



Getting Ready to Read

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The words “reading” and “writing” usually conjure up images of school-aged children sitting at desks practicing these skills under the teacher’s guidance. So if you have a young child, you may think that you can leave these skills alone until your child starts school, and that your child’s teacher will lead the way to literacy.

But did you know that...

- there are many skills that children need to learn *before* they can learn to read and write. These are called **early literacy skills**.
- many studies have shown that children who develop stronger early literacy skills are more likely to have better success at school.
- young children learn best about literacy by talking and interacting with their parents about literacy-related things that interest them in daily life. For example, young children learn about literacy when their parents point out printed words on the cereal box, explain the plot of a favourite storybook, play grocery store and write pretend shopping lists, or recite rhymes.

What are *early literacy skills*?

The term “early literacy skills” refers to the knowledge that provides the foundation for learning to read and write. There are five early literacy skills that children need to develop before they start school:

- **Conversation** – Your child’s ability to speak and understand language will help him understand and think about what he reads later on.
- **Vocabulary** – Studies have shown that the size of a child’s vocabulary in kindergarten predicts his ability to learn to read [1]. This is because the more words a child knows, the easier it is for him to learn new ones, and to understand the sentences and stories he reads.

- **Story comprehension** – Knowing the letter names and their sounds isn't very helpful if your child doesn't understand the meaning of a story. Providing your child with many opportunities to listen to and understand stories will eventually make it easier for him to read and write stories on his own.
- **Print knowledge** – Before a child can read and write on his own, he needs to be aware of how print works. For example, he needs to understand that print is made up of letters, that each letter has a name, that we read from left to right, and that print can be found in many places (including signs, books, magazines, package labels, on the iPad, etc).
- **Sound awareness** – This is the awareness that speech can be broken down into smaller units – i.e. speech can be broken down into words, which can be broken down further into syllables and individual sounds. Sound awareness includes letter-sound knowledge, which involves knowing that letters represent sounds. Children with strong sound awareness tend to become better readers and writers [2].

How to build your child's early literacy skills at home

You don't need special materials or activities to build your child's early literacy skills. In fact, your child will learn best if you look at books that s/he has chosen, and you have conversations during your everyday activities and routines.

Here are some ideas for building your child's early literacy skills during everyday life:

- **Breakfast** – Point out the words (and explain what they mean, if necessary) and letters on the front of the cereal box, carton of milk, or apple juice bottle.
- **Bath-time** – On a shampoo or bubble bath bottle, find a word that begins with the same letter as your child's name. For example: "That word says 'bubble.' 'Bubble' begins with the letter B, just like your name, Brent." Some faucets have the "H" for hot and "C" for cold on them, which provides another opportunity for you to point out print in your child's environment.
- **Grocery shopping** – Make a shopping list together with your child, reading and pointing to the words after you write them. Take the list to the store. Look at the store flyer together when you arrive at the store and read from your list. You can also point out print on price tags, the aisle signage, and package labels as you shop. You can play a game involving sounds while you shop. For example, while you pass by the milk section, tell your child "I'm looking for something in this aisle that starts with the 'mmm' sound. Can you help me find something that starts with 'mmm'?" You may have to add a clue such as, "It's something we drink that is white."
- **In the car** – Develop your child's sound awareness by playing a guessing game. Take turns thinking of words that rhyme or start with the same sound. For example, "I'm thinking of an animal that starts with the 'tuh' sound". Again, you may have to add clues if your child is unable to answer, such as, "It's a big cat with stripes."
- **On a walk** – Stimulate your child's sound awareness by finding things that start with the same sound ("I spy something that starts with the sound 'ssss'" or "Can you find something else that starts with the 'ssss' sound?"), or things that rhyme ("I see something that rhymes with 'far'"). Going for a walk is also a great time for conversation and for highlighting new words, like

“bungalow”, “humid”, “pavement”, “brisk”, “dew”, or “pedestrian.” Ideas about helping your child learn new words can be found in our article [“Build Your Child’s Vocabulary.”](#)

- **Using the iPad or computer** – You can emphasize letters and sounds on the keyboard and help your child type some letters. When you join your child for a computer game, you can point out instructions that explain how the game is played. When looking up something on the Internet together, track the print with your finger as you read some of the information to your child. Have a conversation about what you have looked up together, asking questions to ensure your child understands what you read.

- **Bedtime** – It’s great to share a book before bed with your child. The trick is to read *with* your child, not just *to* your child. To do this, you need to follow your child’s lead, allowing him to pick an interesting story, and then observe his interests during the book. You can turn book reading into a conversation by making comments related to whatever sparks your child’s interest during the book. You can ask preschool-aged children some open-ended questions, aimed at helping them understand and think about the story (such as “What would you do if you were in that situation?”, or “Why do you think he got off the bus?”) [3]. To ensure you are having a back-and-forth conversation about the book, pause and wait for your child to participate, and avoid bombarding your child with questions or asking questions that “test” your child [2].

It’s never too early to start building your child’s early literacy skills. Most of the early literacy skills mentioned above develop in children between the ages of three to five, but there are some skills you can start to nurture even earlier. For example, the ideas above about sharing books are appropriate for two year olds, and three year olds can benefit from conversations that highlight new vocabulary, sounds, and print in their environment (e.g. “look at that red sign, it says S T O P”). By incorporating some of these ideas into everyday routines with your child, you will encourage an awareness of print and sounds as well as a love of books.

The ideas above come from a new Hanen resource for parents, *I’m Ready! How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success* [2], aimed at helping parents promote their child’s early literacy skills at home. Based on the most current research about early literacy development, this beautifully illustrated book makes it easy to turn everyday activities into opportunities for literacy learning.

References

1. Rowe, M. (2012). A Longitudinal Investigation of the Role of Quantity and Quality of Child-Directed Speech in Vocabulary Development. *Child Development*: 83(5), 1762-1774.
2. Greenberg, J. & Weitzman, E. (in press). *I’m Ready! How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success*. Toronto: Hanen Early Language Program.
3. Pepper, J. & Weitzman, E. (2004). *It Takes Two to Talk: A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays*. Toronto: Hanen Early Language Program.

About The Hanen Centre

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, please visit www.hanen.org.

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