

Myth:

Children Can Be Too Young to Start Learning Literacy Skills

Introduction

Literacy learning begins at birth and there is even some anecdotal evidence that literacy learning begins before birth. Does that statement seem unbelievable to you? It isn't. The truth is that developing literacy skills begins with an individual acquiring skills like:

- Attending to you when you speak.
- Focusing on a picture.
- Using facial expression, vocalizations, or body language (arched back, reaching for or pushing an object) to communicate that he/she is enjoying (or not enjoying) a story or song.
- Reaching for and eventually pointing to objects in the environment and, at some point, pointing to words and pictures in books.
- Gaining physical skills that will allow him/her to hold a book, turn a page, type, or hold a pen.

These basic skills, learned in the first months and years of life, create a foundation for learning to read and write (Sturm & Clendon, 2003).

You might be wondering how children learn these skills. They do it through play and conversation (including exposure to literacy activities) long before they can participate in systematic literacy instruction (van Kleek & Schuele, 2010). Consider the following examples:



Oliver is focusing on the picture in the book. He is learning what to do with a book by watching his mother. He sees her turn pages, hold the book right-side up, and stop on each page to look at the picture and talk. Oliver is gaining the foundations of literacy.

Angela and her older sister, Susan, are reading together. Angela has already learned how to handle a book. She uses story-reading behaviors she has already learned, like babbling while looking at pictures and pointing to them. Now, she is learning that books can be fun and entertaining even on her own.



Gina recognizes pictures in books. She is paying attention to what happens in the story and responds to it. Sometimes when she sees a picture of a toy like one she has, she will go and get it. She is making connections to the story.

Literacy activities, play, and conversation provide children with a foundation for learning to read and write. Even as skills grow, these activities provide an opportunity for children to use the literacy skills they are gaining in real life situations. More academic learning experiences such as those found in Accessible Literacy Learning (ALL) can be added as learners start to develop simple skills, interests, and abilities like those in the ALL Readiness Checklist (Light & McNaughton, 2011).

- Understanding basic questions and instructions.
- Understanding simple conversation about events outside the immediate environment.
- Recognizing pictures and/or line drawings.
- Communicating with speech, signs, photographs, line drawings, and/or other symbols.
- Demonstrating an interest in books, letters, and/or the keyboard.
- Having a reliable physical means to indicate a response.
- Participating in an activity organized and directed by an adult for 5-10 minutes.

Demonstrating these behaviors can be a signal that an individual has or is developing the ability to participate in and benefit from systematic literacy learning programs like ALL.

Remember, though, that literacy learning does not begin with academic learning experiences or systematic instruction. This learning actually begins at birth and continues with exposure to literacy activities through play and everyday life. No child is too young for that!

References

Light, J. & McNaughton, D. (2011). *Accessible Literacy Learning (ALL) Instructional Guide*. Pittsburgh, PA: DynaVox Systems LLC.

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