

Language: Paving the way to early literacy!

By Roxane Bélanger, SLP-C, Reg. CALSPO,
Speech Language Pathologist

Many studies have shown the importance of oral language in the acquisition of reading and writing skills. As a matter of fact, oral language is the foundation for later emergent literacy skills. A child's oral language ability is one of the best indicators of later success at school, including learning to read and write.

Many important pre-requisites for oral and written language are necessary. Studies have shown that children demonstrating these skills are better equipped to become proficient readers. Regardless of age, it is never too early or too late to begin playing with sounds and words.

Many researchers in the field of communication and early education agree that the following skills are important for communication and emergent literacy skills:

Vocabulary knowledge: Children need to know the names of things, actions, concepts and words.

Narrative skills: Children need to be able to describe things, events and stories.

Print awareness: Children need to show their interest in books, be able to know how to use a book and show interest and understanding of print.

Letter knowledge: Children need to learn that each letter is different, has its own name and unique sound.

Phonological awareness: Children need to be able to hear and play with the smaller sounds in words. In daily activities, parents and early childhood educators can do many things to promote the skills identified in order to support ongoing language development and lay out the foundation for early literacy skills.

Introduce nursery rhymes and rhyming: You can begin introducing young children to the world of rhymes by telling babies nursery rhymes, singing jingles to

infants and teaching toddlers a few basic rhyming songs. By the age of three, children can begin playing with sounds and start to recognize words that rhyme. Eventually, they may even make up rhymes on their own (e.g. “cat” rhymes with “pat”).

Playing word and sound games: Help children become more aware of sounds in words by talking about the sounds at the beginning of words, in the middle or at the end of words. It is easier for children to start with sounds that appear at the beginning of a word. With longer or multisyllabic words, have fun counting and clapping out the number of syllables in that word. Use compound words to show children that some words are actually made up of two other words (e.g. “cowboy” is a combination of “cow” + “boy”). Older children can become aware that words are made up of different sounds when you show them how to sound out the sounds in a word (e.g. “bee” has two sounds: the “b” sound + the “ee” sound).

Read books and tell stories: When reading books to children, we are showing them that pictures and print go hand-in-hand to tell a story. We are also helping them understand that each story has a similar structure: a beginning, a body, a conclusion. Reading often to children will help them learn new words and increase their exposure to unfamiliar or rare words. Reading the same book will help children better consolidate the understanding of the story structure and those rare words. Predictable and repetitive stories (like Red is best) help children develop language and help them better remember the story structure. You can also ask children to predict what could happen in the story before reading the book, during the reading and after the story has been read.

Introduce children to print: Around the age of three, children should start to show an interest in print, writing and symbols. Promote this interest by helping them recognize symbols in their environment (e.g. STOP signs, FIRE EXIT), on labels on DVDs and books (like Caillo or Dora) and including print in their pretend play or any other daily activity (e.g. making a grocery list together). By four years of age, children become interested in copying down letters or their name. Help them associate the letter “B” with its name (b) and its sound (the sound “buh”). This letter/sound correspondence skill is critical to developing the written language.

In the community, many agencies and programs – such as the public libraries, the OEYCs, the Early Literacy Specialists and the First Words program (to name only a few) – will offer interesting and valuable programs, workshops and fact sheets to

support the community in promoting children's language and early literacy skills. You can visit these agencies or their websites for more information.

Language and emergent literacy are on a continuum! Oral language lays out the foundation for early and later literacy skills. It is through natural, daily interactions with their parents, caregivers, teachers and other partners that children crack the code of language, discover the power of language and link it to literacy. When we help children develop the interest, a set of skills and the knowledge of oral language, we are paving the road to literacy. As with any other skill, whether it's an academic skill, a motor or musical skill, practice is the key! The more we practice, the better we become!

Early identification makes the difference. Families can access First Words community screening clinics at any time, visit our website at www.firstwords.ca or call OPHI for more information at (613) 580-6744.

This article originally appeared in the March 2010 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper