

# WHAT WORKS?

## *Research into Practice*

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Research Monograph # 37

How can parents and educators support young language learners?

## Supporting Early Language and Literacy

*Dr. Janette Pelletier*  
OISE, University of Toronto

The time of early childhood prior to Grade 1 is a qualitatively unique developmental period for language and literacy learning. This monograph addresses the question of how parents and educators can support young children in becoming literate learners. It begins by summarizing current research on literacy development and then offers some practical research-based strategies for those who work with young children in school settings.

### Research Tells Us

*Parents and educators can support young children in becoming literate learners by:*

- engaging children in conversation
- providing opportunities for play-based learning
- encouraging interaction with environmental print
- intentionally building phonological awareness
- focusing on letter names and letter-sound correspondences
- providing lots of experiences with print
- engaging in shared reading (and talking about it)
- building vocabulary knowledge

**JANETTE PELLETIER, PH.D.**, is Director of the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, Research Director of the Dr. R.G.N. Laidlaw Centre and a professor in the Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology, OISE, University of Toronto. She teaches and carries out research in the area of early learning.

### Key Findings from Early Literacy Research

#### 1. Engaging children in conversation facilitates learning different forms of language, expands vocabulary and can help children learn to read.

In conversation, children develop the language needed to make sense of print, specifically decontextualized language – or the language of the “not here and not now.” Narrative skill – being able to recount a story or event – is an important aspect of oral language development. Narrative links actions to consequences by referring to internal states that allow us to make sense of the social world.<sup>1</sup> Studies have shown that skill in narrative comprehension and production relates to academic performance in school, especially to learning to read and write.<sup>2</sup>

#### 2. Play is a natural context for children’s language development.

In play, children try out new ways of combining thought and language; for example, by using language to represent new ideas not tied to reality. Since dramatic play is symbolic in nature it can provide a “bridge” to printed language. Dramatic play enhances children’s comprehension of stories through “re-enactments.” Children use decontextualized language within the context of dramatic play and in recounting events derived from personal experience in their play.<sup>3</sup> Talk about play, referred to as “metaplay,” is an indicator of children’s ability to think about language and has been associated with children’s later reading

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and writing. Children's language is enhanced when adults and older children scaffold their play, particularly in complex socio-dramatic play, when children must keep in mind their own and others' roles and can even "plan" their play. This kind of play is reported to foster self-regulation.<sup>4</sup>

### **3. Children's interactions with environmental print are instrumental in forming understandings about the purposes of print in daily life.**

Children are curious about print in the environment and pay attention to it usually before they become interested in print in books.<sup>5</sup> When adults help children to attend to environmental print, children's attention gradually shifts from pictorial clues – such as symbols, shapes and colours – to the letters embedded in the sign, logo or other form of print.<sup>6</sup> In this way, it is argued, environmental print is a genuine reading resource.

### **4. Creating phonological awareness through hearing and thinking about language helps children learn to read.**

Research on reading shows that kindergarten children with well-developed "phonemic" awareness are more successful in learning to read.<sup>7</sup> When children are able to map the sounds of speech (phonemes) onto the letters (graphemes), they become aware that continuous speech is broken down into discrete sounds. Phonological awareness develops from larger units, such as words, to smaller units, such as syllables and rhymes, and finally to phonemes, the smallest units of sound.

### **5. Knowledge of letter names and letter-sound correspondences is a critical precursor to learning to read and write.**

When learning to read print [in alphabetic languages] children must translate and hook letter names to sounds – known as "decoding."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, initially, children try to map meaning onto printed forms, looking for the physical similarity between what is spoken and what is written. Very young children may believe, for example, that the word "train" should be represented by a long string of letters. As children's knowledge of letter-sound correspondences grows, they become aware that printed letters represent sounds. Letter names that cue children to letter sounds (such as 'm' or 'p') facilitate discovery of the alphabetic principle.<sup>11</sup> The rate at which children develop fluency has been shown to depend on instruction and opportunities to engage in invented spelling.<sup>12</sup>

### **6. Concepts of print reflect experience with print.**

Despite the strong views of practitioners that concepts of print such as left-to-right progression, top-to-bottom orientation and use of spaces to separate words are important milestones in early literacy development, research suggests that they are more an index of a child's knowledge about what one does with print or his/her prior experience with print in the home.<sup>13</sup> In this view, concepts of print support but do not predict children's literacy development.

### **7. Shared reading promotes narrative competence.**

Over the past 25 years, reading researchers have shown that concepts of print as well as vocabulary knowledge, understanding of story structure and general knowledge are developed through shared book reading. Some researchers claim that the quality of the interactions between adults and children is key to enhancing children's motivation to read and their literacy knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Others have suggested that discussions about books are a bridge between oral and written language as the adult leads the child to develop commonly shared meanings about print.<sup>15</sup> Some research has suggested that when ELL children are read to at home in their home language and in English, learning in both languages is improved.<sup>17</sup>

### **8. Reading and story comprehension depend on vocabulary and general knowledge.**

Learning to read print is not the same as learning to understand print. While oral comprehension may develop "naturally," reading requires instruction. Some children are able to decode and read words but they are not able to understand

## **A note about decoding ...**

Research with English Language Learners (ELL) shows that children learn to read words in their second language through decoding, despite limited oral language skills in the new language.<sup>8</sup> ELL reading research points to the importance of phonemic awareness and word recognition skills; for example, phonological awareness measured in either the child's first or second language predicts individual differences in the development of word recognition and word attack skills in the second language.<sup>9</sup>

With repeated exposure to text and opportunities to decode, all children become more fluent word readers.

## **Try "dialogic reading" ...**

An important technique in teaching with storybooks, especially in developing narrative competence, is "dialogic reading."<sup>16</sup> Here the adult facilitates the child's active role in telling the story by asking questions about the story or the pictures in the book, providing feedback in the form of repetitions and expansions, and modelling answers.

what they read; this has been attributed to a lack of adequate vocabulary.<sup>18</sup> In addition to vocabulary knowledge, top-down processing refers to children's general knowledge that helps them to make sense of the words they have decoded or recognized. Research shows that when storybooks are read out loud two or more times, and word meanings explained, children can acquire 8 to 12 word meanings per week.<sup>19</sup>

## Practical Research-based Strategies for Parents and Educators

### 1. Oral language development should be an explicit focus.

- Build on conversations introduced by the child by asking questions.
- Focus conversations to draw descriptive language from the child – talk about how things look, feel, taste, smell or work, and how they make you feel.
- Elicit mature word choices by asking children to think of alternate words with the same meaning.
- Offer children opportunities to tell stories. Plan for play as a critical context for children's language and cognitive development.

### 2. Set up classroom time and space to encourage children's socio-dramatic play.

- Document children's play through transcripts and photographs.
- Engage actively in children's play.
- Try out play planning, scribing what children say they will play.
- Discuss game playing (rules, turn-taking) and use specific vocabulary (beginning, luck, chance).

### 3. Capitalize on environmental print for early literacy development.

- Take children on neighbourhood or school walks and draw attention to purposes and meanings of signs.
- Read books about environmental print (e.g., *Signs Around Us*, *City Signs*).
- Engage children in making environmental print books, using upper/lower case and a variety of fonts, formats and styles.
- Consider the perspective of the "reader" (relates to media literacy).

### 4. Consider that phonological awareness moves from words to rhymes to syllables to sounds.

- Have children attend to words, syllables, rhymes and phonemes.
- Clap hands to count out the syllables in familiar words and names.
- Use songs to emphasize rhymes, play pattern games with rhymes.
- Have children play with phonemes by inventing songs.
- Play word games that emphasize the structure of language, teach children to blend or delete individual sounds to form words and match words based on initial sounds.

### 5. Promote recognition of alphabet letters and sounds.

- Exploit children's own names to help them hear the "sound" of letters.
- Provide opportunities to use invented spelling. Help children to sound out when they are writing. Model the process.
- Encourage creative writing, journal stories, labelling pictures; provide note paper in dramatic play areas.

### 6. Create opportunities to actively engage with print.

- Draw children's attention to the surface features of written text (e.g., ask children where to begin and end reading and which words to pay attention to on the page).
- Point to and refer to the title and the names of the author and the illustrator.

## Have fun!

Make up "silly stories" (mixed-up fairy tales) and nursery rhymes with substitutions (e.g., "Mary had a little dinosaur.").

Make alphabet and sound learning fun. Reproducible concentration games such as letter concentration, beginning sound, first letter and rhyming (and others) can be found in Pelletier, Hipfner-Boucher & Doyle (2010).<sup>20</sup>



## Literacy and Numeracy Resources and Publications ...

Web:  
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/publications.html>

Call:  
416-325-2929  
1-800-387-5514

Email:  
LNS@ontario.ca

- Raise curiosity by discussing illustrations or other interesting features on the cover.

- Point to and discuss punctuation marks. Ask, “What is this for?”

### 7. Engage in shared reading to promote motivation and literacy development.

- Use different voices to give storybook characters a unique personality and to emphasize the meaning of punctuation marks or text features such as enlarged or bold text.
- Facilitate children’s active role in telling the story by asking questions about the story or the pictures in the book. Allow children to interrupt to ask questions.
- Discuss the meaning of unfamiliar words.
- Use nursery rhymes to promote literacy development: relate nursery rhymes to children’s own experiences; engage children in dialogue that extends beyond the nursery rhyme; draw children’s attention to rhymes; recite familiar passages from nursery rhymes or songs; have children guess which nursery rhyme or song the passage is taken from.

### 8. Build reading comprehension as the ultimate goal.

- Enhance storybook comprehension by reading the story out loud two or more times, explaining word meanings.
- Guide story retelling by questions that prompt children to name characters, identify the setting, tell what happened, draw conclusions (the PEER strategy offers an approach – Prompt the child to say something about the book/Evaluate the child’s response in a positive way/Expand the child’s response by rephrasing and adding information/Repeat the prompt to make sure the child has learned<sup>21</sup>).
- Guide story comprehension using a variety of prompts that have been shown to be effective (e.g., the CROWD strategy – Completion prompts/Recall prompts/Open-ended prompts/Wh – prompts [what, where, why and how]/Distancing prompts [to help children relate to experiences outside the book<sup>21</sup>]).

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