



Community Pædiatric Review

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Introduction

Reading with young children (0 - 5 years) needs to be promoted to families and all members of the community as a fun and integral part of a child's daily routine. In your professional role you have the opportunity to work with families to enable this practice to become part of the culture of family life and support the development of "emergent literacy skills" in children prior to the commencement of formal education.

The following material has been extracted from a literature review that has been undertaken by the Centre for Community Child Health in

partnership with The Smith Family and made possible with funding from the Telstra Foundation. This literature review focussed on how literacy skills are best acquired and therefore determined the key features of a program (which will be known as "Let's Read") to promote reading to young children in order to encourage the skills which will increase their chances of learning to read and write successfully in later life.

Why is literacy so critical?

The links between literacy (the ability to read and write the printed word), self-esteem, school performance and adult life chances



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have been widely documented. This literature review confirms the findings that poor literacy skills are associated with generally lower education, employment and social outcomes as well as being linked to high rates of welfare dependence and teenage parenting. A 1997 survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that individuals with 'very poor' literacy skills were more likely to leave school early, had a greater chance of being unemployed and earned less than those with 'good' literacy skills. Other studies cited demonstrate that poor literacy levels can also impact on both the health practices and health outcomes of individuals with poor reading levels.

Literacy and socio-economic status

Reading failure disproportionately affects children from socially disadvantaged homes, which in turn contributes to a continuation of the poverty cycle. Moreover socio-economic status (SES) has been found to be one of the strongest predictors of performance differences in children at the beginning of first grade. Perhaps even more alarmingly, the research evidence indicates that those children who experience early difficulties in learning to read are unlikely to catch up to their peers. It is hypothesised that children who struggle with reading will dislike reading and children who read less fall further behind.

Many children who struggle to acquire adequate literacy skills already show deficits in important emergent literacy skills prior to school entry.

Literacy in Australia

The Australian *Survey of Aspects of Literacy* found that some 20 per cent of Australians aged between 15 and 74 years have 'very poor' prose literacy skills (ABS, 1997). A national survey of the literacy standards of Australian children also found that nearly 30 per cent of the sample of Year 3 and Year 5 students failed to meet the appropriate grade reading standard. Consistent with other research, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) survey also found that there was a significant gap between the results of students from low SES and indigenous families compared with the achievement levels of children from high and medium SES families.

These findings are broadly consistent with the results of Australia's national student achievement benchmarks,

which represent the minimum level of competence deemed necessary to allow meaningful participation in the school learning program. The most recent results (2001) show that indigenous students were three times less likely to reach the Year 5 reading benchmark than Australian students as a whole. The results also provide evidence of potential differences between male and female performance in reading and writing, with a greater proportion of girls in grades 3 and 5 achieving the benchmark level than boys.

Language and Literacy development

A number of studies have highlighted the enormous impact of early experiences on brain development and the complex interaction of biological and environmental factors in the development of both language and literacy. What is more complex is to identify those factors or activities that influence children in their efforts to acquire conventional 'print literacy' knowledge as distinct from language.

Whilst there is an innate propensity for language in human beings, the development of literacy skills (reading and writing) is markedly different from the development of language, although dependent on it. Formal literacy is artificial in that its components (letters, words, punctuation symbols) were developed as a means of facilitating the use of language by capturing or symbolically representing the language. Literacy is accordingly thought to be 'experience dependent' as it can be encouraged by experiences that may not be available to everyone.

Although formal literacy education usually begins once a child commences school, the building blocks for success in literacy are laid much earlier in childhood.

Researchers have identified a number of independent and identifiable skill sets that are early predictors of later reading success, often referred to as *emergent literacy*.

These skills include:

- language abilities (vocabulary),
- the ability to identify the names and sounds of letters (the alphabet),
- an ability to identify and manipulate sounds,
- an understanding of "print convention" together with literacy environments (having books in the home). A

significant body of research has demonstrated a strong relationship between a number of recognised emergent literacy skills and later success in reading, particularly links between “letter knowledge” or *phonological awareness* and later reading proficiency.

Home literacy activities

Recognition of the various skills that are believed to precede the acquisition of formal literacy has enabled educators, clinicians and cognitive scientists to develop programs that are aimed at strengthening children’s abilities in these areas.

Research indicates that home literacy environments play an important role in both language and literacy development.

Children’s vocabulary skills have been found to be related not just to reading to the child but also to the number of books in the home, to library visits and to parents’ own print exposure. Children of low-income families have been found to be at greater risk for reading difficulties and slower in the development of language skills. Such children often come from homes where there are fewer books and where shared reading occurs less frequently.

Shared reading

As the literature highlights, the benefits of reading to young children have long been recognised as having a positive impact on language development and on later reading achievement. A number of studies show that regular shared book reading from a young age is correlated with vocabulary scores. However, two often overlooked but important aspects of this shared reading, are book selection and the manner or style in which a child is read to.

1. The selection of *predictable* or *patterned* books and *alphabet books* is suggested as supporting parents to engage young children in the activity of shared



reading and to assist in the development of word identification and awareness of how letters map onto sounds.

2. Active parental help in the form of *increased book ownership*, information about *frequency* and *style* of book reading, techniques such as *interactive questioning* and *shared story telling* all enhance the established language benefits of shared reading by promoting a number of important literacy prerequisites. The simple action of *fingerpointing* at words or phrases during storybook telling assists children in acquiring important skills, such as the ability to track print, alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness and the development of word recognition.

Recent research suggests that phonological awareness (a cognitive capacity that relates to the ability to identify and manipulate sounds in spoken language) is an important predictor of reading success in normally developing children.

Laying the foundations for future success in reading

The literature review examined a number of early literacy interventions that specifically target children prior to school entry, including facilitated, curriculum based programs and book-based interventions. The crucial role that parents can play in promoting literacy success were a common feature of the interventions reviewed. Book distribution interventions (ROR and BookStart) are considered to have been successful in increasing the numbers of books, particularly in low-income households, as well as increasing the amount of time children are read aloud to daily.

It has long been recognised that reading to children assists language development. The recent evidence also suggests that it also leads to greater success in literacy if the reading style helps children to acquire early knowledge of letters and the sounds they make. What has emerged, as vitally important in value adding to the activity of shared reading, is additional *anticipatory guidance* for parents and other carers. This guidance should include information about the types of books most appropriate for children at different ages and stages as well as activities that promote phonological awareness (such as mapping of sounds and names to each letter and an emphasis on rhyming and blending).

The recent research evidence suggests that promoting specific literacy-related activities during the years prior to school entry can improve future literacy outcomes for children in disadvantaged communities. Based on these findings, it is concluded that the *Let's Read* program should include all of the following key components:

- *Shared reading* between child and care giver;
- Easy accessibility to age appropriate *free books*;
- *Professional involvement* to convey *guidance messages* and *model* shared reading practices to parents;
- Built upon an *emergent literacy framework*, which promotes emergent literacy knowledge skills and environments, including *language abilities, letter sound/name knowledge, phonological awareness and conventions of print*; and
- *Community involvement* to assist in the sustainability of a community-based early literacy program.

Extracted from:

Let's Read Literature Review 2004. Undertaken by the Centre for Community Child Health in partnership with The Smith Family.

A full copy of the *Let's Read* Literature Review is available from www.rch.org.au/ccch/research.

Reflection questions:

- *Do you raise the issue of reading with children during your professional contact with families and their young children?*
- *At what age do you think that is "appropriate" to raise this issue?*
- *Would you feel confident providing guidance to parents about how to read with their child? Would you be able to model this behaviour?*
- *Do you deal with many families where you believe that the parent/s are illiterate? How do you support them?*
- *Are you aware of, and/or involved with, early literacy programs in your area?*
- *Do you encourage families to join the local library?*
- *Are you aware of the barriers that may preclude some families from reading with their young children?*



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