



SCHOOL READINESS AND EARLY LITERACY

Adapted from a presentation by Elizabeth Love Inner East Community Health Service - October 29th 2003.

At this time of the year in particular, parents and teachers alike, are often thinking about whether or not children will be ready for school next year. As well, we might also ask "How ready is this school to accept this child?" In other words, from the beginning, the education process should be seen as a joint venture between the child, the family, the school and its teachers. We hope that you will find this article useful in considering the broad and complex topic of "School Readiness".

Oral language - both the speaking and listening components, is integrally related to written language - both reading and writing. As naturally competent speakers we rarely have cause to stop and think about what language really is and how oral and written language are connected. However as our young children embark on their school journey it is important for us to learn more about these important areas and how they impact on reading and spelling.

What is in the Oral Language Pie?

We can think about language simply as a pie with three main ingredients -

- 1. Meaning** - if we are to understand what others say or write we must know meanings of words and phrases. We must also have experiences, ideas and concepts and know how these are linked together into networks of meaning. This is called semantics.
- 2. Structure or Form** - In English we have certain sounds (44) that are used to articulate or pronounce words. With these words we can create sentences and longer "paragraphs" but we must use particular rules. This is called grammar. Structure also includes the overall "hanging together" or organization of what we say.
- 3. Use** - We all know that it is important to learn to say the right thing at the right time. Many of these largely unspoken rules of conversation or social interaction depend on where we are, whom we are with and what purpose we are trying to achieve. This is also called pragmatics.

School Language

When children go from home to school they must learn to use their oral language for a new range of purposes - e.g. telling stories, reporting, asking questions, following instructions, explaining. They must also learn to communicate more clearly with others because the new people they meet do not have the same background knowledge or have not shared the same



experiences. At school there is a demand for more sophisticated and literate language skills to talk about abstract ideas and concepts. More literate language consists of complex sentences containing a number of linked ideas. Vocabulary needs to be specific and children must learn to clarify their thoughts as they go along. The less formal conversational style of 'home' language where meanings are shared, will not be sufficient as schooling progresses.

At school, children need to be able to think about and talk about language, about their learning and about their thinking. E.g. What does the **word** *fragile* mean? What is a better word than *got* to use in that **sentence**? What is the first **sound** you hear in the word *octopus*? How many **syllables** does *octopus* have? How could we **remember** that information for next week? How do you **spell** *hippopotamus*? How did you **know** that word said *knife*?

Metalinguistics - is the secret extra ingredient for school success. It is the ability to think consciously about all aspects of the language pie. It is crucial for learning to read.

Reading

- Learning to read is not 'easy' and 'natural' - good readers just make it look that way.
- The learning to read process starts very early with first experiences with print.
- Oral language and pre-literacy skills support early reading and writing skills.
- Phonological awareness should be a key component of early literacy instruction.
- Skilled readers have good **decoding** skills (word recognition); they understand what they read (**comprehension** skills) and they read with **fluency**. All of these areas should be addressed in the early reading program.
- Reading is a complex process. Children are taught to utilize a variety of cues or prompts to achieve success when reading unfamiliar text - meaning, knowledge of sounds and letters and also awareness of grammar and sentence structure. It is important to remember that it takes a long while for many students to integrate all the reading cues.

Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is the ability to consciously reflect on or 'tune into' the **sound** (phonological) **system** of our language. It is part of the metalinguistic abilities described above. When we talk about a child's Phonological Awareness skills however we are not talking about the child's ability to hear or say sounds. Phonological Awareness consists of a number of skills that are related to early reading development and others that appear to develop as a consequence of learning to read.

At a general level Phonological Awareness involves an awareness that words -

- can be broken up into **beats** or **syllables** (**hos-pit -al**)



- can rhyme (**can, fan, man**)
- At the sound (**phoneme**) level Phonological Awareness involves awareness that words
- can start with the same **sound** (**never naughty**)
 - can be segmented into the **first sound** or sounds (**onsets**) and the **rime** pattern.(**sand & stand** can be segmented into **s-and, st-and**)
 - can be formed by **blending** separate sounds together (**f-i-sh** makes **fish**)
 - can be **segmented** into separate sounds (**s-l-i-p**)
 - can be **changed or manipulated** by removing, adding or reordering sounds within the word to make a different word (**trip** without the **r** says **tip**)

The importance of Phonological Awareness

- A child's level of phonological awareness prior to school is one of the most important predictors of their later reading development.
- Phonological awareness should be an important feature of the early reading program.
- Children with good phonological awareness develop an understanding of the alphabetic nature of English more readily - i.e. there is a direct relationship between the sound units in spoken words and the letter associations in written language.
- Preschool activities to develop P.A. prepare children for literacy instruction.
- Training in Phonological Awareness is particularly helpful when it is combined with letter identification and letter manipulation.

School Readiness - some key indicators

- Knows how to handle a book
- Recognizes some letters of the alphabet by name
- Can tell a simple story and recount events in sequence
- Knows some nursery rhymes, chants or songs
- Has early Phonological Awareness skills - syllables, rhymes & 1st sound awareness
- Is beginning to link some letters with the sounds they represent *e.g. M says "mmm"*
- Enjoys listening to stories and joining in the discussion
- Understands concepts such as day/night, numbers, directional words, colours, shapes
- Can follow simple two stage instructions
- Recognizes own name and is learning to write it
- Can persist at simple tasks independently
- Shares with others



How parents can help their child 'get ready' for school

Involve your child in lots of talking and listening

- Turn off the TV during dinner - substitute with 'Talk Time'
- Make sure you are filling up the 'language pie' - feeding in new words to the conversation, discussing what words or phrases mean, telling jokes or commenting on how and what people say.
- Ask open ended questions to encourage your child to talk and express ideas
- Play word and listening games to build vocabulary and expressive language, even something as simple as 'What's the first word you think of when I say ...' Then explain how the words are connected.
- Involve children in activities beyond immediate family - library, museum, zoo
- Model for them your own thinking - e.g. I've decided to cook chicken tonight/ I can't remember their name/ I thought you wanted orange juice, not lemonade.

Teach your child about print and books

- Show your child signs and labels in the environment e.g. Police, Safeway.
- Show how to hold a book, where to start, how we read left to write.
- Use words such as title, author, illustrator, chapter etc.
- Provide a model of the value of reading and writing in everyday life - write notes, read magazines, look up TV guide, make shopping lists.
- Help them create their own books, paste in pictures, use photos or own drawings. Children can dictate the text for you to write.
- Provide writing materials and paper for experimenting with written language.
- Demonstrate your own enjoyment of reading.
- Introduce fun opportunities for your child to "read" simple personal messages from you. E.g. Hello Tommy. Today we are going to the zoo. Love Dad.

Introduce the letters of the alphabet

- Learn the alphabet sequence e.g. by singing the alphabet song.
- Give opportunities for children to then learn the names of the individual letters when out of sequence.
- Check alphabet charts & books to ensure provide accurate sound-letter links
- Teach some common and consistent sound-letter associations e.g. m,s,b,n,k and first sound of child's name.
- Remember to associate writing the letter with saying its name and also providing the sound it usually represents.



Develop listening skills and Phonological Awareness development

- Encourage active listening - use audio tapes, Simon Says and Memory Games
- Clap out the beats/syllables in words.
- Play "I Spy" with first sounds not letters.
- Talk about rhyme and introduce rhyme games.
- Enjoy alliteration and tongue twister games.

Make a regular time to read to your child

- Read a variety of books - picture books, nursery rhymes, books that emphasize sounds. Read stories as well as information books.
- Take time to talk - stop and predict what will happen next, talk about and draw the best part of the story, what does the story remind them of?
- Ask questions that probe understanding e.g. What was the main problem in the story? or Why did the character do that? What would you have done?
- Have fun with language and jokes and discuss the meanings of unusual words.
- Reread familiar stories - your child can help you retell or act out the story.
- Continue to read to your child even when they have started to read themselves.

Some Phonological Awareness activities

A Sound Way - Phonological awareness activities for early literacy. E. Love and S. Reilly. (1995) Longman, Melbourne.

Phonemic Awareness. (1997) Fitzpatrick. Creative Press

To develop the awareness of words in sentences -

Grow a Sentence - Add a new word each turn and take turns to repeat it, e.g. Dog A dog.... A big dog A big dog growls A big dog growl loudly.

Tap or Clap - Clap out the words in simple sentences. I like jelly. Jenny has red shoes on. Demonstrate that words that take longer to say use more letters when written. Compare a short word, *up* with the long word *hippopotamus*.

To develop awareness of rhyme

- *Chants and Nursery Rhymes*
- *Rhyming Bingo* - Trend Enterprises
- *Listening to rhyming stories* such as *Each Peach, Pear Plum*. Children can supply the rhyming word at the end of the sentence.
- "*Hospital*" rhyme. Complete the rhyme e.g. 'Mrs Peck hurt her (neck)'.



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- *Rhyming pictures.* Pairs of rhyming pictures are named, e.g. dog, log, bear, pear. Contrast the words until the children find the pair. E.g. Do these rhyme? dog - bear, dog - log.

To develop awareness of the first sound

- *Alliteration.* Make up alliterative phrases using the children's names. E.g. 'Jenny's jumping, Tickly Tara, Sally's sitting, Happy Hayden'
- *Sound Bucket Game.* Pull out an object, name it and think about one or more objects that begin with the same sound.
- *I Spy ... with my little eye* - use the sound not the letter name.
- *The 'Mmm' Shop.* What things are sold? milk, Milo, margarine, mars-bars, mice
- *The 'sss' Table.* Collect and set the table only with things that start with the 's' sound. For example, saucer, spoon, sausages, serviettes, salad, soup.

To develop awareness of sounds within words

- *Robot Blending.* Robot talks in broken speech, e.g. *p-o-p*. Children blend these sounds together to make the word 'pop.'

Some sound-letter activities

- *Singing Alphabet cards* - ants on the apple a a a (Sung to tune Skip to My Lou).
- *Oxford Essential Readers - Sound Starters and Sound Stories* emphasize the links between sounds and letters. Both resources are by Elizabeth Love and Sue Reilly.
- Use a multi-sensory teaching approach - using song, rhythm and action.
- *B box* - Create a sound-letter box e.g. for b. Box contains objects, pictures, sandpaper letter, letter to trace, stickers to place on things that start with 'b'.

Some Language activities

- *Memory games* - e.g. I went shopping and I bought Parent and child take turns to add an item of shopping to the list, repeating the list in order each time before adding a new item. Items could be within a category - food, toys or clothing.
- *Paddy's Language Pack.* Love and Reilly - Speech and Language Products Fax 61 3 98130686. Paddy is an "exchange student" bear visiting from Scotland. The photos in this resource, show Paddy enjoying activities in Australia e.g. camping, crossing at the school crossing, shopping, sun-baking at the beach. For each photo there are suggested activities and discussion topics. Use Paddy as the starting point for your own stories or use a digital camera to take photos of your child with their favourite toy. Use the photos to make books & posters with text dictated to you by your child.



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- *20 Questions.* Choose a 'secret' item. Children ask questions which generate a 'yes' or 'no' answer. E.g. Is it inside the house? Is it alive? Children must discover the 'secret' item before they have used up 20 questions. Can vary to -"Guess who I saw today."
- *Felt Pictures* - use these to create a simple story.
- *Sorting* - Give your child a small collection of simple objects to sort into groups. Ask them to discuss and explain how they made their decision. E.g. banana, tennis ball, apple, spoon, biscuit, pencil, un-inflated yellow balloon, cup, soft toy. Did they put all the things the same colour together? Perhaps they differentiated by shape or things you can eat versus things you can't, or hard or soft things. Remember there are no right or wrong answers just different ways of thinking and using language.
- *Draw a story.* Ask your child to draw three - four pictures about themselves or other family members. Together create 'our' talking story by using the pictures to guide the story. Use some simple story starters such as 'Once upon a time there was a called (insert child's/family members name) and he/she liked to ... One day ...

Some websites

Between the Lions - stories, games and tips for parents <http://pbskids.org/lions>

Kidbibs - parents and kids <http://kidbibs.com>

Preschool Home activities - Gayle's Preschool Rainbow <http://www.preschoolrainbow.org>

Parent tip-sheets - <http://illinoisearlylearning.org>

Bedtime stories - Children's storybooks on line <http://www.magickeys.com/books>