

Shoot for the SSTaRS!

To be ready for success in school, young children need to have a strong foundation of **early literacy skills** – the skills required *before* a child starts to read or write. Studies have shown that children who start school with higher levels of these skills go on to have greater academic success.

By making small but important tweaks to the way you interact with children, you can make literacy-learning a natural and enjoyable part of everyday routines and activities.

Vocabulary – A Key Building Block of Literacy

One of the important early literacy skills children need to be prepared for school is **vocabulary**. The larger a child’s vocabulary in preschool, the easier it will be for her to read and understand stories later on.

But it isn’t just about how many words children know. How well they *understand* those words is important as well. To build children’s understanding of new words, you’ll need to “Shoot for the SSTaRS”.

Stress the new word to focus the children’s attention

Show the children what the word means

Tell the children what the word means

and

Relate the word to children’s personal experiences and knowledge, as well as to other words and situations

Say it again —and read the book again

Stress

To stress a word, pause for a moment before and after the word. Also, emphasize the word by using a louder or quieter voice when you say it. For example, “He was feeling... *exhausted*... after all that running.”

Show... and Tell

Show the children what the word means by:

- Pointing to pictures in the book.
- Using facial expressions.
- Using actions or gestures (for example, slump your shoulders when saying “exhausted”)

Tell

Tell the children what the word means by:

- Explaining its meaning. For example, “He’s *selfish*. ‘Selfish’ means that he only cares about what *he* wants, and not about what other people want.”
- Talking about the category the word belongs to. For example, “an eggplant is a vegetable.”
- Describing what the word is and what it’s not. For example, “A passenger is someone who rides in a bus, a car, a train or a plane. But a passenger can’t be a driver.”

And

Relate

Relate the word to familiar words or experiences.

- Words – Describe the word using simpler words that the children already know. For example, when talking about the word *exhausted*, use more familiar words like “tired” or “sleepy”.
- Experiences – If you come across the word “exhausted” in a book, ask the children about a time when *they* felt exhausted

Say

Say it again – The more times the children hear a word, the more likely they’ll be to understand and remember it. Repeat the word by:

- Reading the same book several times.
- Using the word in different situations throughout the day.
- Using the word before or during book reading (e.g. while looking at a picture) or after book reading while having a conversation about the story.

Examples of Shooting for the **SSTaRS** with “pedestrian”

Show

Point to an illustration

Point to a picture of a pedestrian in the book.

Act it out or use gestures

Demonstrate walking down the street like a pedestrian.

Tell

Name the category to which the word belongs or define the word

“A pedestrian is a person who gets from one place to another by walking.”

Use other words

“This woman is a pedestrian. She is walking on the sidewalk.”

Provide details about the word’s meaning

“Pedestrians walk on the sidewalk. Most streets have side - walks just for pedestrians so they are safe from the cars and trucks.”

“Pedestrians need to look both ways before they cross a street to make sure they don’t get hit by a car. Traffic lights protect pedestrians because they tell the cars to stop so the pedestrians can cross safely.”

“These people are pedestrians since they are walking to where they need to go instead of taking the bus or a car.”

Draw on the children’s personal experiences or background knowledge

“I walked from my house to the store last week, so I was a pedestrian then. Tell me when you were a pedestrian recently.”

“A pedestrian crossing has some stripes painted on the road and a big sign showing people walking. Some pedestrian crossings have flashing lights. The stripes and the sign and the flashing lights tell cars to stop if a pedestrian wants to cross the street. Have you ever crossed a street at a pedestrian crossing?”

Relate

Compare and contrast word meanings of synonyms and antonyms

Compare “walker” and “jogger” to “pedestrian”

Compare “driver” and “passenger” to “pedestrian”

“If someone is riding a bike on the sidewalk, is she a pedestrian? Why not?”

Suggest other situations in which the word could be used

“Where else do we see pedestrians? We see pedestrians walking along the sides of roads or crossing the road. We don’t see pedestrians on highways because there are no sidewalks and the cars are moving too fast. It would be too dangerous to be a pedestrian on a highway.”

Read the book three times

Say it again

Make the word sparkle throughout the day

When out for a walk, talk about the children being pedestrians and point out other pedestrians. Talk about pedestrians and drivers and the rules pedestrians must follow.

What other early literacy skills do children need to learn?



Conversation - As children engage in conversation, they can draw on their knowledge and experience to make new connections and form new knowledge. The better their conversational skills now, the easier it will be for them to understand what they read later on.



Vocabulary - The more words children know, the easier it is for them to learn new words and to gain meaning from the stories they read.



Story comprehension - Experience listening to and understanding stories will eventually make it easier for children to read and write stories on their own.



Print knowledge - Before children can read and write, they must understand how print works. For example, they'll need to know that print is made up of letters of the alphabet, that letters combine to make words and that print is read from left to right.



Sound awareness - To be prepared to read, children must understand that words can be broken down into syllables and smaller sounds, and that letters correspond to certain sounds.

To learn more about what you can do to build these critical skills, visit www.hanen.org/Getting-Ready-To-Read

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically. For more information on The Hanen Centre and its programs and resources, visit www.hanen.org.