



EMERGENT LITERACY – FROM WHAT DOES IT EMERGE?

Emergent literacy refers to that period of time prior to conventional or formal literacy instruction during which children acquire concepts, skills and knowledge about written language. They do this by observing and participating in informal experiences of reading and writing behaviour.

Research tells us that those children who come to school with emergent literacy skills will learn to read and write more easily than those less advantaged students who are unfamiliar with books and with the role that text plays in conveying meaning and enjoyment. Children without emergent literacy skills may struggle to keep pace with literacy instruction and are at increased risk of becoming disengaged with learning. This has led educators and researchers to look more closely at factors that may help to prevent reading failure.

WHAT ARE THE KEY “INGREDIENTS” OF EMERGENT LITERACY?

The indicators for emergent reading are generally differentiated into five areas. – oral language, emergent writing, print knowledge, alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness (National Early Literacy Panel, 2004). Many aspects of these important emergent literacy behaviours have been discussed in our previous newsletter articles.

- **Phonological awareness** – the awareness of and ability to “tune in to” the sounds of spoken language (newsletter no. 21 “Phonological Awareness” Sep. 2007)
- **Alphabet knowledge** – knowledge of the names of letters and the sounds they represent (newsletter no. 22 “Linking sounds and letters” Nov. 2007)
- **Metalinguistic awareness** – an appreciation of the meaning of words that describe literacy, such as ‘word’, ‘read’, ‘letters’, ‘spell’ – (newsletter 24 “Language Milestones for school success” Aug. 2008)
- **A literacy promoting environment** in which books are present, valued and shared with children. (newsletter no. 19 “Shared Stories – preparing for literacy” Mar. 2007)
- **Oral language ability**, particularly vocabulary and the ability to understand and tell ‘stories’. (newsletter no. 24 “Language Milestones for School Success” Aug. 2008)
- **Print knowledge/awareness** is an understanding of the basic conventions of print. It is a crucial foundation skill in young children’s preparation for learning to read but has perhaps until recently received less attention than other issues. This article will look more closely at this area and the implications that it has for promoting emergent literacy.

“Recommended Daily Allowances” for Emergent Literacy

Laura Justice, has written extensively about emergent literacy. She uses the analogy of a food pyramid to suggest ‘portions’ that will best promote emergent literacy skills in young children. Daily Allowances (Laura Justice, 2009) Shared storybook reading intervention

5 portions of emergent writing
5 portions of phonological awareness
10 portions of oral language
5 portions of print knowledge
2-3 portions of alphabet knowledge
AND...
plenty of hugs and praise during shared reading activities

PRINT KNOWLEDGE/AWARENESS

Print knowledge/awareness has a number of facets including

- knowledge about how print is organized in specific ways – the direction of the print from left to right and from the top to the bottom of the page for example – and the role that print plays in conveying meaning (print concept knowledge)
- interest in and knowledge of names such as ‘word’, ‘letter’ and the specific characteristics of written symbols (alphabet knowledge)
- appreciation of the role that writing plays in communicating meaning (**emergent writing**)

Measures of print knowledge in preschool children collected prior to formal schooling have been linked to the children’s later achievements in word recognition and spelling so it is important that we find ways to enhance this knowledge. This is particularly relevant for children at risk because of speech and language difficulties or those from families with limited environmental exposure to literacy. (National Early Literacy Panel, 2004).

HOW CAN WE FOSTER PRINT AWARENESS?

Although many children are constantly exposed to print on road signs, billboards and shop advertising, it would appear that this alone may be insufficient. Laura Justice suggests -

“Only when adults talk about and point to print, however, will children also talk about and look at print.” She offers some suggestions for encouraging children to attend to and interact with print.

- Providing print rich environments
- Encouraging literacy enriched play settings
- Mediated writing

SHARED READING – WHAT IS REALLY HAPPENING?

Where do children look?

Recent research which examined children's eye movements during story sharing, revealed that young children aged 4, rarely look at the text of the book – in fact less than 5% of eye fixations are on print during story book reading. As a consequence the children seldom enquired or commented about the text in their storybooks (Justice et al 2008). Other studies of the adults' behaviour (parents and educators) whilst reading stories showed that they rarely make comment about the text or refer to it by pointing or tracking it on the page.

It has been suggested that what is needed is an "embedded-explicit model" of intervention (Justice 2004) where children participate in high-quality daily activities that are natural and meaningful but involve intentional and explicit engagement with both oral and written language.

Print referencing

Justice advocates the use of specific techniques for talking about and pointing to print called **print referencing strategies**. She recommends that several of these strategies be introduced every time an adult reads with young children. Preliminary results of research (Justice et al 2009) showed that children whose teachers used print referencing style during reading made large gains in print concept knowledge, alphabet knowledge and in their ability to write their own name. It seems that it is relatively easy to train adults to add print referencing techniques to shared reading formats, particularly when they can appreciate the difference that this may make in later outcomes of formal literacy learning.

Some texts make print referencing easier.

Embedded print within the illustrations appears particularly powerful in encouraging young children to spontaneously talk about print. Also storybooks that have text in "unusual" places draw more attention from young children. This includes books that have text

- under flaps
- in speech bubbles
- that "wanders" over the page, for example following the flight path of a fly
- of large font size, or utilizes capital letters
- that is repeated

What can we say and do?

Verbal: This would include comments and questions. For example:

Where should I begin to read?

Look – that is the word I just said. It is 3 times on this page? Can you find them?

What do you think that word might say?

The mouse said "OUCH" – can you find that word "OUCH" next to the mouse?

This is the word STOP – it starts with the letter S like at the beginning of your name.

Non verbal:

Accompany comments or questions with pointing out text, particularly the text that is in "unusual" places. Point and track the book's print with your finger whilst reading the story.

We must keep in mind however the importance of engagement and a shared collaboration in story reading rather than it becoming a controlling adult game! Sharing a story should be fun and enjoyable. We must remember to not 'over do' the questions but learn to pause to allow the child to observe and make their own comments.

PROVIDING PRINT RICH ENVIRONMENTS

All adults, be they childcare workers, preschool teachers or parents, can provide a 'print rich' environment at home. Parents can model their own literacy activities such as reading the newspaper, writing emails and writing notes. Opportunities for explicit comments about the value of written language in real life situations are numerous. Ask the child to 'help you' write the shopping list, or Christmas present list; point to the steps in the book as you follow a simple recipe; look up the TV guide together and find the correct day and time; find the next playgroup or football clinic written in a diary or calendar; help them sign their name on the birthday card; write labels for jars and food items. Create a home library (bookshelf) where the child can keep their favourite books close by for browsing or reading.

LITERACY ENRICHED PLAY SETTINGS

Adults can also facilitate print awareness by encouraging children to play games which involve literacy related tools such as paper, envelopes, pens, stamps, crayons, lists, appointment book, phone book, maps, magazines, menus, price tags and signs. These 'props' help children role play meaningful and socially interactive literacy events - shopping, banking, choosing books at the library, playing school, visiting the post office, hair salon, vet or writing tickets for a plane trip. They will be learning about the world at the same time as learning how written language works.

MEDIATED WRITING

By providing a small well equipped children's writing centre we can make it easier for young learners to experiment with writing. Encourage them to draw, copy or write their name, trace letters, play with letter cards or manipulate magnetic letters. Talk about letter names and the sounds they represent. Children may initiate a 'writing lesson'. When they begin to ask how to spell words or invent their own spelling they are showing important foundation skills for literacy. Children might also like to dictate a label, sentence or story for you to write.

CONCLUSION

Research tells us that those children who arrive at school with foundation emergent literacy skills will benefit from literacy instruction more than their peers who arrive with little interest in and experience with the printed word. Research also indicates that even those children who are read to often do not spontaneously extract information about print from the pages of their storybooks unless the interaction explicitly focuses on the text. Remember when we talk about print it encourages children to do the same. By providing rich print environments, opportunities for 'literacy' play and by including specific referencing to print as we enjoy shared reading with our young children we can give them a positive start to literacy instruction.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Let's Read Program www.letsread.com.au

Read it Again – PreK. Laura Justice & Anita McGinty. A Preschool Curricular Supplement to Promote Language and Literacy Foundations <http://www.myreaditagain.com>

Justice, L. M., Kaderavek, J. N., Xiato Fan, Sofka, A. & Hunt, A. (2009). Accelerating Preschoolers' Early Literacy Development Through Classroom-Based Teacher-Child Storybook Reading and Explicit Print Referencing. *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*. Vol 40. 67-85

Justice, L. M., & Ezell, H. K. (2004). Print Referencing: An Emergent Literacy Enhancement Strategy and its Clinical Applications. *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*. Vol 35. 185- 193.

Justice, L.M., Pullen, P.C. & Pence, K. (2008). Influence of verbal and nonverbal references to print on preschoolers' visual attention to print during storybook reading. *Developmental Psychology*. Vol 44 (3) 855-866

National Early Literacy Panel 2009 – information includes the National Early Literacy Panel 2009 www.nifl.gov/earlychildhood/earlyresearch.html

National Institute for Literacy – articles for parents and educators
www.nifl.gov/publications/publications.html

Emergent and Early Literacy Intervention: Strategies for the clinic and the classroom. Laura Justice, Speech Pathology National Conference, Adelaide, May 2009, Get Ready to Read. <http://www.getreadytoread.org>

Parents will find a fun emergent literacy video with plenty of print referencing in the online games section - Chapter 1: Gus and Inky's Underwater Adventure Checklist http://www.getreadytoread.org/images/stories/downloads/home_checklist.rev.pdf

O'Connor, R. E., Notari-Syverson, A., & Vadasy, P. F. (2005), *Ladders to Literacy: A Kindergarten Activity Book*, Brookes Publishing Company, Baltimore

This newsletter was originally written and published by Sue Reilly and Elizabeth Love in November 2009. It was re-formatted with slight changes by Lucia Smith in May 2012.