of reading and writing must be letting them see how the permanence and portability of writing can widen the scope of that influencing, expressing, and informing. Young children who can say "No! Don't!" experience the power of spoken words to influence what others do or don't do—but only when the speakers are present. Being able to write *No* extends the exercise of that power to situations in which they are not present, as morning kindergartners Eric, Jeff, Zack, and Ben realized when they wrote *NOStPN* (No stepping) to keep afternoon kindergartners from disturbing a large dinosaur puzzle they had assembled on the classroom floor (McGee & Richgels 2000, 233–34).

**Written language is decontextualized; that is, the sender and receiver of a written communication usually do not share the same time and space.**

## The practice of early literacy instruction: Two examples

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Unlike the very real and immediate sounds and meanings of talk, print is silent; it is obscure; it is not of the here and now. Consequently, early literacy instruction must often be explicit and direct, which is not to say that it must be scriptlike, prescriptive, and rigid (Schickedanz 2003). Rather it should be embedded in the basic activities of early learning long embraced by early education practice and research. These include reading aloud, circle time, small group activities, adult-child conversations, and play.

Teachers can embed reading and writing instruction in familiar activities, to help children learn both the conventions of print and how print supports their immediate goals and needs. The two examples below show how what's new about early literacy instruction fits within tried-and-true early education practice.

### Interactive storybook reading

Reading aloud has maximum learning potential when children have opportunities to actively participate and respond (Morrow & Gambrell 2001). This requires teachers to use three types of scaffolding or support: (a) before-reading activities that arouse children's interest and curiosity in the book about to be read; (b) during-reading prompts and questions that keep children actively engaged with the text being read; and (c) after-reading questions and activities that give children an opportunity to discuss and respond to the books that have been read.

Instruction can be easily integrated into any of these three phases of story reading. This highly contextualized instruction should be guided by children's literacy learning needs and by the nature of the book being read:

- information books, such as Byron Barton's *Airport*, can teach children new vocabulary and concepts;
- books, songs, and poems with strong rhymes, such as Raffi's *Down by the Bay*, promote phonological awareness; and
- stories with strong narrative plots, such as *There's an Alligator under My Bed*, by Mercer Mayer, are ideal for generating predictions and acquainting children with narrative structure, both of which lay a foundation for reading comprehension.

In addition, most books can be used to teach print recognition, book concepts (e.g., cover, page), and concepts of print (e.g., print vs. pictures). Of course, instruction should be limited to several brief teaching points per reading so children can enjoy the read-aloud

experience. Enjoyment and building positive dispositions should always be given high priority when reading aloud. For an example of how a teacher might do an interactive story reading session with *There's an Alligator under My Bed*, see "Shared Reading to Learn about Story Plot."

### Literacy in play

The general benefits of play for children's literacy development are well documented, showing that a literacy-enriched play environment exposes children to valuable print experiences and lets them practice narrative skills (Christie & Roskos 2003). In the following example, two preschoolers are playing in a restaurant activity center equipped with wall signs (Springville Restaurant), menus, pencils, and a notepad:

**Food server:** Can I take your order?

**Customer:** [Looks over the menu] Let's see, I'd like some cereal. And how about some orange juice. And how about the coffee with that too.

**Food server:** We don't have coffee. We're all runned out.

**Customer:** Okay, well . . . I'll just take orange juice.

**Food server:** [Writes down order, using scribble writing] Okay. I'll be right back with your order. (Roskos et al. 1995)

Here, the customer is using the literacy routine of looking at a menu and then placing an order. If the menu is familiar and contains picture cues, some emergent reading might also be taking place. The food server is using another routine—writing down customer orders—and is practicing emergent writing. In addition, the children have constructed a simple narrative story, complete with a problem (an item is not available) and a resolution (drop that item from the order).

A Vygotskian approach to developing mature dramatic play also illustrates the value of tangible play plans for helping children to self-regulate their behaviors, to remember on purpose, and to deliberately focus their attention on play activity—foundational cognitive skills of reading and writing (Bodrova & Leong 1998). We have found that preschoolers often spend more time preparing for their dramatizations than they spend acting out the stories. For example, one group of four-year-olds spent more than 30 minutes preparing for a pizza parlor story (organizing felt pizza ingredients, arranging furniture for the pizza kitchen, making play money, and deciding on roles) and less than 10 minutes acting out the cooking, serving, and eating of the pizza meal. One would be hard pressed to find another type of activity that can keep young children focused and "on task" for this length of time.

## Shared Reading to Learn about Story Plot

Here is how one teacher reads *There's an Alligator under My Bed*, by Mercer Mayer, to a group of four-year-olds.

**Before reading.** The teacher begins by saying, "Let's look at the picture on the cover of the book. [Shows a boy in bed with an alligator sticking out from beneath] The boy in this story has a *big* problem. Can anyone guess what that problem is?"

After the children make their guesses, the teacher points to the title and says, "The title of this book is *There's an Alligator under My Bed*. So Suzy and Joey were correct in guessing what the boy's problem is. How do you think the boy will get rid of the alligator?"

After several children share their predictions, the teacher begins reading the book aloud.

**During reading.** After reading the first section of the book, which introduces the boy's problem, the teacher pauses and asks, "Do you have any other ideas about how the boy might get rid of the alligator?"

The teacher reads the next two pages, which detail the boy's plan to leave a trail of bait to the garage, and then pauses to ask the children what the word *bait* means.

After reading the next section, in which the boy lays out a trail of food, the teacher asks, "What do you think the alligator is going to do?"

Finally, after reading the rest of the story, in which the alligator gets trapped in the garage, the teacher points to the note the boy left on the door to the garage and asks, "What do you think the boy wrote in his note?"

**After reading.** The teacher sparks a discussion of the book by asking several open-ended questions, such as "What did you like best about the story?" and "How would *you* have gotten rid of that alligator?"

Later, the teacher does a follow-up small group activity—to reinforce a sense of story plot, she helps children sequence a few pictures of the main story events.

Specific to early literacy, descriptive research shows that a literacy-in-play strategy is effective in increasing the range and amount of literacy behaviors during play, thus allowing children to practice their emerging skills and show what they have learned (Neuman & Roskos 1992). Evidence is also accumulating that this strategy helps children learn important literacy concepts and skills, such as knowledge about the functions of writing (Vukelich 1993), the ability to recognize play-related print (Neuman & Roskos 1993), and comprehension strategies such as self-checking and self-correction (Neuman & Roskos 1997). Like storybook reading, the literacy learning potential of play can be increased when it includes before, during, and after types of scaffolding as illustrated in "Guided Play to Explore New Words and Their Sounds."

## Closing

We are gaining empirical ground in understanding early literacy learning well enough to identify essential content that belongs in an early childhood curriculum. Increasingly, the field can articulate key concepts and skills that are significant and foundational, necessary for literacy development and growth, research-based, and motivational to arouse and engage children's minds. The need to broadly distribute this knowledge is great—but the need to act on it consistently and carefully in instructional practice is even greater, especially if we are to steer children clear of the bramble-bushes and on to be successful readers and writers.

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## Guided Play to Explore New Words and Their Sounds

With the teacher's help, the children are creating a gas station/garage play center as part of an ongoing unit on transportation.

**Before play.** The teacher provides background knowledge by reading *Sylvia's Garage*, by Debra Lee, an information book about a woman mechanic. She discusses new words, such as *mechanic, engine, dipstick, oil*.

Next, the teacher helps the children plan the play center. She asks children about the roles they can play (e.g., gas station attendant, mechanic, customer) and records their ideas on a piece of chart paper. She then asks the children to brainstorm some props that they could use in their center (e.g., signs, cardboard gas pump, oil can, tire pressure gauge) and jots these down on another piece of chart paper. The children then decide which props they will make in class and which will be brought from home, and the teacher or a child places an *m* after each make-in-class item and an *h* after each from home item.

During the next several days, the teacher helps the children construct some of the make-in-class props, such as a sign for the gas station ("Let's see. . . *gas* starts with a *g*. Gary, your name also starts with a *g*. Can you show us how to write a *g*?").

The list of props from home is included in the classroom newsletter and sent to families.

**During play.** The teacher first observes the children at play to learn about their current play interests and activities. Then she provides scaffolding that extends and enriches children's play and at the same time teaches important literacy skills. She notices, for example, that the mechanics are not writing out service orders or bills for the customers, so she takes on a role as an assistant mechanic and models how to write out a bill for fixing a customer's car. She monitors her involvement to ensure close alignment with children's ongoing activity.

**After play.** During small group activity time, the teacher helps children with a picture-sort that includes pictures of people and objects from their garage play. They sort the pictures into labeled columns according to beginning sounds—/m/ (*mechanic, man, map, motor*); /t/ (*tire, tank, top, taillight*); and /g/ (*gas, gallon, garden, goat*). They explore the different feel of these sounds in the different parts of their mouths. They think of other words they know that feel the same way.

After modeling, the teacher gives the children a small deck of picture cards to sort, providing direct supervision and feedback.