


LEARNING TO READ THE WORLD: *Literacy in the First 3 Years*



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Note: Adapted from a book of the same title, co-edited by the authors, and to be published by the ZERO TO THREE Press in fall 2004.

Baby Isaac, age 6 weeks, hears a familiar male voice and struggles mightily to raise his head enough to turn toward the sound that he has heard often before.

Ali, age 26 months, scribbles on a grocery sack. Round and round and round go the circles, forerunners of “my name.”

Larissa, age 16 months, bangs her cup on the high chair tray. After Mother fills it with water, Larissa snorts and points to the orange juice carton on the counter. “Duce!” Mother understands the message and responds by pouring juice into the cup.

Three-year-old Ibrihim cautiously ascends the climbing structure, turns, and gives his teacher a “high five.” Both know what the sign means.

Alexis, whose body battled spinal meningitis at age 2 months, still does not speak at age 2 years, but, gripping two books, she teeters toward her mother, clearly communicating her powerful desire to “read.”

During the first 3 years, young children begin to read their world. Initially without verbal labels, they discriminate self—that is, me from not me: “This is my hand.” “That is what I want.” “Mine!” They also define familiar caregivers—of course, wordlessly at first: “Mommy feeds me.” “Nana likes that!” “Papa plays

with me.” Baby Isaac’s head-lifting response, described above, acknowledges his father, an important person in Isaac’s young life. Infants and toddlers begin early to discern familiar objects and to formulate the laws that systematically govern their properties: “When Mommy holds me in a certain way, it is time to eat.” “Kicking this mobile makes something happen.” “When I drop my spoon, people react.” “When they put me in my bed, it is time to sleep.” Ali has learned, for example, that rubbing the marker across the paper makes colorful lines that are delightful to herself and others. As infants’ random movements and utterances are

at a glance

- The infant-toddler years are incredibly important in producing a nation of readers.
- Every family can, in culturally appropriate ways, help infants and toddlers learn to read the world.
- Every caregiver can, in culturally appropriate ways, help infants and toddlers grow in language and literacy.
- Early childhood programs must intentionally and frequently support families and caregivers in helping infants and toddlers learn to read the world.
- Communities must encourage infants and toddlers and their families, caregivers, and early childhood programs in efforts to foster early language and literacy.



PHOTO: MARILYN NOLT

interpreted to convey emotions and ideas, they learn that gestures and words share meanings among groups of people. Thereby young children take giant steps into the world of communication (Bloom & Lahey, 1978; De Boysson-Bardies, 1999): Hands out means “pick me up.” Head shake means “no.” “Dink” means “Give me water, please.” Thus Larissa and Ibrihim have already learned some conventional signs that communicate meaning to the important people in their world. Finally, young children learn that print carries meaning: “Books are for reading.” “A yellow M means Happy Meals.” “That is my name.” Alexis (above) knows that her storybooks feature delightful tales that she and her caregiver can enjoy together. Further, she knows that squiggles on the pages carry words that her caregiver can read over and over and over again. Scribbling conveys messages: “I make my doggie’s picture.” “Here is Barney.”

From this foundation of basic learnings and subsequent daily explorations with everyday people and objects, the young child builds many other understandings of self and others, as well as concepts of economics (“He has more; I have less.”), politics (“The teacher is the ‘boss’ of the classroom.”), geography (“This is my neighborhood; Grandma lives far away by an airplane ride.”), philosophy (“Everybody has more fun when we share.” “That’s not fair!”), and physics (“When I let go of my toy car on a hill, it will go down.”). Upon such simple notions about the way the world works, the child builds sophisticated understandings, elaborate vocabulary, complex reasoning, and a growing power to influence others by verbal and written arguments. Thus, young children begin to read their world and to have wider and greater impact upon it.

The Early Years Matter

As media attention and public policy increasingly focus on improving literacy for all the nation’s children

(U.S. Department of Education, 2002), it is astounding that so little attention has been paid to the first 3 years of life. The first thesis of this article is that the infant–toddler years are incredibly important in producing a nation of readers. Thought and language, from which all later understanding comes, begin and intertwine during the earliest years (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Basic understandings from the infant–toddler period contribute to symbol knowledge—this symbol represents that person, object, or idea which forms the basis of later school learning and abstract thinking in adolescence and adulthood (Bloom, 2000).

This dynamic process is inherently a social one (Notari-Syverson, O’Connor, & Vadasy, 1998; Shatz, 1994). In the shelter of nurturing adults, the infant or toddler learns to read the world as safe or scary, fascinating or dull, responsive or threatening, caring or neglectful, colorful or bland. The baby learns which people are predictable, what objects do, and how “our family” lives and works and has fun. Further, young children come to realize that all of these learnings about the world have labels—words—and, eventually, children also grasp the signs that identify these words—print or other icons. Finally, they learn that words and print have unbelievable power to activate family members, caregivers, and even people who reside in other places who get our messages by telephone or mail. The concept that words carry power begins during the first 3 years of life. So also does the confidence that “I can read! I can read! I can read!” along with an awareness of how important (or unimportant) reading is to the people whom they see every day.

Portions of this work were supported by grant #S349A02002 from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, to Sonoma State University, the StoryQUEST Project.



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Families Are Critical in Early Literacy

The second thesis of this article is that every family can, in culturally appropriate ways, help infants and toddlers learn to read the world. Family members do not need a special degree, advanced training, a high IQ, or special creative talent. They do need *presence*, *time*, *words*, *print*, and *intention*. Infants and young children need adults who are *present*, who are there when the child reaches for a toy, smiles his first social smile, or opens a book, and who respond with acknowledgment, pleasure, and verbal labels. This takes *time*—time to notice, time to expand the child's efforts, time to explain the conditions and boundaries of actions and words, and time to share wonder in everyday miracles such as the cat's silent approach, the pigeon's chattering from the stoop railing, or waves hitting the beach with an unending rhythm. Helping children learn to read their world takes *words*, lots of words (Hart & Risley, 1995, 1999)—words well-chosen to encourage children's efforts (Shatz, 1994), words combined with expectant waiting for the child to offer tentative first communication attempts via whole-body movements, gestures, vocalizations, or pseudowords (McDonald & Mitchell, n.d.). Adults help children read their world when they acknowledge the surrounding *print*, from a cash register receipt to a billboard, a bus schedule to a restroom sign, a popular magazine, a novel, or a board book for baby. Finally, *intention* repeatedly and emphatically emphasizes the lifelong importance (for both adult and child) of words and print. Intention underscores the adult's commitment to cherishing these foundational forms of communication, enjoying them in culturally meaningful ways, explaining them to children in age-appropriate ways, and purposefully using them in mutually satisfying co-constructions countless times every day (Knapp-Philo & Stice, 2003a, 2003b). As the adult senses the child's interests and responds to the child's concerns with language and appropriate references to print, early literacy begins and flourishes during the first 3 years of life. The message is "Language works. Print is fun. They make my life better."

Families can learn simple research-based strategies for taking turns in speech with their infants and toddlers, sharing books, and providing vocabulary for the experiences of daily life. Adults can sing songs from their family's tradition; make up nonsensical ditties that celebrate sounds and rhythm; and repeat TV jingles, nursery rhymes, or fingerplays that match words with physical movements. They can encourage older children to read with infants and toddlers, thereby building sibling relationships, enhancing the older children's reading skills, and supporting the notion that high-quality care for young children always includes literacy. Families can put words to their routines of daily living and play word games during waiting times (Knapp-Philo & Stice, 2003a, 2003b, 2004). Because of the special family-child bond and the immediacy of current events, these brief interactions are invaluable for helping the child learn to read her world.

Caregivers Help Infants and Toddlers Read the World

The third thesis of this article is that every caregiver can, in culturally appropriate ways, help infants and toddlers grow in language and literacy. Caregivers, like parents, need *presence*, *time*, *words*, *print*, and *intention* to share language and literacy with infants and toddlers. All five qualities are important. But it is *intention* that turns the physical activity of diapering into a delightful exchange of sound play, a trip to the grocery store into a vocabulary lesson about colors and the names of fruit, or the retelling of a game on the playground into a description that teaches sequencing and narrative skills. Caregivers need knowledge of the cultural supports for the language and literacy learning of the children and families they are serving (Neuman & Roskos, 1992). Caregivers need to have sufficient skills in guiding small groups of children in order to give full attention to individual young children's language and literacy efforts. They need to draw out shy children while they help very talkative ones begin to listen to others as well as to speak. Caregivers need to arrange environments that are symbol rich and interesting without being overwhelming to infants and toddlers (Rosenkoetter, Notari-Syverson, & Knapp-Philo, 2004). Caregivers, like parents, can put words to their routines of daily living and play rhyming games during waiting times (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002). Even the simplest exchange becomes a literacy lesson when it includes the warmth of a relationship coupled with words, their concepts, and perhaps a graphic symbol.

Programs Establish Expectations for Significant Adults

The fourth thesis of this article is that early childhood programs must intentionally and frequently support families and caregivers in helping infants and toddlers learn to read the world. What gets noted gets repeated (Peters, 1987). Program leaders bear significant responsibility for nurturing

positive language and literacy practices among their infant–toddler staff members as well as for developing a staff culture in which supporting young children’s language and literacy efforts is highly valued. For administrators, coordinators, board members, and other program leaders, *presence*, *time*, *words*, *print*, and *intention* are essential to leadership. These emphases are seen in the regular *presence* of the leader in group settings and on home visits, where the leader notes positive staff practices related to early language and literacy development and encourages additional ones. Key behaviors are observed (a) when program leaders provide *time* for one-to-one and group staff development related to early literacy; (b) when program leaders share personal *words* that frequently, concisely, and memorably reiterate the importance of everyday language and literacy interactions with infants and toddlers as well as model continuing learning with staff and family members; and (c) when program leaders establish *print* priorities that continually provide developmentally appropriate books for young children and families, and articles, videotapes, and on-site coaches with early literacy ideas for staff. Underlying all these emphases is *intentionality* that makes child and family literacy an agency priority.

In high-quality programs, professional development and family learning opportunities about research-based language and literacy strategies affirm current practices that are productive and introduce promising new ones (International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Knapp-Philo & Stice, 2003a, 2003b, 2004). Leadership creates a climate of experimentation and innovation in literacy efforts. An atmosphere of discovery and continual learning among adults promotes a setting in which young children can explore and gain language and literacy skills.

Program leaders are instrumental in encouraging family literacy: Adults who talk and read model the importance of language and literacy in their homes when they portray joy in words and stories and create a setting where books and print are abundant. In this kind of home, young children learn early that literacy matters. Many families have not had these kinds of experiences themselves and do not know how powerful such experiences are for their children. Leaders of programs for young children can provide families with needed information, share ideas and strategies, and create an environment that encourages regular experiences of adults and children learning and growing together.

Communities Recruit Attention, Provide Resources, and Encourage Families and Programs

The fifth thesis of this article is that communities must encourage infants and toddlers and their families, caregivers, and early childhood programs in efforts to foster

early language and literacy. The entire human environment is critical in encouraging the relationships and strategies that make a difference for infants and toddlers as they learn to read their world. Words, stories, books, and print weave a fabric for everyday life that enfolds young children and nurtures them as talkers, readers, and writers (Regalado, Goldenberg, & Appel, 2001).

Communities encourage early literacy in many ways, including family literacy programs, social marketing of literacy themes, free books for infants and toddlers, library children’s hours, storytelling festivals, story walks, religious story nights, puppet theaters, and much, much more. Bill-

boards and bus signs encourage adults to talk and listen to babies, read books, and share stories. Public service announcements call families’ attention to sounds, rhythms, and rhymes as building blocks for later literacy. Parenting education fosters adult–child book reading. Community leaders take time to read to toddlers and are photographed by the media doing so. Communities can create a climate in which children’s capacity to use symbols is engaged by people who model and demonstrate their use, who involve children in symbol-using activities, who encourage children to use symbols in a variety of ways, and who give children materials with which to explore, experiment, and play (McLane & McNamee, 1990).

The clear message is that early language and literacy matter!

On Apple Pies, School Readiness, and Support for Early Literacy

Carl Sagan, the noted astronomer, wrote, “If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first create the universe” (1980). The point of Sagan’s comment is that causation of even simple phenomena is quite multifaceted and complex, and one needs to start early in the chain of relationships to begin to discern true cause and effect. School readiness is like that. So is literacy. Many thousands of interactions embedded in hundreds of meaningful relationships support a child in learning to read the world (Elicker, Fortner-Wood, & Noppe, 1999). Infants and toddlers successfully come to decode the words and print symbols that convey concepts when many ordinary people play their varied roles across the early years. Thus, the overriding thesis of this article is that it takes all of us to nurture infants and toddlers to become readers (see Figure 1; see also Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2002).

Such a literacy-supportive world might look like this: Infants and toddlers, each in their individual ways, welcome or redirect initiatives from others. Families provide the thousands of experiences with events, words, and print every day that help young children read their world. Families also supply their own cultural lens and, by responding to young children’s

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cues and providing loving attention from treasured people, they help infants and toddlers see patterns in multiple stimuli.

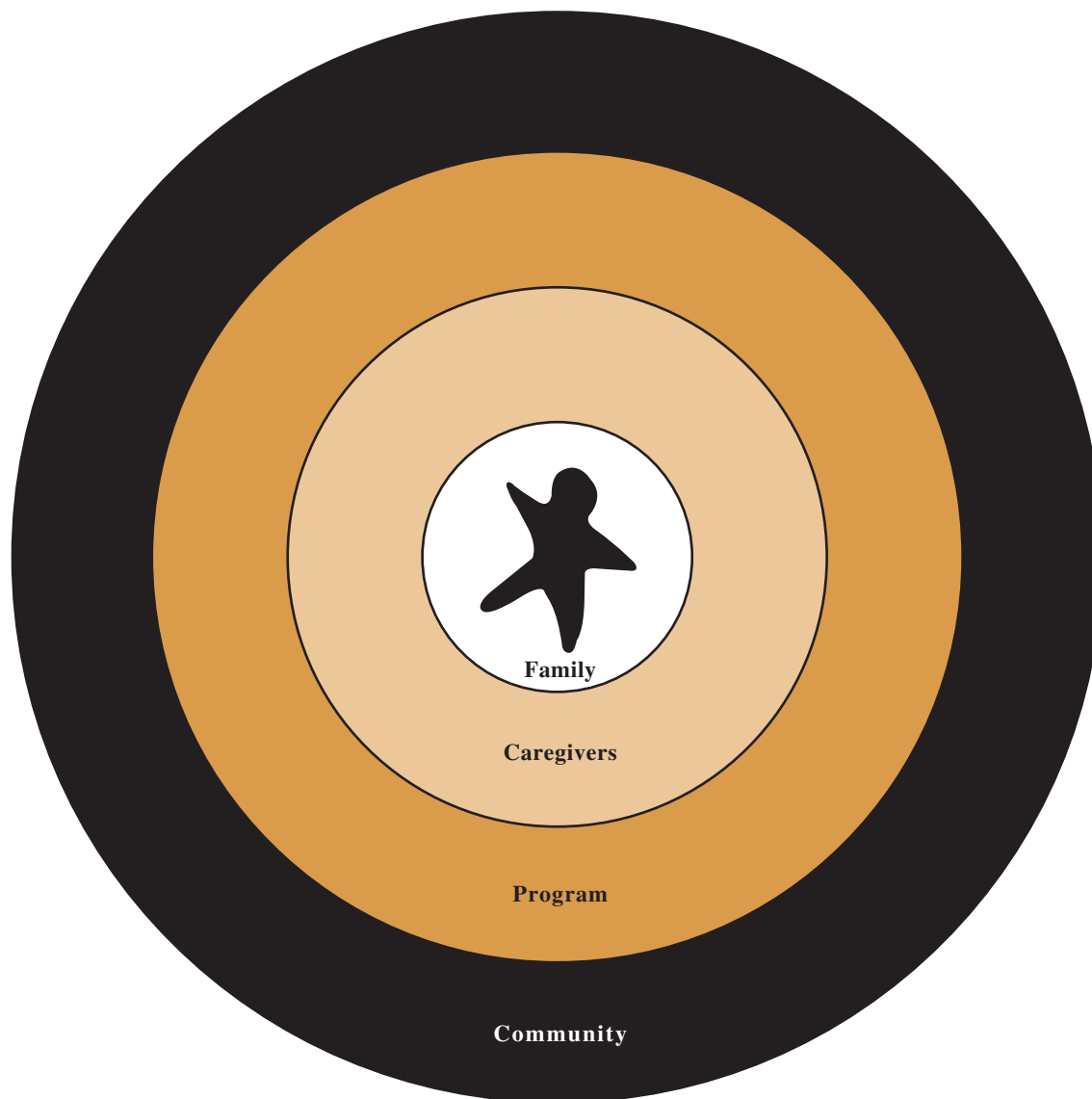
Caregivers share words and print with infants and toddlers all day long in ways that honor the cultures and languages of the families in their programs. Caregivers adapt the environment to encourage young children with special needs to participate in activities of their choice and label daily events in words, signs, and print. Through the contributions of all their caregivers, young children's worlds become larger and more interesting; objects gain names, attributes, and actions; books become friends and sources of information; and infants and toddlers acquire language as a tool for sharing desires, ideas, and fun through statements, rhymes, stories, and songs.

Program administrators, governing boards, home visitors, and continuing education providers support families and caregivers in knowing that language and literacy matter. They regularly model and offer strategies to enhance adult-child interactions.

Program policies and program leaders emphasize the modeling of literacy among all staff members, from bus driver to custodian, teacher to therapist, nurse to case-worker. The shared investment in early literacy goes beyond education as it is embraced by health, human services, business, and the arts.

When communities mobilize for literacy, they include the youngest children and their families in literacy initiatives. Early literacy is now marketed like soap or the latest

FIGURE 1. CONTEXT FOR INFANTS' AND TODDLERS' LEARNING TO READ THEIR WORLD



toy. Board books can be found on buses, in restaurants, in doctors' and dentists' offices, and in play and religious venues. In every community setting, we are sending the message that early literacy matters!

Policymakers at local, state, and national levels emphasize a comprehensive view of early literacy—that is, adequate jobs, health care, housing, child care, schools, and recreation give families a solid base from which to help their young children learn to read their worlds (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000).

Finally, research continues to validate real-world literacy strategies that support the learning of infants and toddlers within a climate of acceptance and joy. Such research guides policymakers, program leaders, caregivers, and family members along paths that will produce readers once today's infants and toddlers reach school age.

Early Literacy: A Promise of Success

The promotion of early literacy is a work in progress, but the potential of our nation to foster early language and literacy is mighty—and it is increasing. Families, infant–family professionals, program leaders, and policymakers can employ an array of effective strategies to support early language and literacy in very young children. Research has clearly demonstrated that infants and toddlers learn in the context of everyday routines of families, programs, and communities. Proven strategies will move the quest for early language and literacy forward through comprehensive, developmentally responsive approaches that honor the diversity of the nation's people. Pursuing this quest is a worthwhile commitment—one that promises success for individuals, families, communities, and the nation. ¶

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