



Early Literacy



Early literacy experiences are unique because they rely on the actions of a caring adult to unlock their full learning potential. A book on a shelf or a children’s song playing in the background by itself is little more than sensory clutter in a baby’s environment. However, when a book or song is shared, explored, and enjoyed with them by their caregiver, it blossoms into a meaningful, multilayered learning vehicle.

Children’s books, oral storytelling, rhymes, and songs hold a special place in the lives of many children and the memories of many adults. When books, stories, songs, and rhymes are intentionally shared and enjoyed with young children as a regular part of each day, they have the greatest power to enrich language development. This also builds children’s knowledge of the world and strengthens their attachment to caregivers. These activities are not only enjoyable in the moment but, for many children, they spark a lifelong love of literature and music. Early literacy development is a dynamic process!

The Attraction of Stories, Rhymes, and Songs

Early literacy doesn’t mean just reading! Long before children become readers, they can develop an appreciation for the sounds of language (phonological awareness) through songs, imitations, and sound plays that all cultures share with their infants. The sounds of language are fascinating and fun. Many books are appealing to infants and toddlers as they are read aloud because of the language sounds they feature. The same is true for many of children’s favorite rhymes and songs. Very young children who are just beginning to learn about and make sense of languages are highly interested in listening to, reproducing, and playing with language sounds (phonemes). Books, rhymes, and songs are especially effective in highlighting these sounds.



Support babies and toddlers by:

- Frequently engaging children in book exploration, storytelling, and reading activities.
- Sharing many forms of children’s literature, including poems, songs, finger plays, and wordplay.
- Using songs to model rhyming and enhance predictive sequencing.



Stories are Mirrors and Windows of Children's Experiences

Books often connect to children's own memories and experiences while also introducing them to new knowledge and ideas. Young children are especially drawn to stories and images featuring familiar people, places, and situations as these help them make sense of the world around them. At the same time, their natural curiosity drives them to discover new things. This is why it's essential to provide books that reflect the diversity of all children and families, so each child can engage with both familiar and novel content. When caregivers begin with relatable elements in a story and then introduce new words or concepts, it sparks the child's interest and curiosity.

Support babies and toddlers by:

- Ensuring that the book selection shows various cultures and languages and features characters with different abilities.
- Making books and music available in different languages. Providing many types of books, including picture story books, participation books, patterned concept books, predictable books, wordless books, folktales and fables, poetry, nursery rhymes, alphabet books, counting books, rhyming books, and information books.

Early Literacy Experiences Promote Brain Development

Young children, who are great at recognizing patterns, quickly notice and remember the repeating elements in a story or song. This allows them to anticipate and participate in the storytelling, making the experience fun and satisfying. It also provides valuable practice for language production! Even though children's books tend to have more illustrations than words, they are goldmines for supporting cognitive functions like early symbolic thinking. For infants and toddlers, who don't yet understand written words, illustrations play a vital role in the shared book experience. Intriguing images can lead to thoughtful explorations and deep discussions with toddlers that go well beyond the words on a page. It's important to remember that, for infants and toddlers, the pictures are a key part of a book's appeal.

Support babies and toddlers by:

- Pointing to pictures while labeling them, using facial expressions, varied vocal tones, and gestures to communicate the meaning of words.
- Supporting vocabulary building by reinforcing the meanings of words by connecting them to real-life experiences.

Book Friends

Reading together, saying rhymes and finger plays together, and singing favorite songs together all have an undeniable social and emotional component that contributes powerfully to their appeal and potential to support learning. Being held during reading or hearing a favorite lullaby feels comforting, relaxing, and safe. Holding the book and turning the pages allows children to participate and contribute in a way that satisfies their desire for independence and mastery. Silly stories, songs, and rhymes bring joy to children and adults who share the experience.

For many people, books are an essential part of a fulfilling life. Most of these individuals were likely introduced to books at a young age by an adult who wanted to share their love of reading. What a privilege it is for caregivers to introduce young children to so many “book friends” and other rich and enjoyable literacy experiences. Caregivers can lay the foundation for babies and toddlers to become skilled readers and develop a lifelong love for the richness and joy of books, storytelling, songs, and poetry!

“Literature is my utopia. Here, I am not disenfranchised. No barrier of the senses shuts me out from the sweet, gracious discourses of my book friends. They talk to me without embarrassment or awkwardness.

-Helen Keller

Support babies and toddlers by:

- Promoting positive attitudes toward books by making them available for children to explore independently.
- Modeling shared and independent reading activities, rereading favorites, and modeling appropriate care for books.
- Offering children opportunities to turn the pages of books and choose the books read to them.



Learn more at

zerotothree.org/criticalcompetencies