

Building Early Literacy Skills in Children on the Autism Spectrum or with Social Communication Difficulties

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Emergent literacy skills are the building blocks of learning to read and write. These early skills are essential for all children to learn, but can be particularly important for children on the autism spectrum or with social communication difficulties. This is because the areas of literacy where these children need the most help often mirror their areas of difficulty in communication. So when you promote their early literacy skills, you also support their communication.

What early literacy skills does your child need to learn?

Vocabulary – Knowing as many words as possible so that it’s easier to learn new words and gain meaning from stories.

Story understanding – Understanding not only what is happening in a book, but why it is happening – for example, how the thoughts and feelings of a character influence what they say or do. This involves the ability to read “between the lines” to figure out things that aren’t explicitly stated in the text.

Print knowledge – Understanding how print works – for example, knowing that print represents what we say, that letters make up words and that we read from left to right.

Sound awareness – Understanding that words can be broken down into syllables and smaller sounds and that letters correspond to certain sounds.

What literacy challenges might your child face?

When developing early literacy skills, children on the autism spectrum may experience challenges that are related to their difficulties with communication. They may need extra support in particular areas, such as:

- **Understanding** – Difficulties with language comprehension, organization and planning can make it difficult to understand what’s happening in a story and how events are unfolding.
- **Perspective-taking** – When children find it hard to understand the motivation of characters in a book, it can be difficult for them to follow the story.

- **Attention** – Sometimes difficulties with focus can make it difficult to attend to a book.
- **Seeing the big picture** – Sometimes children get caught up in small details so they have difficulty grasping the overall story.

What can you do to help?

There are many things you can do to support your child's emergent literacy development, and what you do now can have a big impact on his literacy and language skills later on. Talk to your child's SLP, educator or early intervention professional to learn about specific interaction techniques you can use to meet your child's individual early literacy needs.

In the meantime, here are some tips for creating the kind of environment that will set the stage for your child to learn early literacy skills in a way that's enjoyable for both of you:

- **Make a variety of printed materials accessible** – Keep books, magazines and other printed materials in different places around your home where your child can easily see and reach them. Talk to your child about the information and intended message shared in these materials.
- **Include books based on your child's interests** – Choose storybooks that include illustrations of things your child likes and are relevant to your child's experiences. Also consider including non-fiction books and magazines on topics that interest your child.
- **Approach book reading as an opportunity for conversation by:**
 - paying attention to what your child is interested in and take the time to talk about it.
 - being flexible – Spend more time on the pages your child likes, and allow him to turn the pages backward or forward when he wants to.
 - talking about the story or the pictures in the book by relating them to your child's experiences.

About The Hanen Centre

The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit organization committed to promoting the best possible language, literacy and social skills in young children. Hanen specializes in providing parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the evidence-based knowledge and training they need to support all young children's language development. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those on the autism spectrum, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

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