

Early childhood development

The ABCs of early literacy: What every parent, caregiver and educator needs to know

Consider this statistic.

Nine million – or 42 per cent of – working age Canadians do not have the literacy skills they need to function properly in today's society.

This represents an enormous loss to individual Canadians and our country as a whole. Literacy is linked to everything from success in school, work and social relationships to civic engagement, health and life expectancy.

Until recently it was thought that literacy began in school, but new research has shown that it starts to develop much earlier, during a child's first years in fact. We now know that language development in the early years lays the foundation for literacy skills and adult achievement.

"This is not about getting toddlers to read," explains Dr. Linda Laidlaw, associate professor in early literacy at the University of Alberta. "There's pressure to teach children the alphabet before they start kindergarten, but there are no studies to show that if you learn to read in the early years, you're going to be at an advantage in school. This is about building the scaffolding for the language, thinking and social skills that are essential to learning to read and write."

What do parents, educators and caregivers need to know about early literacy? And what can they do to support its development?

Here, in brief, is what the experts and current research say:

A Language development precedes and lays the basis for literacy. A child's language ability at age three to four strongly predicts his or her literacy skills and learning success throughout school.

B Language and literacy involve a number of complex, interrelated areas of development, including thinking, physical, social and behavioural development.

C Early environments and experiences have a significant impact on language and literacy development.

D Language learning begins at birth. Infants naturally respond to the sounds of speech and begin vocalizing. Responsive parents and caregivers who speak to them often and encourage their attempts to communicate positively support their language development. Children raised in nurturing, language-rich environments acquire larger vocabularies and better language skills.

E The home environment plays an important role in language learning. Early learning and child care environments are important, too. High quality preschool programs improve children's language and literacy skills, and can improve outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

F Individual development in language and literacy varies a great deal and is influenced by the interaction of many factors (including socio-economics, language experience and gender).

G Reading books with children supports the growth of language and literacy. Many other activities promote language and reading as well, including singing songs, playing word games, reciting poetry and rhymes, telling stories and encouraging children to articulate their thoughts and feelings. Parents who struggle with literacy can support their children's development through these kinds of activities and by participating in family



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literacy programs offered by libraries and family support centres.

Dr. Laidlaw offers this parting advice: "Respond to your children's interests. Children are motivated to learn when their interests are supported. Use electronic media in ways that promote language, social interaction and print awareness. Technology is not necessarily evil."

For more information about early language and literacy development, please go to <http://www.cllrnet.ca/>