



Teresa Layden

Early Literacy and Learning to Read

One of the best ways to approach the development of early literacy skills is in the context of learning to read. In fact, it is almost impossible to discuss one without the other given their contiguous relationship.

Perhaps one of the most useful ways to frame a discussion of the development of early literacy skills is to organize it according to four of the most important concepts children need to acquire in order to make their initial foray into reading easier. Several of the skills related to each concept as well as strategies to help children obtain them will then be presented.

Important Concepts

In general, the four overarching concepts that children need to internalize to make their initial reading experience easier are: 1. an understanding that people read to create meaning; 2. an understanding that in the creation of meaning there are print conventions authors generally adhere to; 3. a sense that in order for the meaning of a text to be apprehended words need to be decoded and encoded (phonemic awareness); and 4. a sense that in order to decode and encode words one must be familiar with the sounds of letters (alphabetic principle).

People Read to Create Meaning

If you ask young readers to define reading, many of them will tell you that reading is sounding out letters and putting these sounds together to make words. As young readers become more experienced, however, their focus naturally shifts from sounding out words to comprehending the intent of what they've processed. Reading becomes meaning. Mature readers are able to connect the words on a page almost seamlessly and automatically to the words' meanings and no longer have to consciously think about deciphering isolated letters or phonemes. Reading fluently becomes more a matter of cognition and almost akin to thought.

To help early learners understand that the goal of reading is to derive meaning from text, it's important to engage young learners in the meaning of what's being read to them. This is as simple as previewing a book before you read it (looking at the pictures and together making predictions about what the book might be about--I see a picture of a sad elephant talking to a pig. What do you think they could be talking about?), finding out what the child already knows about the subject and having them make connections between what they know and what they're about to hear (What do you know about elephants and pigs? What are some other books you've read where the main characters are animals?), asking questions throughout the story to make sure what's being conveyed is understood (Wait. I'm confused. Is it still nighttime or is it morning now? How do you know?), and helping young listeners generalize some of what they're hearing to their own lives (I see this character likes to joke with his friend. What do you like to do with your friends?).

Another worthwhile activity is to give children paper or other art materials and have them draw or create a picture of their favorite part of the story. Writing down their ideas about what they've drawn is also extremely valuable as it allows for further reflection. If the child is older, you can also help them write their

own stories about the story. For instance, they might write about something they can imagine doing with one of the characters in the story, another way to solve the main character's dilemma, or something related to one of the story's themes. They can also act out part or all of story and include puppets, costumes, or props.

One of the most important things we can give young children is a broad and varied experiential base so that they can bring to texts a diversity of knowledge allowing them to better understand a range of material. This means exploring your backyard and neighborhood, visiting places like the park and zoo, participating in local and cultural offerings, and having all adventures near and far. When children can tap into prior knowledge to reinforce and strengthen existing knowledge as well as use that prior knowledge as the foundation upon which to integrate new information their ability to comprehend can soar.

Print Conventions

A less abstract concept children need to have a sense of before they can become fluent readers is that they're print conventions governing text. Closely related to this concept is the idea that text is what happens when speech goes to print. Print conventions are the built-in givens or code that enables us to better understand printed language and makes it easier to figure out its meaning.

There are a number of ways we can begin to help young children understand the nature and purpose of print conventions including (of course these things don't need to be done each and every time you read aloud or the sheer fun and beauty of language will be lost!):

- 1 Point to the name of the author and illustrator. Discuss with your child what authors and illustrators do. Find out about favorite authors/illustrators and go to their websites or write them a letter or send them a picture.
- 2 When you read, emphasize the left to right directionality of text by putting your finger under each word. Have children copy you (there are also all kinds of workbooks where children can trace lines from left to write, you can also generate tracing sheets from the internet, or make your own). Read something backwards so they can hear what happens! Point out the spaces between words. Point out end punctuation and discuss what these marks mean and why they're included. Point out where paragraphs begin and end. Point out where page numbers are included. Discuss! Discuss! And ask questions.
- 3 Have your child tell you about their drawings. Label the objects in them. Have your child dictate a sentence or two about their drawings and read their sentences back to them. Point out that their own words have now become text. Have your child dictate and illustrate stories and then read these stories back to them as well. Let them be the author and illustrator.
- 4 Read different genres to your child. Point out the differences between a letter and a poem or fiction and non-fiction. Show them how different genres might look differently on a page. Point out graphs and charts and discuss how these are organized and how they can enhance meaning. Think about your home page in Gmail or Yahoo. Keep in mind that children will be faced with textual demands that will require them to take in several genres at once. As your child gets older, increasingly explore books that are comprised of multiple genres.
- 5 Encourage your child to "read" to you, their stuffed animals, their dolls, or their action figures. This will enable them to master opening the book from the right end and not holding it upside down. It will also give them the experience and power of holding a small measure of meaning in their hands and sharing it with others.

Phonemic Awareness and the Alphabetic Principle

I came across a lengthy, but wonderful summary of phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle that I've included below. It's based in part on research done by the National Institute of Child Health and

Human Development founded in 1962 by President Kennedy and Congress:

In an English alphabetic system, the individual letters on the page are abstract and meaningless, in and of themselves. They must eventually be linked to equally abstract sounds called phonemes, blended together and pronounced as words, where meaning is finally realized.

To learn to read English, the child must figure out the relationship between sounds and letters. Thus, the beginning reader must learn the connections between the approximately 44 sounds of spoken English (the phonemes), and the 26 letters of the alphabet.

What our NICHD research has taught us is that in order for a beginning reader to learn how to connect or translate printed symbols (letters and letter patterns) into sound, the would-be reader must understand that our speech can be segmented or broken into small sounds (phoneme awareness) and that the segmented units of speech can be represented by printed forms (phonics). This understanding that written spellings systematically represent the phonemes of spoken words (termed the alphabetic principle) is absolutely necessary for the development of accurate and rapid word reading skills.

Why are phoneme awareness and the development of the alphabetic principle so critical for the beginning reader? Because if children cannot perceive the sounds in spoken words – for example, if they cannot "hear" the at sound in fat and cat and perceive that the difference lies in the first sound, they will have difficulty decoding or "sounding out" words in a rapid and accurate fashion.

This awareness of the sound structure of our language seems so easy and commonplace that we take it for granted. But many children do not develop phoneme awareness, and for some interesting reasons that we are now beginning to understand.

From the NICHD studies that were initiated in 1965 to understand how the reading process develops, we now have strong evidence that it is not the ear that understands that a spoken word like cat is divided into three sounds and that these discrete sounds can be linked to the letters C-A-T.

Rather, we know it is the language systems in the brain that performs this function. In some youngsters, the brain seems to have an easy time processing this type of information.

However, in many children that skill is only learned with difficulty, and thus must be taught directly, explicitly, and by a well-prepared and informed teacher.

It also has become clear that the development of these critical early reading-related skills, such as phoneme awareness and phonics, are fostered when children are read to at home during the preschool years, when they learn their letter and number names, and when they are introduced at very early ages to concepts of print and literacy activities.

Does this mean that children who have a difficulty understanding that spoken words are composed of discrete individual sounds that can be linked to letters suffer from brain dysfunction or damage? Not at all. It simply means that the neural systems that perceive the phonemes in our language are less efficient in these children than in other children.

The development of phoneme awareness, the development of an understanding of the alphabetic principle, and the translation of these skills to the application of phonics in reading and spelling words are non-negotiable beginning reading skills that all children must master in order to understand what they read and to learn from their reading sessions.

Adapted from: Lyon, G. R. (July 10, 1997). Report on Learning Disabilities Research. Testimony before the Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives.
From <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/356>

Although the process detailed in this passage sounds daunting, there are numerous activities related to phonemic awareness and an understanding of the alphabetic code that help children become competent readers. Here is just a sampling:

- 1 Rhyme. It appears that children who can rhyme have an advantage over those who can't when it comes to learning to read. Being able to rhyme means having a sense that words can be broken into different sounds and that by varying initial consonant or vowel sounds new words can be formed. There are countless songs, finger plays, nursery rhymes, and books that contain an element of rhyme, which can be sung, recited, or read to young learners. You can leave off the last word in a rhyme and have your child supply the missing word. You can also replace a familiar rhyme with an unfamiliar one (Little Miss Muffett sat in a tree. Little Miss Muffett got stung by a ???). You can also play rhyming games like "I spy with my little eye, a word that rhymes with look. What is the word?". Think word families—use real and made up words (at, bat, cat, dat, fat, gat, hat... The possibilities are truly endless.
- 2 Reading requires an ability to match—shapes to letters, letters to sounds, words to meaning and so on. You can help develop this skill by playing card games, manipulating dominoes, and doing puzzles. Even household tasks like laundry can play a part—e.g. pairing socks to make a match!
- 3 Introduce letter names and sounds. Start with letters that are important or distinctive like the letters in your child's name. Emphasize the sounds of letters, as the sounds of letters will eventually be more important than names. Say "a for apple" rather than aye for apple to help your child develop that habit. Read alphabet books. Keep magnetic letters handy. Label objects in your environment. Create a word wall of interesting or often used words. Make your child's name visible on pictures or other spots in your home.
- 4 Help children's writing skills keep pace with their language development. Help them form a correct pencil grip. Support them as they learn to cut and use other writing implements. Encourage them to trace and copy letters. As they get older, encourage them to use "invented" spelling and begin to sound out words. Keep writing supplies available and ready. It's important to ensure that writing and reading skills develop at a similar pace as they complement, reinforce, and depend on one another.
- 5 Talk to one another as much as possible. This helps build vocabulary and generates an interest in things outside themselves, both skills vital to reading. For instance, as you walk to school or in your neighborhood ask your child to notice which trees look the same and which trees look different. Ask them to describe the parts of a tree and what grows on trees. Ask them if it were possible to grow anything in the world on a tree what they'd like it to be.

In general, ask questions that stimulate thinking and require more than yes/no answers like what if questions. For example: What would happen if it never rained?; What would happen if you came upon a talking puddle?; What if a giant ladybug landed on your head and sneezed?; What if the grass changed colors twice a day?

If you don't know the answer to a question posed, look up the answer together. Validate children's interests and show them the importance of research tools like books and search engines. Show an interest in their stories. Help them develop stories with beginnings, middles, and ends. Ask questions to help them expand their thinking—Then what did the giant do?, How did that make the giant feel?, Did the giant have any help?

And lastly **read, read, read**—you can never read too much!

One Final Note

The development of early literacy skills and the initial stages of reading are generally collaborative steps—a wondrous collaboration between young learners and their parents and teachers, between readers and texts, between language and knowledge, between words and meaning... It often takes many hours to launch a new reader into the world. Savor the adventure!

The Board met on 2/12. Here's what was discussed and decided:

A. Review Agenda, Action items, Board Timeline

B. Director Update

- a. Fundraising Update
 - i. Raffle Tickets
 - ii. Posters
 - iii. Advertising
 - iv. Procurements
 - v. Job signup
 - vi. Giving Wall
- b. Church Guidelines
 - i. Standards Document w/Father James
 - ii. Usage Agreement Addendum – Communication
 - iii. Administrative suggestions for board review
- c. Bus Zone Signage
 - i. Change sign to 30 minute load/unload?

C. Administrator Update

- a. Working Schedule

D. Teacher update

- a. Child/Working Parent update
- b. Transition to Outside
- c. Curriculum
- d. Communication Tools
 - i. Teacher Notebook?

E. Co-Chair A

- a. School security
 - i. Possible new doors
 - ii. In session sign
 - iii. East precinct contacted as a get to know you
 - iv. Safety Committee?
- b. Outdoor Storage Shed Concepts
- c. Crisis Solution Center – quarterly report
- d. Board Motivator Ideas for Procurements and Raffle Sales

F. Co-Chair B

- a. Consent to treat
- b. Assumption of Risk

G. Parent Coordinator

- a. Parent Job Timeline
- b. Parent coordinator follow-up
- c. Yearbook Timeline
 - i. Done before June 1
 - ii. Need to reviewed by May 15
 - iii. Representation of each child
 - 1. Make sure there isn't too much repetition of any one child
 - iv. Quote, photo, artwork

v. 1 or 2 Teacher Pages

H. Registrar

a. PreK change

I. Secretary

a. Library Books

b. Art work

J. Treasurer

a. Budget Update

b. Yearbook

i. \$300 budget

ii. \$5 per family

K. February Parent Meeting

a. Topics and Announcements

L. Action Items

M. Staff Contracts (No Teachers present. Board Only discussion)

Don't Forget!

This year the annual **Family Night Out will be on SUNDAY, March 24, 2013**. This event includes dinner, a raffle, music by Recess Monkey, and our silent auction. This year's theme is Rock Band! Come wearing your best rock star ensemble and enjoy this family friendly evening.

Tickets are \$16 for adults, \$8 for kids.

Each family must procure THREE items. Contact your favorite restaurant or business for gift cards and service certificates, or get creative and donate something that uses your own skills. We will send out lists of items procured on a regular basis so families don't approach a business which has already donated an item for our auction.

The Family Night Out is open to the public. Start talking about it now with your friends and family!

Upcoming events:

March 6th - King Street regular day (SPS early dismissal)

March 12th - Board Meeting

March 15th - King Street regular day (SPS no school)

March 19th - Parent Meeting

March 24th - Auction

April 2nd - Board Meeting

April 3rd - Field trip to Children's Theater - No school!

April 9th - Parent Meeting

April 15-19 - Spring Break - No school!

Happy Birthday!

Noah turns 5 on 3/22.

Ellen turns 3 on 3/25.

Your contributions to the King Street Cooperative Preschool Newsletter are very welcome!

The next edition will come out on March 19th, 2013. Please send articles, pictures, information and

ideas to Lissa Munger, ecmunger@gmail.com, by Wednesday, March 13th.

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