

Early Literacy Skill Development across the Early Years

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There is no question about the strong connection between language and literacy development. As children's language develops, their understanding of literacy increases. Reciprocally, as children's literacy develops, their language skills expand and grow. Oral language and literacy development begin in infancy and progress in young children's lives when they have appropriate guidance and interactions. The processes of speaking, listening, reading, and writing all develop in an interrelated and interconnected manner.

Early literacy foundation skills include oral language, phonological processing, and written language. Oral language skills include learning to understand and use words to communicate. Phonological processing is the ability to make sense of the speech sounds when listening to language and to pronounce words when speaking. An important aspect of this processing is the development of phonological awareness by attending to and learning to manipulate syllables and sounds in words. Written language includes an awareness of print, learning the alphabet, and becoming a writer. The following table outlines how young children develop these important skills, across the early years.

Notice the emergence of the oral language and the connection to phonological processing as expressive language develops in the infant and toddler years. Look at the connection to written language as young children learn to focus on word structures, connect sounds to alphabet letters, and experiment with writing them.

Age Range	Oral Language	Phonological Processing	Written Language		
			Print Awareness	Alphabet Knowledge	Writing Development
0-12 months	Emerging speech sounds and expression with cooing and babbling	Emerging sensitivity to speech sounds	Emerging book awareness	No awareness of alphabet letters	No awareness of making written marks
1-2 years	Emerging vocabulary saying single words	Sensitivity to word boundaries	Recognition of familiar books; emerging book orientation		Emerging use of writing tools to make marks

2-3 years	Emerging sentences with simple word combinations; continued vocabulary growth	Expanded use of speech sounds in words	Emerging symbol recognition	Emerging awareness of alphabet letter names and shapes	Begin writing with scribbles
3-4 years	Adding word parts like -ing, -ed, -s endings;	Emerging syllable and	Emerging print orientation, top		Writing with mock letters

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	continued vocabulary and sentence growth	rhyme awareness	to bottom, left to right		and then random letters
4-5 years	Combining sentences; continued vocabulary and sentence growth	Rhyme production and beginning phoneme awareness	Emerging punctuation, capitalization use; emerging 1:1 word correspondence	Learning more letter names and some sound connections	Partial word (semiphonetic) writing using invented spelling
5-6 years	More complex sentences; continued vocabulary growth	More complete phoneme awareness of simple words	Expanded punctuation, capitalization use; established 1:1 word correspondence	Complete letter name and sound knowledge	More complete word writing (phonetic) with invented spelling

Babies

As babies are “bathed” in the language they are loved in, they become *sensitive* to the speech sounds in the words they hear. They begin to play with and practice making those sounds. Around 3 to 4 months, babies begin to coo, which is vocal play using vowel sounds (e.g. ah-oo ah-oo). Around 6 to 8 months, babies add consonant sounds to their vocal play beginning to babble (e.g., “babagagadada”). As part of their cooing and babbling, they learn about inflection and pitch patterns in speech (prosody). They also learn to connect gestures with phrases in familiar routines like waving for *Hi* and *Bye* and in common finger plays like *peek-a-boo* and *pat-a-cake*. These vocalizations have a sound structure (phonology) but no intentional expressive meaning, yet.

Their understanding of language grows at an incredible rate. They learn to tune into words and word boundaries by knowing where one word ends and the next one begins in the flow of speech. For example, babies learn to recognize the word *bottle* when their caregiver says, “Do you want a bottle now? You must be really hungry.”

With book reading experiences, babies learn to make connections with the words they hear to the pictures on the pages. With many exposures to the same books, babies learn to anticipate the pictures on the next pages and want to turn the page to see them. They may recognize familiar and favorite books by the pictures, but generally do not have any awareness of the graphic symbols, yet.

Babies Emerging into Toddlers

Around 12 months, with a range between 8 and 14 months of age, babies learn to say their first words. These first words contain a sound structure (phonology), meaning (semantics), and expression (prosody). Babies associate something important in their everyday routines and say a consistent syllable to express true words. These first words are usually simple and often repeated syllables, like *dada*, *mama*, *baba*, and communicate the entire message. “Mama” may mean

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Mama, pick me up! or “baba” may demand *I want my bottle now*. At this level, babies’ understanding of words far exceeds the number of words they are able to say. The appreciation of the “first word” stage is a significant developmental milestone that is universal across many cultures and languages. Families and caregivers naturally tend to encourage this process.

Phonologically, children develop greater sensitivity to more sounds and word patterns learning to distinguish words and then pronounce words more clearly as they learn to say more speech sounds. The word *bottle* may be first pronounced as “băbă” then “bădə” changing to “bădo” as a young child becomes more sensitive to word pronunciations.

From a print perspective, babies and toddlers generally don’t recognize any symbolic written or print images, yet. With book reading experiences, they begin to orient and turn books to the right side up and learn to turn pages. They may “read” familiar books with their stuffed animal friends and dolls, imitating the book reading behavior they have

experienced. When they see writing happening, they learn that writing tools make marks, and, if given the opportunity, they make try experiment making marks on any available surface.

Toddlers Emerging into Preschoolers

Toddlers, between 18 and 24 months, exhibit an explosion of vocabulary words and word combinations in short sentences. When children have acquired a vocabulary of about 50 expressive words, they begin to combine words together to say simple sentences (e.g., “more juice”, “no go”, “cookie me”). These sentences contain simple word order structures. The meaning is understood by recognizing the situation, by interpreting the child’s body language, listening to the way the sentence is said, and engaging with the child. For example, a child may say, “Mommy sock,” which could have many meanings such as:

“Mommy, here’s my sock.”

“Mommy, here’s your sock.”

“Mommy, where’s my sock?”

“Mommy, I took my sock off.”

As their phonological sensitivity expands, young children continue to learn to say more speech sounds, and their words generally become more understandable. They combine more words in their sentences and add endings (morphemes) to their words like plurals (e.g. “hats”), possessive markers (e.g. “boy’s hat”), -ing endings (e.g. “sitting”), and past tense -ed form (e.g. “sitted”). At first, they may use sentence structures such as “Me goed to a store.” and “What doing?” as they learn grammatical forms. These structures become more developed as their language grows. At this level, all of the structural components of language (phonology, semantics, morphology, syntax, and prosody) are present.

With their expanded language use and understanding, they begin to develop early phonological awareness. This stage occurs when children realize that the words they say not only have a meaning, but these words also have a basic structure that can be played with and changed. Their rhyme skills develop as they begin to identify words that rhyme or sound the same at the end. They learn to play with syllable parts of words. For example, as they learn words to songs, they may sing, “Twin – kle, twin – kle, li – ttle star” segmenting the syllables in the words *twinkle* and *little*. They might say the word *dinosaur* by stomping their feet for each syllable saying “di – no

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– saur.” They may be able to find a particular animal in a group when you ask them to find the “kan – ga – roo.” These skills are important early foundations for later literacy learning.

In written language, children learn to visually recognize print symbols in their environment by the way they look. They might connect the logo to their favorite fast-food restaurant, know that STOP says “stop” in a red octagon, and know what their first name looks like in print. Generally, they recognize printed symbols as whole

entities. The individual parts, such as letters, have no meaning to them, yet. Children expand their book awareness and may “read” the pictures in familiar books telling the story. With more exposure, they often begin to learn the names of individual letters recognizing their shapes, particularly those in their own name. More often at this level, they do not have an understanding that letters represent speech sounds used to read and spell words.

Their understanding of how writing works develops as they learn that there is a distinction between drawing and writing. They may compose a note or make a list using a scribble in a horizontal wavy line. Scribbles may develop into letter-like marks, called mock letters, as young children recognize that the written words have spaces between the letters.

Older Preschoolers

With a growing understanding of more complex language, older preschoolers use *adult-like* language. They have learned to say many speech sounds in the words they know. There may still be a few developing sounds, such as /r/ and /th/, but in general, their speech is understandable. The words they know how to say have grown to well over 1000 words. They are able to put these words into longer, more complex sentences. They combine sentences into stories, descriptions, and conversations. By 5 years of age, nearly all the basic grammatic structures of oral language are in place.

On a phonological awareness level, rhyme recognition grows to rhyme production, being able to generate words that rhyme by changing the initial sounds in the words, saying “cat” rhymes with *hat*, as an example. With growth in their cognitive development, their phonological awareness develops into more specific phoneme awareness. They learn to recognize and identify the beginning sounds in words and are able to group items with the same beginning sound (recognizing that their friends’ names, Sam and Sara, sound the same). The ability to identify and isolate speech sounds in words is a required foundation skill for letter-sound learning leading to early reading and writing.

With more experience interacting with storybook reading and exposure to the print in their environment, preschoolers learn more print conventions such as a left-to-right orientation, spaces between printed words, and the use of punctuation in sentences. They transition from following print with a finger sweep to pointing to each word in familiar text with 1:1 word correspondence.

Alphabet learning is a big focus at this level. Children learn to name letters, recognizing their shapes. They typically know the letters in their first name and in words that are important to them. Generally, they are able to recognize more uppercase letters than lower case ones, and they

may learn a few letter sound connections. It is not expected that preschool children

transitioning into kindergarten know all the uppercase and lowercase letter names or sounds.

Their growing letter learning and phonemic awareness skills are reflected in preschoolers' writing. They transition from using mock letters to using random letters in their message writing, knowing that writing includes letters. By the end of the prekindergarten year, with appropriate guidance and encouragement, preschoolers may learn to apply their letter name and sound knowledge in their writing, using invented spellings. They may write "I LK TD BS." (I like Teddy bears.) expressing a desire for a stuffed animal friend. Encouraging preschool children to write messages at their developmental level is a powerful learning opportunity to enhance their developing understanding of letters and sounds.

Preschoolers Turning into Kindergarteners

With so much typical development occurring during the infant, toddler, and preschooler years, children entering kindergarten have the oral language foundations to transition into more conventional literacy learning, which is a primary focus in the early grades. Their ability to relate narratives continues to develop into telling stories with a beginning, middle and end. They include more episodes to describe what is happening and adding feelings, emotions, and motivations of their characters. Their narrative skills are supported by continued growth in vocabulary as well as understanding and use of more complex sentences. A few kindergarteners may have some remaining speech sound differences and a few underdeveloped grammatical structure use, but their oral language should be basically in place.

Phonemic awareness continues to develop as children expand their ability to identify and isolate beginning, then final, and eventually middle sounds of simple words, which leads to being able to hear each sound in CVC words. They can report that the sounds in the word *fish* are /f/ /i/ sh/. Rhyming skills grow to be able to provide a string of words that rhyme changing the beginning sound by saying "light, white, bite, sight."

With developing speech sound isolation and identification and a foundation in learning letter names, children learn to combine these skills to develop a true understanding of the alphabetic principle connecting symbols (letters) to phonemes (sounds) in the words they say, hear, and see. They learn to decode simple words by saying the sounds represented by the letters and blending the sounds together (e.g., seeing the word *dog*, sounding out each letter saying /d-o-g/, and reading "dog"). Attending to more discrete details of how print looks, children learn more print conventions such as when to use capital letters, where to put punctuation, how to write letters legibly, and when to use spaces between the words they write.

Children's invented, experimental, or temporary spellings of the words they write are generally a partial or semiphonetic version (e.g., "lv" for *love*, "wn" for *one*, "tb" for *table*). They progress to the phonetic level including letters that represent more of the sounds in the words they are writing (e.g., "luv" for *love*, "wun" for *one*, and "tabl" for *table*). Familiar words that have been repeatedly encountered become part of a child's

visual memory and are easily identified. Experimental spelling is a powerful way of helping children improve their understanding of the connection between letters and sounds.

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Across each of the age levels, early literacy development is dependent on the interconnected relationship of oral language, phonological processing, and written language. Oral language is facilitated by phonological processing and exposure to the world of print. Exposure to written language enhances oral language leading to better developed phonological processing and phonological awareness.

