

Early Literacy and Beginning to Read

A POSITION STATEMENT OF THE
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Literacy, the ability to read and write, plays a major role in school and life success.

Parents, educators, politicians, and community leaders place a high value on learning to read. At the same time, they also express concerns about how well children are learning to read. (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998).

Early literacy and the foundation for beginning to read begins at birth and is a developmental process that occurs throughout life. The first cry, the first coo, the first “da-da” and “ma-ma,” the first words are proof that children have a desire to communicate. Adult reading for whatever purpose—information or pleasure—has its basis in how well or how poorly young children learn to read.

Children’s early literacy and beginning to read successfully is a collaborative process and shared responsibility that includes teachers, parents and communities.

To promote early literacy, we need to:

- Recognize and support what children already know about oral and written language before school. For example, young children know a lot about language, how to use it and what it means. They can differentiate between pictures and print in books. Some children are aware of environmental print and can read the signs embedded in logos.
- Permit and encourage children to build on their existing knowledge of oral and written language. Children should be actively involved in many meaningful, functional language experiences including speaking, listening, reading, writing, and viewing.
- Provide a supportive instructional environment where children can build a positive attitude toward themselves and literacy development.
- Prepare ourselves as teachers of young children to deal with and respect differences in language and cultural backgrounds
- Ensure that young children have access to quality and age-appropriate books. Reading to children is one of the best ways to promote positive attitudes toward reading and to give children the sounds and words of literacy and reading. Beginning at birth, all children should be read to with regularity and enthusiasm. SECA recommends that at each grade level, beginning in the preschool and continuing into kindergarten and first grade, all children should be familiar with many books. These books should include all genres---fiction, non-fiction, poetry,

and expository. Such a goal demands that sufficient resources be allocated for the purchase of books by families, programs, schools and communities.

- Design classrooms and other settings for young children that are rich with literacy materials for reading and writing. Such literacy rich environments possess the following characteristics (Morrow, 2001):
 - An abundant supply of materials for reading writing, and oral language development
 - Learning centers that integrate literacy in all content areas
 - Learning centers that emulate real-life experiences and make literacy meaningful to children.

Promoting Language Development and Literacy with Infants and Toddlers

Vocabulary is critical to literacy development. Size and quality of vocabulary are well documented as being tremendously influential in the educational process (Hart & Risley, 1995 and Hart & Risley, 1999). Following are strategies that are recommended for developing language, and consequently vocabulary, in infants and toddlers (Morrison, 2001).

- Treat children as partners in the communication process. Many infant behaviors, such as smiling, cooing, and vocalizing serve to initiate conversation, and professionals can be responsive to these through conversations. Conversations are the building blocks of language development, and attentive and caring adults are the best stimulators of cognitive and language development for young children.
- Talk to infants in a soothing, pleasant voice with frequent eye contact, even though they do not “talk” to you. Most mothers and teachers talk to young children differently from the way they talk to adults. They adapt their speech so they can communicate in a distinctive way called “motherese” or “parentese.”
- Speak in an easily understandable way with toddlers. When conversing with toddlers who are just learning language, it is a good idea to simplify verbalization. Don’t use “baby talk” but make sentences understandable to young children. For example, you wouldn’t say, “We are going to take a walk around the block, so you must put your coats on.” You would say to toddlers, “Let’s get coats on.”
- Use children’s names when interacting with them, to personalize the conversation and build self-identity.
- Use a variety of means to stimulate and promote language development, including reading stories, singing songs, listening to records, and giving children many opportunities to verbally interact with adults and other children. Take infants and toddlers on trips inside and outside the home and center. Use these occasions to talk with the children and comment on what they are doing and seeing. Talk to children in the full range of adult language, including past and future tenses.
- Encourage children to converse and share information with other children and adults. Help them to learn to converse in different settings by taking them to

different places so they can use their language with a variety of people. This approach gives children ideas and events as a basis for using language.

- Have children use language in different ways. Children need to know how to use language to ask questions, explain feelings and emotions, tell what they have done, and describe things and events.
- Give children experiences in the language of directions and commands. Many children fail in school settings, not because they do not know language, but because they have little or no experience in how language is used for giving and following directions. It is also important for children to understand that language can be used as a means to an end—a way of attaining a desired goal.
- Converse with children about what they are doing and how they are doing it. Children learn language through feedback, asking and answering questions and commenting about activities. Feedback from adults to children lets them know that you are paying attention to them and value what they are doing and saying.

Literacy Development in Pre-kindergarten and Kindergarten

Certain literacy skills provide a framework around which to build pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs that promote literacy development and proficiency in reading. These skills include:

- **Listening Comprehension:** Pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children are able to comprehend what they hear in conversations and in stories read aloud and construct meaning with increasing accuracy. Comprehension is a major reading goal.
- **Speech Production and Speech Discrimination:** Young children learn to vocalize, pronounce, and discriminate the sounds and words of language.
- **Vocabulary:** Pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children experience rapid growth in their understanding of words and word meanings. Vocabulary knowledge reflects children's previous experiences and growing knowledge of the world around them and is one of the most important predictors of later reading achievement. As children learn words, they are able to relate them to their language experiences.
- **Verbal Expression:** Effective communication requires that children use their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and sense of audience to convey meaning.
- **Phonological Awareness:** Phonological awareness is an auditory skill that involves an understanding of the sounds of spoken words. It includes recognizing and producing rhymes, dividing words into syllables, and identifying words that have the same beginning, middle, or end sounds. Phonological awareness represents a crucial step toward understanding that letters or groups of letters can represent phonemes or sounds (i.e., the alphabetic principle). This understanding is highly predictive of success in beginning reading. Phonological awareness enables children to hear sounds in words, to segment words into sound units, and blend them back together again. Phonemic awareness, a component of phonological awareness, includes the ability to notice, think about, and manipulate individual sounds and words.

- Letter or Alphabetic Knowledge and Early Word Recognition: Letter knowledge is an essential component of learning to read and write. Knowing how letters function in writing and how these letters connect to the sounds children hear in words is crucial to children's success in reading. Combined with phonological awareness, letter knowledge is the key to children's understanding of the alphabetic principle. Activities that support alphabetic knowledge include games, songs, and writing activities that help children learn the names of letters.
- Motivation to Read: Children benefit from classroom environments that associate reading with pleasure and enjoyment as well as learning and skill development. These early experiences will define their assumptions and expectations about becoming literate and influence their motivation to work toward learning to read and write.
- Knowledge of Literary Forms: Exposure to storybooks and information books helps children become familiar with the language of books, story forms, and the parts of books.
- Written Expression: Pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children generate hypotheses about how written language works and begin to explore the uses of writing for themselves. They also begin to ask adults to write signs and letters for them. Through these early writing experiences, young children develop initial understandings about the forms, features, and functions of written language.
- Fluency: The process of automatically and accurately recognizing words (fluency), which suggests that children can decode words and understand what they are reading, is a major reading goal. Activities that promote fluency include shared read-alouds to hear the fluent reading of teachers as a model, repeated readings, echo reading of stories, reading easy books, reading and chanting familiar stories to get the rhythm of fluent reading, and building a background for new stories by introducing and practicing new words prior to reading them in the text.

The Controversy Surrounding Phonics

Phonics is the teaching of the relationships of letters and sounds. While there is controversy surrounding the teaching of phonics as a means of teaching children early literacy skills and reading, SECA supports a balanced approach to reading, which includes the teaching of phonics in appropriate ways. SECA does not support a "phonics-only" approach to reading, but lends its support to an instructional approach to reading that includes phonics as one of the strategies to promote literacy development.

Vocabulary: The Cornerstone of Literacy

SECA cannot overemphasize the importance and role of vocabulary in literacy development. Size and quality of vocabulary are well documented as being tremendously influential in the educational process (Hart & Risley, 1995 and Hart & Risley, 1999). In order for children to have the vocabularies they need to be successful, they should learn many new words each day. Such vocabulary comes through rich language environments, rich language experiences, and reading and being read to on a

daily basis from birth. Parents, teachers, schools, programs and communities share the responsibility for ensuring that young children develop vocabulary and early literacy skills.

To promote children's early literacy and beginning to read, teachers should place an emphasis on providing literacy-rich environments that promote social interaction, peer collaboration, and learning experiences in both explicit and problem solving situations. Activities should integrate reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing. Learning should be related to real-life experiences that are meaningful and functional. Careful monitoring of individual growth should occur frequently, using multiple measures and varied instructional strategies, including direct instruction. Ample time and space should be provided for children to learn through play, manipulation, and exploration.

Researchers and practitioners are generating new information about learning which changes the information and strategies we use to help children learn. Teachers of young children must stay current with the constant stream of literature that is available about how to best support young children's literacy and reading development.

One of the most important elements of literacy development is that children associate literacy with pleasure and success and develop a desire to read and write. This desire motivates an interest in learning the skills necessary to become proficient in all literacy activities. Such an environment ensures a lifelong interest in refining and using literacy skills.

We have known for many years that the early years are crucial for literacy development and we are pleased with the emphasis on early literacy that is now in the forefront of the public policy debate. We welcome the scientific community to this debate and as partners on behalf of young children. It is time for all early childhood educators to seize the opportunity to ensure literacy and reading success for all our children.

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