



# Literacy in the early years

The word 'literacy' means different things depending on who is using it. Literacy refers to a wide range of skills and knowledge that allow the literate person to communicate, learn and take part in society.

Literacy means the teaching and learning of:

- oral language
- reading and
- writing.

Each of these aspects of literacy involves different skills and knowledge.

In the early years, oral language, reading and writing are taught both separately and together. Sometimes there are formal lessons that can be easily recognised as literacy learning.

At other times, literacy skills and knowledge are incorporated into games, singing and play activities. Students may not recognise these as literacy learning but they all play an important part in teaching the skills and knowledge needed to become literate.

The learning that occurs in other subject areas such as mathematics and science also includes aspects of literacy instruction that are specific to those subjects.

## Oral language

Sometimes called 'Speaking and listening' in schools, oral language provides the foundation for the learning of other literacy skills.

At school children learn oral language by:

- participating in classroom discussions as a whole class, in small groups and in pairs
- talking for different purposes, for example, sharing likes and dislikes
- reading aloud, with discussion and conversation about books
- singing songs, chanting, reciting poems and rhymes
- speaking in front of the class for different purposes, for example, sharing what they did on the weekend
- listening to the teacher and classmates.

Some important oral language skills that young children will develop during early literacy learning include:

- listening to and understanding verbal directions
- listening to and understanding stories read aloud
- asking questions or making requests and listening to the answers
- expressing feelings, thoughts and ideas verbally
- speaking in complete sentences
- hearing the separate words in a sentence
- hearing and replicating sound patterns, such as rhyme.

These are some ways you can encourage oral language at home:

- Talk to your child, ask them questions that require more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Ask them for their thoughts, opinions, preferences and to give explanations or justifications that encourage them to speak in longer and more complex sentences.
- Listen carefully and responsively to your child's answers.
- Play talking games (the car can be a great place for this) such as I spy with my little eye, Twenty questions, Celebrity heads and Taboo.
- Do things together and talk about what you've done. Do some cooking or gardening together, take a trip on a bus or train, visit the local pool or park, go for a walk in the bush or around your neighbourhood. This will expose children to different vocabulary, technical words and different sentence structures.
- Playing together in planned or spontaneous ways allows children to experiment with talk for different purposes and encourages creativity and imagination. Draw together, use play dough, dig in some dirt, play dress-ups, make roads for toy cars, play with puppets or play cards and board games.
- Sing songs, nursery rhymes or silly poems. Change the words around or substitute names and places that you and your child know.

## Reading

Children read for enjoyment and to learn and discover in the early years and throughout their schooling. The aim of reading is to understand, or comprehend, the book, article or website being read.

At school, children learn to read by:

- listening and responding to stories, poems, non-fiction books and websites read aloud by the teacher
- reading along with the teacher and classmates
- reading in small groups and individually with the teacher
- trying out and practising their emerging skills independently.

During early literacy learning, young children will develop some important reading skills and knowledge including the following:

- Books and websites are created by authors and illustrators for particular purposes.
- Printed words on the page have meaning and can be used to construct sentences, which can be combined into longer pieces of writing.
- Punctuation helps the reader make meaning of words and sentences.
- Pictures and illustrations also contribute to the meaning in imaginative and informative books, articles and websites.
- The reader's experience of the world and other books helps them to understand what they read.
- Each reader responds differently to the things they read.

It is important to encourage reading at home.

- Visit your local library and let children choose picture books or non-fiction books to borrow.
- Snuggle up on the lounge and reread your child's favourite books aloud to them. Introduce your child to books you loved as a child. Talk about and share your enjoyment and appreciation of the books you read together.
- Listen to audio books together. (This is a good thing to do on long car trips.) Talk about your responses to the story.
- Give books as presents. Treat books as precious and special things.

- Visit second-hand bookshops and op shops to search for favourite books or new titles or authors.
- Talk about favourite books, types of stories, authors and illustrators. Encourage your child to share their personal responses to books and the reasons for their likes and dislikes.
- Make sure you let your child see you reading things that interest you (books, newspapers, magazines but no phones!). Put aside a special time each day for the whole family to sit somewhere comfortable and read their own books together.
- Point out print around the home and in places you visit, such as street names, shop signs, food packaging and maps.

## Writing

As they learn to write and practise writing in the early years, children will draw on their oral language skills and their reading skills and knowledge.

At school children learn to write by:

- looking closely at the writing of others including the teacher and published authors
- brainstorming ideas with the teacher and classmates
- planning for writing as a class, in small groups or pairs and individually
- writing together as a class, with the guidance of the teacher
- writing with a partner and independently
- sharing their writing and talking to the teacher and classmates about their own writing
- writing for different purposes.

During early literacy learning young children will develop some important writing skills and knowledge. They will learn that writers:

- write for different purposes and audiences
- can be creative and imaginative
- choose their words, sentence structure and the layout of their writing to help meet their purpose for writing
- use consistent letter size, formation and direction when they write
- use spelling knowledge to spell consistently. (Spelling knowledge includes the connection between the sounds in a word and the letters used to represent that sound, letter patterns in words, and spelling conventions.)

Try some of these ideas for writing with your child at home.

- Make a list before shopping for groceries.
- Write letters, invitations, greeting cards, postcards and emails to family and friends.
- Copy down your favourite one of Grandma's recipes.
- Write lists as you plan various family activities, such as packing for a holiday or planning a party.
- Label children's drawings. Let children talk and write about their drawings.
- Try some role-playing situations that involve writing, for example, play restaurants and write down customer orders, play doctors and take down patient details, play police and ask witnesses for the details of a car crash.



Erin aged 4½ wrote down her mum's lunch order of cheese on toast.