

Developing literacy

Literacy is most commonly understood as reading and writing. But before children can read and write, they need to learn about sounds, words, language, books and stories. You have a vital role to play in helping your child with early literacy development.

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Encouraging literacy development

The growth of literacy skills is a **vital part of your child's overall development**. It's the foundation for doing well at school, socialising with others, developing independence, managing money and working.

But before your child learns to read and write, he needs to develop the building blocks for literacy – the ability to speak, listen, understand, watch and draw.

With time, and your support, your child will also come to understand the connection between letters on a page and spoken sounds. For this to happen, she'll need plenty of experience with:

- pictures and objects – how you can use words to talk about them
- letters and words – their shapes, sounds and names
- sounds – how words can rhyme, begin and end with the same letters, be broken up into parts (for example, [syllables](#)), be formed by blending different sounds, and so on.

This will prepare your child for school, when he starts learning the more formal aspects of literacy.

You can help your child's literacy development by **communicating** with her, **reading** with her and **teaching her about sounds** in ways that are fun for both of you.



The language experiences that children have before they start school form multiple and powerful brain connections. These connections are used for language, thinking and understanding. Without activities like talking, singing and reading, the brain doesn't develop this rich network of connections.

Communicating: its importance in literacy development

Bonding and interacting with your baby or child helps create a sense of security in him, and a desire for him to interact with you in return.

You might notice your baby responds to your smiles and baby talk. She might try to imitate your sounds and facial expressions. When you repeat your toddler's babble, it lets her know she's communicating. Singing to



did you know



A child learns the meanings of about 1000 words a year from birth to the start of school.

By the age of 10, children are learning most of their new words through reading – up to about 12 000 words in Grade 4 and 80 000 by the end of high school.

her teaches her about the rise and fall of sounds. It also introduces her to the music and stories of her culture. All of these back-and-forth interactions are getting your child ready for talking and socialising.

What you can do

- Copy the sounds your baby makes and don't be afraid to use baby talk – it helps babies understand how language is put together.
- Sing with your child. You can visit our [Baby Karaoke](#) page for ideas on what to sing.
- Talk to your child about the everyday things you're doing and seeing together. For example, 'Let's get the washing now', 'Look at the red bird' or 'Yum, what a nice lunch we're having'.
- Name people, items at the supermarket and special features on different objects – for example, the velcro on shoes or buttons on a shirt.
- Talk about feelings and chat about whether your child is happy or sad. You can help out by giving him the words to describe his emotions. This can help him understand how others feel too.
- Listen to your child. Follow her lead and talk about things she brings up. If she asks a question, give her the chance to come up with answers before you step in. For example, you can respond by saying, 'What do you think that is?', 'What do you think it's used for?'
- Share stories with your child. You could share funny or interesting stories from your childhood or tell him about your family's past. You could take turns creating a story together.
- As your child gets older, teach her that words can be broken down into segments. For example, 'man' is made up of m-a-n. Also show how parts of spoken words can be blended to produce whole words. For example, r-u-n or r-un or ru-n makes 'run'.
- You can also play a game that gets your child thinking about the different sounds in words. For example, 'Say the word butter. Say it again but don't say "but" '. Your child might say 'er' or 'ter'. This helps your child understand that words are made up of sounds.

Reading: its importance in literacy development

It's a good idea to **read with your child often** – you can start from birth onwards. Children who have had experiences with language and print from an early age are more likely to develop a solid literacy foundation.

Reading with your child:

- gives you enjoyable time with him as you share an activity, looking at pictures and playing with words
- helps him start to appreciate what books have to offer, and shows him that books can give both pleasure and information
- helps him learn the sounds of letters in spoken language
- helps him understand that stories aren't coming from you, but from the words on the page – this teaches him about how the printed word works
- helps him develop a larger vocabulary, which increases his understanding, pleasure and interest in reading (this is because books offer more unusual words than are used in everyday language or on television)
- improves his thinking and problem-solving skills
- can start a conversation about a new concept, an event or something that interests your child.

What you can do

- Read with your child. You can start from birth, but it's never too late to begin.
- When your child is old enough, encourage her to hold the book and turn the pages. This will help her start to understand that the book should be a certain way up, and that pages are always turned in the same direction.
- Slide your finger along underneath the words as you read them, pointing out each word. This indicates to your child that we always start on the left and move to the right when reading English, helping him start to understand the rules of reading.
- Point out pictures and talk about the pictures your child points to.
- Make the sounds of animals or other objects in the book – have fun!



[Let's Read](#) is an Australian program that promotes reading with babies and children aged 0-5 years. Let's Read resources include reading tipsheets and book suggestion lists.

Rhyme: its importance in literacy development

Rhyming is a great way to teach children the connection between the sound of a word and how it's written.

What you can do

- Play games that involve rhyming. Rhyming words helps children appreciate beginning and ending sounds – for example, 'cat, pat and mat'. You can play them at any time – in the car, while shopping or at the dinner table.
- Play games that involve the sound and rhythm of words. You could try 'I Spy' and tongue twisters such as 'She sells seashells by the seashore'.
- Read rhyming books, such as *The Cat in the Hat* or *Doodledum Dancing*.



You might like to read about more [activities to promote literacy](#).

Signs of early literacy difficulties

Children develop at different rates. Some children with early literacy difficulties will catch up to their peers. But some children who make slow early progress often need extra help. If they struggle early on, they can experience delays in literacy development over the long term.

There are some early signs that your child might be having trouble with early literacy skills. These signs involve both oral language (vocabulary and listening skills) and knowledge of word structure (knowing letters, rhyming, sounding out and blending sounds in simple words).

Literacy difficulties at 3-4 years

Seek help or advice if **most of the time** your child has trouble with three or more of the following activities.

Your child has trouble:

- telling you what action is going on in a picture book – for example, running, barking, eating
- using all of the necessary words to make a complete sentence – for example, 'I going zoo' rather than 'I'm going to the zoo'
- listening to an adult read to her on a regular basis
- remembering a previously read book when shown its cover
- showing that she can tell the difference between the front and back of the book, and that she can hold it the right way up
- naming simple objects represented in books
- concentrating on and responding to print, such as the letters in names, signs and so on
- scribbling to make shapes that look like letters
- stringing similar-sounding words together – for example, 'cat, bat, hat'
- repeating at least parts of nursery rhymes.

Literacy difficulties at five years

Seek help or advice if **most of the time** your child can't do the things listed above, and struggles with three or more of the following.

In spoken language, your child has trouble:

- understanding everyday spoken directions

- incorporating new words when he speaks, and noticeably using longer sentences (often more than five words)
- recognising the beginning of words and sounds that rhyme, and producing examples
- breaking simple words into their parts (syllables or single sounds), and putting sounds together to make words
- using the proper endings of words – for example, ‘He played football with me’ rather than ‘He play football with me’
- using comparison words, such as ‘heavier’, ‘stronger’ or ‘shorter’. For example, if you said, ‘A car is big, but a bus is _____?’, your child should reply, ‘Bigger’.

In reading, your child has trouble:

- showing interest in books and reading
- trying to read – for example, your child might say, ‘This word says cat. See, I can read!’
- following the sequence of events in stories
- relating what happens in books to her own life events
- listening attentively when books are read aloud and doesn’t get meaning and pleasure from this activity.

In understanding print concepts, your child has trouble:

- knowing that words in print are different from pictures, and are there to be read
- observing and commenting on print in different settings, such as on TV, food packets, tablets and so on
- appreciating the different purposes of print – for example, locations, prices, assembly instructions
- knowing that each letter in the alphabet has a name and a sound
- naming at least eight letters
- understanding that writing is a tool for communication
- scribbling his name, messages and so on, regardless of whether you can read what he scribbles.



If you need help or advice, you could start by talking to your local child and family health nurse, your GP, paediatrician, speech pathologist or your child’s teacher. These professionals should be able to direct you to other services and support.

Helping your school-age child with literacy development

You can prepare your child for reading and writing tasks at school by giving her lots of opportunities to experience language and print in all its forms.

If you think your child is having difficulties, try the following:

- Check with her teacher about progress, and work on a support plan together. The earlier you and the teacher step in to help your child, the better she’ll progress in the long term.
- Give your child lots of encouragement for trying, even if he repeatedly makes similar errors.
- Make sure your child is ready to learn by being organised in the morning. It will help her to have set **routines** and quiet times to do her reading.
- Schedule times to read with your child. You can alternate between your child reading to you and you reading to your child. If he’s struggling, this will help him avoid too much frustration.
- Use everyday opportunities for reading and writing. For example, read street and shop signs, menus, prices and labels at the supermarket. You could also write an email, letter or a text message to a friend. This shows your child how useful reading and writing are.

If you have concerns about your child’s progress, **speak to your child’s** classroom teacher.

If you’re still concerned about your child’s progress, talk to the teacher, school counsellor or GP about seeking

more advice from an educational psychologist or literacy specialist.



Speaking more than one language has lots of benefits for children. Read our article on [raising bilingual children](#) for information and tips on supporting your bilingual child's literacy development.

More to explore

- Language development: an amazing journey
- Reading and storytelling with babies and children
- Telling stories with children: videos
- How your child learns: the baby to preschool years
- How your child learns: the school years
- Child development: the first five years

Web links

- Washington Learning Systems – Literacy Resources
- Early Words

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See references