

More than reading and writing



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Most parents know that reading and writing are very important for children. However, how words help us understand our world and make the most of opportunities is much more than reading and writing – it is called ‘literacy’.

Children don’t wait till they start school to learn literacy skills. The experiences they have every day from birth help them develop their literacy and their knowledge and understanding of the world.

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What is literacy?

Literacy is part of our daily life and how we use language in our:

- speaking and listening
- reading
- writing and drawing
- storytelling
- watching and using electronic media.

How children learn

Children’s literacy development begins in the family from when they are born. It continues in the family, children’s services, schools and communities as they grow up. Children learn from how their family uses language and from having lots of opportunities to talk, read, write, draw, sing and play. They need to experiment and practise their skills. They need to know their learning is important and that you are proud of their efforts.

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When children have lots of experiences with words and print their literacy is off to a good start.

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Children’s literacy skills

Children are developing literacy skills when they:

- talk to people, listen, take turns in conversations
- ask questions
- watch and listen to adults and other children to find out what to do
- tell people how they feel, eg ‘I feel cross’ or what they need, ‘Please may I have a drink?’
- carry out instructions – from simple ‘Please put your cup on the table’ to the more difficult ‘Please put your toys away and go to the bathroom and brush your teeth’
- talk about themselves and their own actions, eg ‘Me good boy today’ or ‘I’m eating a banana’
- listen to or tell rhymes, riddles, stories or jokes
- recognise problems and possible solutions, eg ‘The rope keeps falling down. You tie it up?’
- engage in imaginative or pretend play
- choose their own book or ask for a story
- talk about stories and say what they think might happen
- play card or board games
- scribble, draw and paint with crayons, textas, pencils, paintbrushes
- make letter shapes with play dough
- write some of the letters of their name
- start to use the words ‘write’ or ‘draw’.

What parents can do

Parents and others in the family are teaching children literacy by their own use of language – how they speak and listen to each other, read, write, use computers and watch TV or movies.

Speaking and listening

Families are teaching by:

- talking together
- asking and answering questions
- explaining things and giving instructions
- listening to what others say or for sounds in the environment
- saying what they see and do, eg 'Oh, look at the colourful leaves fluttering in the wind', or 'I'm going to fill the wheelbarrow with all the leaves'
- planning and predicting, eg 'I wonder if it will rain and if we should take an umbrella?'
- sharing stories and jokes
- singing songs and jingles, saying rhymes and chants
- problem solving, eg 'You want the car to go to sport and I need to visit a friend, how can we work this out?'
- thinking out loud, eg 'I am nearly ready for work – now, have I forgotten anything? Oh yes, I must put the dog out'.

Children need you and other family and friends to:

- listen, talk and take an interest in them
- read books with them, tell stories and share experiences
- answer their questions
- agree and argue with them
- play word games:
 - 'What does the cow say?'... 'Moo'
 - 'Why did the chicken cross the road?'
 - 'Knock, knock'. 'Who's there?'

Encourage children to listen to sounds and words:

- sing songs and say rhymes
- imitate sounds they hear, eg motors revving, dogs barking, cows mooing
- listen to stories together
- listen to the wind in the trees, the waves of the sea, birds and aeroplanes
- use different voices, eg whispering, happy voice, sad voice, shouting, and talking fast or slow
- help them work out what sound they hear at the beginning of a word
- use simple musical or percussion instruments with songs or rhymes
- give them simple instructions to follow.

Teach children:

- words for getting along with others, eg 'Hello', 'Thankyou', 'Can I join in, please?'
- social rules – when and how to talk, when to listen and how to behave in different situations.

Point out:

- how people talk and listen, eg you have to be very quiet to listen
- how talk can be used in different ways, eg when people are cross sometimes they talk very loudly; when they are afraid they may talk very softly
- how different languages sound.

Talk about:

- what's happened – the past
- what's happening now – the present
- what will happen – the future
- people – what sort of job they do, where they fit in the family or community, their relationship to your child.

Use lots of different words to:

- name things, people, actions, feelings
- talk about size, shape, colour
- name the feel, scent, position or number of things.



Talk about what you are doing:

- at bed time, bath time, change time
- working in the house, the shed, the garden
- feeding animals
- planning a trip or a party
- watching a parade or pageant.

Show children their learning is important:

- listen with interest to what children say
- give them time to find the words they want – help them if they really get stuck
- take their questions seriously and help them find answers.

Enjoy spending time with your child – talking, playing and sharing together. Children learn through play – you don't have to make everything a 'lesson'.

What if we speak more than one language?

If you, your partner or family use a language other than English, you might wonder which one to teach your child. There are benefits when children learn more than one language and it does not cause them confusion or any other language problem. They can build cultural or family bonds when they use their 'home' language with family and community. They need to hear and practise speaking each language often to be good at them. It works best when family members speak to children in the language they are most comfortable with.

Reading and watching

Reading books with babies and young children is one of the best things you can do for their development and learning. Find time to share a book with babies soon after they are born – it's never too early! Point at the pictures they show interest in and name what they are looking at. Baby will gradually learn that the words have meaning. Keep reading books together as they get older.

Let children see you reading:

- books, magazines, newspapers
- recipes, maps, signs, labels, menus, instructions.

Let children see you:

- watching TV or movies
- typing on computers, tablets, phones. Make sure you model healthy, balanced use of electronic devices.

Talk about what you read and watch:

- 'This program is about how people live in China.'
- 'These instructions tell me how to set up my new mobile phone.'
- 'I enjoyed reading that book about machines.'
- 'This label tells me what is in this food.'
- 'I'm going to try this new recipe.'
- 'This magazine has a really interesting story about fresh food markets.'

Point to print when you go out - road signs, bus and train stops, shop windows, T-shirts, posters, letterbox numbers.

Play looking games to help children notice details:

- 'Look for the person wearing red shoes.'
- 'Find the mouse in the picture.'
- 'Find a word beginning with "s".'
- 'Find a number plate with a "three" in it.'
- 'Let's look for writing as we walk to the shops.'
- 'Let's follow this trail of footprints in the sand.'





Help children think about what they see and read:

- ‘Which way should we go?’
- ‘Which baked beans do we usually have, this kind or that?’
- ‘Can I park here?’
- ‘What happened? What will happen next?’

Talk about the importance of your child’s name, what it means, how you chose it. Help children recognise their name and the letters in it, especially the first letter. Look for letters from their name in other words.

Play:

- games which involve imagination and pretending
- board games such as Snakes and Ladders
- card games such as Snap
- matching games with real objects, shapes, pictures or words
- jigsaws and puzzles.

Offer children a variety of things to read:

- old magazines, calendars, catalogues, blank forms
- boxes and packets
- books with pop-ups, flaps or interesting pictures, books about children’s interests, rhymes, poetry and music, storybooks and books about facts.

Show children their learning is important – encourage them to keep practising. But remember they need plenty of time to play on their own and with others too.

Drawing and writing

Let children see you:

- doodling, drawing, painting
- signing documents, paying bills, filling in forms
- writing lists, cards and letters
- doing crossword puzzles
- typing on a laptop or device.

Talk about reasons for writing and drawing:

- ‘I’m writing a shopping list so I’ll remember what to buy.’
- ‘Ahmed loves to draw. Perhaps he’ll be a famous artist one day.’ Maybe visit a gallery or exhibition.
- ‘Peter has written a note to say he’ll be home late.’
- ‘Jenny has drawn a picture to decorate her book.’
- ‘Anna has drawn a map to help us find our way to her house.’

Help children develop hand-eye coordination and finger strength – it helps them learn to write and draw.

Let them:

- pour water
- make and use dough for baking
- do puzzles
- paint, hammer and thread things
- use mud, sand or clay – for squeezing, shaping and drawing in.

Teach by:

- helping children solve drawing problems, eg ‘How can I make a straight line?’
- showing them how to hold pencils or use the computer
- showing them how to form letters, especially the letters in their name
- writing down what your children say.





Let children practise skills by providing:

- paper – lined and blank, old envelopes, letters and cards
- order forms from catalogues, old diaries and cards
- crayons, chalk, pens, pencils, textas, a ruler and eraser.

Encourage children to draw and write by:

- drawing a picture about something they have seen or done
- illustrating a story
- writing their names
- making a shopping list
- making books with sheets of paper stapled together – about your child, family, animals, birthdays, shopping, a place or holiday.

Show children their learning is important by:

- giving them time to experiment and practise
- noticing and appreciating their achievements
- helping them when they get stuck
- encouraging them to keep trying
- putting their drawings or writings on the fridge and asking them to tell you about them.

Don't force young children into reading and writing. They will participate when they are developmentally ready and see a purpose for it.

What about screens?

Watching TV and using other screens has become a big part of our lives.

- Australian guidelines recommend that children under 2 years do not watch TV or other screens, other than to video chat with loved ones. Screens can get in the way of their learning, and babies benefit from more time playing, and socialising with you.
- Children 2 to 5 years should spend no more than 1 hour each day on screens. Young children will learn much more from active play, being outside, being creative, talking, reading and time with family and friends.

If children do watch TV or use electronic games or apps, make sure they are good quality and age-appropriate. The best ones involve children being creative, thinking or solving problems, or getting interested in something in the real world. There are online reviews that can guide your choices. Children also benefit when parents are involved and talk with them about what they are seeing or doing.

Make sure children's screen time is balanced with plenty of active play, creativity and time with family and friends. Remember to model healthy screen use in your own life.





Working together

It is important to work with your child's carer or teacher to support their learning. You might:

- let them know about your child's interests, activities or fears
- ask how your child is going and how you can help
- be as involved as you can in school activities, eg reading or cooking with children, school council or parent group
- visit the service or school
- talk briefly to staff when you drop off your child, eg 'Jack didn't sleep very well last night, so he might be a bit tired today'.

If you are concerned about your child's learning talk with their teacher, carer, doctor, or child health nurse.

Want more information?

Department for Education - GreatStart

Department for Education website has lots of activities to do with children to make the most of everyday learning opportunities

www.education.sa.gov.au/parenting-and-child-care/parenting/learning-your-child-greatstart

The Little Big Book Club - Raising Literacy Australia

Provides free packs of books for babies and toddlers through Children's Centres, the Child and Family Health Service and other services. Find details on the website as well as free activity sheets, ebooks and books for purchase www.thelittlebigbookclub.com.au

Nature Play

Ideas for making unstructured outdoor play in nature an everyday part of childhood

www.natureplaysa.org.au

Dads' Read

Information for dads about reading with children www.dadsread.org.au

Let's Read

Supports families to share words, rhymes, songs, books and stories with children

www.letsread.com.au

Department for Education

Phone 8226 1000

Has information about children's learning in the early years, how parents can be involved, and support available www.education.sa.gov.au

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri to make an appointment. The child health nurses can talk to you about your child's development. See www.cyh.com for child health and parenting information

Australian Government Department of Health

Find Australian physical activity and screen time recommendations

www1.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/gug-indig-hb~inactivitiy

Australian Council on Children and the Media

For reviews of movies, apps and games <https://childrenandmedia.org.au>

Common Sense Media

For reviews of movies, apps and games www.common sense media.org

Raising Children Network

Has information about raising bilingual children and healthy screen use for young children

www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Why stories are important', 'Television', 'Growing and learning in the family' and 'Starting school' www.parenting.sa.gov.au



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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