

## EARLY LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

### Introduction

Positive early language and literacy development can give children a window to the world, helping to ensure that each child can seize his or her potential for future success. The foundations of literacy and learning are laid during infancy and toddlerhood, when the brain undergoes its most dramatic development. During these first 3 years, children acquire the ability to think, speak, learn, and reason. When this early development is not nurtured, the brain architecture is affected and young children begin to fall behind.

Sound policy should be grounded in the fact that young children’s language and literacy development begins long before they walk through the door of a kindergarten classroom. Parents and early childhood professionals play a critical role in the development of communication and early literacy skills. By supporting them in this role, we reap significant dividends throughout the entire scholastic career of a child.

In this policy brief, the terms “early literacy” and “emergent literacy,” refer to what children know about communication, language (verbal and nonverbal), reading, and writing before they can actually read and write. Early literacy encompasses all of children’s experiences with conversation, stories (oral and written), books, and print.<sup>1</sup>

### Literacy Emerges From Early Experiences

At its heart, literacy is about communication, which begins long before a baby utters her first word. Babies are prewired to learn, communicate, and connect with others; they tell us what they need through their cries, facial expressions, sounds, and movements.<sup>2</sup> The growth and development of infants and toddlers is not best supported through a set curriculum, but rather through exploration, discovery, and the everyday activities in which they interact with adults around them.

A child can only achieve competency in essential school readiness skills—such as language and early literacy—when he has begun to experience and master all the domains of development. These include cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, as well as other non-cognitive domains such as motivation to read and persistence in learning.

The learning that occurs within these developmental domains is formed through the relationships that a young child has with the significant adults in her life. Families and other caregivers—such as early childhood professionals—are “the ‘active ingredients’ of environmental influence” during early childhood.<sup>3</sup> The interactive nature of the relationship between a child and his caregivers is essential to the developing brain as it forms the complex web of visual, language, motor, and social-emotional connections essential for later literacy learning.<sup>4</sup> These positive relationships lead to trust, which then gives a child the resilience to face new challenges, actively explore, and focus on the task of learning.

Given the importance of parent–child relationships in nurturing early development, family literacy is a key factor and influence in a child’s early literacy experiences. A family’s literacy skills directly affect parents’ role and effectiveness in helping their children to learn.<sup>5</sup> This is because families are often the first language teachers, determining their child’s actual language and style of dialect and establishing the rules for communication.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, when families share stories, songs, and books with their children, they not only become models for how their children develop literacy skills but also give them the message early on that learning to read and write is important.

Each of the factors experienced in early childhood—family, community, environment—prepares children for later success as communication partners, readers, and writers.<sup>7</sup> When a young child’s early development is not well-supported because of negative environmental factors—when consistent love and trust is absent—the brain’s architecture is affected, often leading to learning and behavioral problems.

“Relational experiences in the early years are the key to how language unfolds in early childhood and how children develop a foundation for their enjoyment of communication and of literacy.”<sup>8</sup>

*Ross Thompson, Professor of Psychology, University of California, Davis*

### The Language Gap Begins Early

Research suggests that a young child’s ability to use language, as well as attune to and understand the meaning of spoken and written words, is related to later achievement in reading, writing, and spelling.<sup>9</sup> Sadly, the achievement gap, or “language gap,” among at-risk children of varying socioeconomic backgrounds emerges early and begins to widen long before their scholastic careers. Differences in word learning among children of different economic backgrounds appear by 16 to 18 months, and patterns that suggest widening gaps are established by age 3. (See “The Language Gap” box.)

#### The Language Gap

- At 16–18 months, when children begin amassing vocabulary, word learning is significantly affected by economic background.<sup>10</sup>
- By age 3, trends in the amount of talk, vocabulary growth, and style of interaction are well established and suggest widening gaps.<sup>11</sup>
- Gaps widen, not diminish, over the early elementary years.<sup>12</sup>

The type and frequency of language very young children hear in their homes,<sup>13</sup> as well as the positive or negative quality of sounds, gestures, and words parents use to communicate,<sup>14</sup> contribute to these disparities. Studies have found that children from low-income families are read to less frequently than their middle-class peers,<sup>15</sup> which can lead to the widening language gap.

## Early Childhood Professionals Play a Key Role

Second only to the immediate family, child care is the context in which early childhood development most frequently unfolds, starting in infancy.<sup>16</sup> As a result, early childhood professionals play a critical role in influencing the positive development of very young children. The quality of the child care setting and, perhaps more important, the relationships between children and early childhood professionals play crucial roles in language and literacy development. An environment where early childhood professionals are positive, supportive, and offer plentiful verbal stimulation is one where children are likely to show advanced cognitive and language development.<sup>17</sup>

Early childhood professionals need to be knowledgeable and intentional in their support and nurturing of early literacy in infants and toddlers. They need to know how to foster children's confidence as communicators, encourage and acknowledge children's own understanding of narrative and of themselves as "storytellers," support the cultural contexts in which early literacy emerges, foster an appreciation of reading, and, above all, build the warm, supportive relationships that nurture a love of learning.<sup>18</sup> It is important that the people who influence a child's development—family, nonfamily caregivers, community members—are supported to provide a positive early learning experience for even the most at-risk children.

"If we put the money in [education] and actually utilize it early, then the money we are spending for interventions for students that are exiting primary or middle grades or high school would be unnecessary."<sup>19</sup>

*George Thompson, Superintendent, Bell County Schools, Kentucky*

## Policy Recommendations

As Congress and the Administration consider how to increase the literacy skills and reduce the early achievement gap for all children, we urge attention to the earliest years, when the critical foundation for later learning is formed. Policies and legislation focused on literacy should:

- 1. Emphasize family engagement, particularly the role of parents in emergent literacy and the importance of reaching all at-risk infants and toddlers.**  
Policies should reflect the importance of educating parents to support their child's development through family activities that promote a language- and literacy-rich home environment. Policies should also ensure the availability of family literacy services that support the literacy of parents as well as children.
- 2. Dedicate funding to support early language and literacy development in infants and toddlers, including professional development for early childhood professionals caring for infants and toddlers.** Early childhood professionals play a critical role in setting the stage for a young child's future academic success. Because of the crucial need to ensure a firm foundation on which later skills will build as children prepare for and enter school, funds within early childhood

allocations for literacy should be dedicated to high-quality early language and literacy training for professionals caring for infants and toddlers.

- 3. Ensure that the wording within literacy legislation for children birth through 12<sup>th</sup> grade reflects the needs of the entire age range.** The foundation of future academic success is laid during infancy and toddlerhood. Legislation supporting literacy from birth through secondary school should recognize the continuum of literacy development that begins at birth and use terms appropriate for all age groups. This includes referring to “language” as well as “literacy” acquisition, referring to “development” as well as early “learning,” and recognizing that programs should target not only approaches for student literacy and education but also effective strategies to develop early childhood programs serving children ages birth to 3 years.
- 4. Build collaborations among birth-to-3 programs, prekindergarten, and K–12 programs to create shared responsibility for language and literacy development.** Families, caregivers, and educators must recognize the role each plays in supporting language and literacy development along the continuum that begins at birth and continues through secondary school. Children’s progress through this continuum can be strengthened and better scholastic outcomes produced if parents, early childhood professionals, and educators collaborate to support transitions, share data, evaluate child progress, and build knowledge and skills in a community context across the range from birth to 12<sup>th</sup> grade.
- 5. Focus research funds on supporting early language and literacy for infants and toddlers.** Research needs to be expanded to explore the best approaches for supporting early language and literacy development in infants and toddlers, as well as on promoting education for both parents and early childhood professionals on how to optimally nurture this stage of development. Additionally, assessments of childhood learning should focus not only on measures of what students have learned over time relative to academic standards, but also on how young children in professional caregiving settings have progressed over time relative to developmental norms.

### *About Us*

ZERO TO THREE Policy Center is a nonpartisan, research-based, nonprofit organization committed to promoting the healthy development of our nation’s infants and toddlers. To learn more about this topic, or about the ZERO TO THREE Policy Center, please contact us at 202-638-1144 or on the Web at <http://www.zerotothree.org/policy>.

*Author: Jaclyn Kupcha, Senior Federal Policy Analyst  
September 2010*

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Rebecca Parlakian, *Before the ABCs: Promoting School Readiness in Infants and Toddlers*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE, 2003.
- <sup>2</sup> Janice Im, Carol Osborn, Sylvia Sánchez, et al., *Cradling Literacy: Building Teachers' Skills to Nurture Early Language and Literacy From Birth to Five*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE, 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Jack Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000.
- <sup>4</sup> Im, Osborn, Sánchez, et al., *Cradling Literacy*.
- <sup>5</sup> NGA Center for Best Practices, *Family Literacy: A Strategy for Educational Improvement*. NGA Center for Best Practices, 2002, [www.nga.org](http://www.nga.org).
- <sup>6</sup> Im, Osborn, Sánchez, et al., *Cradling Literacy*.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ross Thompson, "Early Foundations for Developing Literacy." PowerPoint presentation for the webinar "Building Connections to Support Literacy: Systems of Early Learning for Children Birth to Age 8," ZERO TO THREE, 2010, [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org).
- <sup>9</sup> National Institute for Literacy, *Learning to Talk and Listen: An Oral Language Resource for Early Childhood Caregivers*. National Institute for Literacy, 2010, [www.nifl.gov/publications/publications.html](http://www.nifl.gov/publications/publications.html).
- <sup>10</sup> Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 1995.
- <sup>11</sup> Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, "The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3." *American Educator*, Spring 2003, [www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/spring2003/hart.cfm](http://www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/spring2003/hart.cfm).
- <sup>12</sup> Thompson, "Early Foundations for Developing Literacy."
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Todd R. Risley, Sharon Landesman Ramey, and Julie Washington, "From Babbling to Books: Building Pre-Reading Skills." PowerPoint presentation, Reading Rockets, [www.readingrockets.org](http://www.readingrockets.org).
- <sup>15</sup> Pia Robello Britto, Allison S. Fuligni, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, "Reading Ahead: Effective Interventions for Young Children's Early Literacy Development." In D. K. Dickinson and S. B. Neuman, eds., *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, Vol. 2, 311–332. New York: Guilford Press, 2006.
- <sup>16</sup> National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*.
- <sup>17</sup> J. Ronald Lally, Abbey Griffin, Emily Fenichel, et al. *Caring for Infants and Toddlers in Groups: Developmentally Appropriate Practice*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE, 2003.
- <sup>18</sup> Im, Osborn, Sánchez, et al., *Cradling Literacy*.
- <sup>19</sup> ZERO TO THREE, "A Window to the World: Promoting Early Language and Literacy Development." ZERO TO THREE, 2010, [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org).