



Florida Literacy  
and Reading Excellence

# FLaRE Document

## Emergent Literacy

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## **MISSION OF THE FLaRE CENTER**

The mission of the Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence (FLaRE) Center is to support the Florida Department of Education in its statewide implementation of the Florida Reading Initiatives by functioning as a principal informational delivery mechanism for improving the early literacy and reading instruction to children and families across the state of Florida.

The Center will serve as...

- an information clearinghouse for scientifically based reading and family literacy research
- a lighthouse for disseminating information on successful projects
- a research/development center to document effective practices based on rigorous research methods
- a development center for preservice and inservice teacher training
- a linkage for school districts, IHEs, community organizations that have a vested interest in family literacy and reading excellence.

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## Literacy

Literacy is a process that begins well before the elementary grades and continues throughout adulthood. The definition of literacy has expanded over the past few years.

Literacy is no longer perceived as simply a cognitive skill but as a complex and active process with cognitive, social, linguistic, and psychological aspects (Teale & Sulzby, 1989). Literacy is viewed as the ability of individuals to communicate effectively for real life applications. Literacy involves the ability to read and write, speak, listen, view, and think (Cooper, 1997). Children learn to develop these abilities through real opportunities and support provided by experienced individuals (i.e., parents, teachers, or peers). Reading is inseparable from the broad concept of literacy. Literacy includes all aspects of communicating in real-world situations.

Reading is the cornerstone of education and the foundation of lifelong learning. Learning to read in the first years of school is essential to success in school and in life (Burns, Roe, & Ross, 1999). The importance of helping children become competent readers was recognized by the 1998 United States National Reading Summit. The summit recommended that parents help children become competent readers by reading daily to them from infancy, and that teachers use a variety of instructional methods to provide support for children with limited English, with disabilities, and from lower socioeconomic homes (United States Department of Education [US DOE], 1998).

Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) in *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* discuss the importance of parents and interactions that take place at home for children's optimal literacy development. More than three decades, researchers have shown that children begin their journey as readers and writers early in life. From birth through preschool young children begin to acquire basic understandings about reading and writing and its functions through home experiences with print.

Children do not become competent readers automatically. In order for children to read well by the end of third grade, their progress needs to be closely monitored by teachers and parents during the preceding years (Hiebert, Pierson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 1998).

The National Research Council (NRC), in its *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success* (1998b) report, suggested that the more children know about literacy before they enter school, the better equipped they are to succeed in reading. The main accomplishments include:

- Oral language skills and phonological awareness.
- Motivation to learn and appreciation for literate forms.
- Print awareness and letter knowledge.

These accomplishments are best met through activities that are integrated across cognitive, social, motor, emotional, and language development. (p. 2)

The NRC (1998) highlighted in the same report the following circumstances that promote reading:

- Children's early experiences with language and literacy.
- Sharing books with children.
- Being read to often.

- Development of language skills.
- Development of vocabulary.
- Development of basic knowledge about the world around them.
- Owning books.
- Have access to books at home, in their preschool and primary classrooms.
- Phonological awareness.
- Excellent reading instruction once children begin school.

Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) in *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* recommended that our society needs to play a key role in the prevention of reading difficulties among the current generation of children in America. These authors acknowledge that children need opportunities to:

- Explore the many uses and functions of written language and develop mastery of them.
- Understand, learn, and use the relationships between the spellings of words and the sounds of speech to recognize and spell written words.
- Practice and enhance vocabulary, language, and comprehension skills.
- Have adults read to them and discuss and react to the literature.
- Experience enthusiasm, joy, and success in learning to read and write.
- Use reading and writing as tools for learning.
- Receive effective prevention programs as early as possible if they are at risk of potential reading difficulties.
- Receive effective intervention and remediation programs that are well integrated with their everyday classroom activities, as soon as they begin to have difficulty.

For the most high-risk children, enriched preschool environments can be a deciding factor between success and failure later on in life. Snow et al. (1998) recommended that children who have been identified as at-risk for reading difficulties should have access to quality early childhood environments that promote language and literacy growth and address reading factors in a rich, meaningful, and integrated way. Additional instruction and resources will help children with severe reading difficulties. They called for reduced class size, smaller student-teacher ratios, strong teacher preparation and experiences, expertise in reading instruction, quality and quantity of instructional materials, school libraries, and well-trained and supervised volunteers to help schools with greater number of students at risk for reading difficulties.

In the *Start Early, Finish Strong: How to Help Every Child Become a Reader* (1999) report, the US DOE, America Reads Challenge recommended that "...we must *start early* by preparing young children to read, and we must *finish strong* by providing excellent instruction and community support in the primary grades" (p. 8).

Children who are not adequately prepared to enter school, who have had limited experiences with language and text and limited verbal interactions and reading with parents and caregivers, are more likely to develop reading problems when they enter school (Snow et al., 1998; Scarborough, 1998).

According to the US DOE (1999):

Once in school, a child needs teachers with strong, research-based skills in reading instruction that have the support required to maintain these skills. Members of the community can help by tutoring children, helping parents, providing books, and supporting schools. Such a strong finish offers every student the opportunity to become a good reader by the end of third grade.  
(pp. 8-9)

## What is Emergent Literacy?

Emergent literacy is a fairly new term used to conceptualize early reading and writing development. Teale and Sulzby (1986) in their influential volume *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading* introduced this new term—*emergent literacy*. This term—emergent literacy—assumes that the child acquires some knowledge about language, reading, and writing before formally entering the school. Currently, this term has been expanded to include reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking (Cooper, 1997).

Literacy development does not begin upon entering the school gate; rather, it begins early in life and is ongoing. Literacy development occurs in the everyday contexts of the home, community, and school through meaningful and functional experiences that require the use of literacy in settings that are part of the child's everyday life. These settings are mostly social, with adults and children interacting through sharing, collaboration, and mentoring. Literacy activities occur and are embedded purposefully within content areas such as art, play, social studies, and science, to ensure that children can experience purpose and construct meaning (Morrow, 1997).

Studies from as far back as 1966 have shaped our current outlook on emergent literacy (Clay, 1967; Durkin, 1966; Holdaway, 1979; Taylor, 1983; Teale, 1982; Teale & Sulzby, 1989). Sulzby (1989) views emergent literacy as the reading and writing behaviors that precede and develop into conventional literacy. These behaviors are developed through meaningful experiences and daily interactions with peers and adults (Heath, 1983; Sulzby, 1985). Children's concepts about literacy are molded from the earliest experiences and interactions children have with readers and writers as well as through their own attempts to read, write, and construct meaning (Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

**We, at the FLaRE Center, view *emergent literacy* as a developing range of understanding about print and nonconventional literacy behaviors that begin before schooling and lead into conventional reading and writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking.**

According to Sulzby and Teale (1991), "Emergent literacy has expanded the purview of the research from reading to *literacy* because theories and findings have shown that reading, writing, and oral language develop concurrently and interrelatedly in literate environments" (p. 728).

Researchers' views of emergent literacy have changed over the years as they have started to understand the development of literacy through the "children's eyes," or from the "child's point of view." When educators talk about emergent literacy, they are usually referring to children from birth to kindergarten; this expansion of the age range includes children as young as one or two who listen to stories being read aloud, focus on objects, recognize sounds, notice labels and environmental print in the world around them, and experiment with crayons, markers, and pencils (May, 1998).

Researchers examine young children's construction of meaning as a result of their social interactions with adults, peers, and the world, in general (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Piaget's work informed us many years ago of children's construction of literacy through interactions with their environments, and Vygotsky's idea of *scaffolding* contributed to our understanding of peer and adult support. These and many other perspectives have significantly affected our perspective of emergent literacy.

Teale and Sulzby (1989) described young children as literacy learners with the following characteristics:

- Children begin to learn and read very early in life.
- Young children learn the functions of literacy through observing and participating in real-life settings in which reading and writing are used.
- Young children's reading and writing abilities develop concurrently and interrelatedly through experiences in reading and writing.
- Through active involvement with various literacy materials, young children construct their understanding of reading and writing.
- Learning to read and write is a developmental process for young children.

In a more recent report, Teale and Sulzby (1996) gave us important characteristics of children as literacy learners, which are summarized below:

- Almost all children in our society begin to exhibit understandings and learnings about reading and writing early in their lives. Most children, by the age of 2 or 3, can identify signs (e.g., McDonald's, Wal-Mart, Wendy's), labels (e.g., Life Cereal, Cocoa Puffs), and logos (e.g., Nike, Disney). Children are playing and using early writing behaviors.
- Literacy development occurs through direct experiences that demonstrate to children that reading and writing have a communicative purpose (e.g., reading a recipe, reading directions and signs, writing "thank you" notes or invitations to a birthday party).
- Children who are read to and given opportunities to experiment with writing grow in their understanding of how print functions. They have an increased vocabulary, a better understanding of story structure, and can recognize the difference between written and oral language.
- A language- and print-rich environment provides many opportunities for children to develop their early literacy experiences.

N. Hall (1987) presented some of the assumptions surrounding the emergent literacy perspective about how children read and write:

- Reading and writing are closely related processes and should not be artificially isolated for instruction.
- Learning to read and write is essentially a social process and is influenced by a search for meaning.
- Most preschool children already know a great deal about printed language without exposure to formal instruction.
- Becoming literate is a continuous, developmental process.
- Children need to act like readers and writers to become readers and writers.
- Children need to read authentic and natural texts.
- Children need to write for personal reasons.

Early experiences with written language can provide children with a solid foundation for school literacy learning (Sulzby & Teale, 1991; Teale & Sulzby, 1986, 1996). Before they enter kindergarten, many children have devoted countless hours to storybook reading, programs like *Sesame Street*, and other language-related activities (Adams, 1990). From these experiences, especially those with storybooks, these children have gained an interest in books, the capacity to understand and talk about stories, and to connect the information in stories to their background knowledge (Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, and Freppon, 1995b). These children have also learned that it is print that is read in stories. Finally, children who have had many experiences with storybook reading are able to identify many of the alphabet letters and have acquired at least the beginnings of phonemic awareness.

*Phonological awareness* is an important element of emergent literacy. It refers to an awareness of the sounds of speech as distinct from their meaning. When that consciousness includes an understanding that words can be divided into a sequence of phonemes, we term this understanding phonemic awareness (Chard & Dickson, 1999). Torgesen and Mathes (1998) stated that “phonological awareness is most commonly defined as one’s sensitivity to, or explicit awareness of, the phonological structure of words in one’s language. In short, it involves the ability to notice, think about, or manipulate the individual sounds in words” (p. 2).

Becoming phonologically aware prepares children for later reading instruction (Adams, Foorman, & Beeler, 1998; Chard, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1998). Rhyming and rhyming games help young children to develop an awareness of the phonological structure of words. Acquiring phonological awareness involves two tasks: learning that words can be divided into segments of sound smaller than a syllable, and learning about individual phonemes themselves (Torgesen, 1998). As children acquire more and more knowledge about and experience with the distinctive features of phonemes, they become more skilled at identifying them when occur in words.

According to Torgesen and Mathes (1999), phonological awareness “involves the ability to notice, think about, or manipulate the individual sounds in words” (p. 2). Phonological awareness is very important in learning beginning reading skills. Torgesen and Mathes (1999) state that “phonological awareness is important in learning to read because it strongly supports learning how the words in our language are represented in print” (p. 2).

Phonological awareness helps children’s reading and construction of meaning. Research has shown that children who understand the relationships between letters and phonemes and who learn to use this knowledge for word identification, become better readers than children who have difficulty acquiring these skills (Beck & Juel, 1995; Share & Stanovich, 1995).

Phonological awareness is important in learning beginning word reading skills, because:

- It helps children understand the alphabetic principle.
- It helps children notice the regular ways letters represent sounds in words.
- It makes it possible to generate possibilities for words in context that are only partially sounded out.

According to Hiebert et al. (1998), accomplishments for phonological awareness in Kindergarten and first grade include:

## Kindergarten

- Tells whether two words rhyme.
- Isolates and pronounces the beginning sound in a word.
- Blends the sounds in two-phoneme words.

## First Grade

- Isolates and pronounces all the sounds in two- and three-phoneme words.
- Blends the sounds in four-phoneme words containing initial consonant blends.
- Isolates and pronounces the sounds in four-phoneme words containing initial blends.
- Blends the sounds in four- and five-phoneme words containing initial and final blends.
- 

Reading programs that contain explicit instruction in phonics aid in the development of phonological awareness. “Stimulation of phonological awareness,” Torgesen and Mathes stress, “should never be considered an isolated instructional end in itself. It will be most beneficial if its blended seamlessly with instruction and experiences using letter-sound correspondences to read and spell words” (1998, p. 9). Quality experiences in phonological awareness combined with age-appropriate, fun, systematic, direct, and explicit instruction in phonics delivered (Snider, 1995) by informed teachers, rich experiences with language, literature, writing, and a language and print-rich classroom environment can help make a strong reading program.

Smith, Simmons, and Kameenui (1998) concluded that although phonological awareness training is beneficial for most students, the degree and nature of instruction may vary according to the child’s unique reading needs. They stated that phonological awareness can be developed before reading and it assists in the development of reading skills. Instruction in phonological awareness should be fun, interactive, and developmentally appropriate. Early instruction in rhyming and onset-rime relationships, and integrated instruction in segmenting and blending can be beneficial to reading development (Gough, 1995; Snider, 1995). There are two recent published programs on phonological awareness that are based on research: *Ladders to Literacy* (O’Connor, Notari-Syverson, & Vadasy, 1998) and *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children* (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1998).

*Phonemic awareness* is a powerful predictor of reading success (Adams, 1990; Juel, 1994, 1998; Snow et al., 1998). Phonemic awareness refers to a child’s understanding and awareness that speech is composed of a series of individual sounds or phonemes (Yopp, 1992). Stanovich (1994) concluded that phonemic awareness tasks “are the best predictors of the ease of early reading acquisition—better than anything else that we know of, including IQ” (p. 284). Phonemic awareness helps children understand how spoken language relates to written language. Torgesen, Wagner, and Rashotte (1994) concluded that at-risk children can truly benefit from intense explicit instruction. They also suggested that that type of instruction needs to be fun, interactive, and developmentally appropriate.

Yopp (1992) suggested various strategies that help develop children’s phonemic awareness. The following is a summary of her recommendations:

- Fun, playful, and natural ways that avoid rote memorization and drill.
- Activities that help reinforce and extend children’s awareness of sounds in words (e.g., clapping the num-

ber of syllables in a word, sound matching, sound isolation, sound segmentation, sound addition, sound deletion, sound substitution).

- Activities that encourage interaction among children.
- Activities that allow children to experiment with language.
- Activities that help meet students' individual differences.
- Sharing books that capitalize on word play.
- Making words.
- Reading and reciting nursery rhymes.
- Share riddles and rhymes that focus on songs.
- Singing songs that include word play.
- Play games that encourage word play.

G. Reid Lyon (1994) of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) directed a number of studies that examined the factors that predispose children to experiencing reading difficulties. Phonological awareness seems to play an important role in successful reading development. Lyon (1994) suggested that there are three areas of phonological processing difficulty that predispose children to reading difficulties:

- A lack of phonemic awareness.
- Difficulty with lexical access, or the ability to rapidly name pictures, colors, and objects.
- Difficulty in phonological memory.

According to Lyon (1994), research suggested that for students with the above characteristics, explicit systematic instruction in the code system is necessary. He recommended that children who experience such difficulties can benefit from the following instructional practices:

- Explicit work on phonemic awareness tasks.
- Intensive, consistent, and explicit work in sound-symbol relationships ranging from 30 minutes daily to an hour one-on-one tutorial.
- Explicit application to connected text with controlled vocabulary.
- Early intervention to prevent later difficulties.
- Invented spelling to help engage students in the sounds of words.
- An organized spelling program starting in first grade.
- Interactive and active decoding and spelling instruction.
- Daily word play activities (10-20 minutes per day) in groups.
- Frequent reading aloud to children.
- Being exposed to a variety of literature.
- Exploring the language of books.

Most children acquire a rich and varied background of experiences that help them develop concepts necessary for reading. Other factors believed to influence children's reading development include oral language development, phonemic awareness, concepts about print, and most importantly their home environment and parental influence (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 1998). Because there are children whose home experiences do not fully support their school literacy expectations and learning, these children depend more on school for their academic success, and

they must acquire these understandings as quickly as possible if they are to become skilled readers.

Early literacy experiences can have a profound impact on children’s literacy attitudes and on when children begin to learn to read. “There is no substitute for a teacher who reads children good stories. It whets the appetite of children for reading and provides a model of skillful oral reading,” says Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkerson (1985, p. 51).

Children need to understand that the purpose of print is to communicate. Read-alouds involve the teacher or another adult reading a variety of texts to a group of children. Read-alouds help children’s vocabulary when a teacher or parent/caregiver gives a short explanation or uses the word in context. Children who have been read to by their parents/caregivers are better able to focus on a story, ask more questions, and listen with attention (Anderson et al., 1985).

When teachers read aloud to their students, they model expert reading and fluency. This is particularly important for children who do not have had this experience in their homes or for children for whom English is a second language. Reading aloud from a variety of texts exposes children to different writing styles, helps them learn about story language, prevents them from memorizing favorite books, stimulates their thinking, and expands children’s background knowledge, vocabulary, and concepts about reading (Burns, 2000; Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 1998). Picture books, short stories, chapter books, nonfiction and content books, magazine and newspaper articles, poetry, and student authored writing can be used for read-alouds. According to Burns (2000), other activities that help children’s literacy development include:

- Finger plays.
- Having children retell stories.
- Interactively read aloud stories of predictable patterns.
- Rhyme.
- Repetition.
- Singing and chanting.
- Discussing word meanings.
- Talking about words.
- Learning riddles/rhymes, chants, and nursery rhymes.

When children have multiple and diverse early experiences with language and print, they develop an awareness of print. The concept of words and the idea that meaning is transferred through words can be demonstrated in several ways. Big books are especially useful for demonstrating print as the teacher points to words as he or she reads or has a child use a pointer.

Through shared reading children also learn that print is read left to right and top to bottom. A language- and print-rich environment can be developed in the classroom by:

- Labeling classroom objects.
- Developing class charts with names, jobs, birthdays, classroom activities, and classroom news.

Big books have large pictures and print that children in group settings can easily see. The stories often use predict-

able, repetitive language and focus on content that is appealing to young children. Big books are used frequently in supportive shared-reading activities where the teacher and children read the story aloud together (Eldredge, Reutzel, & Hollingsworth, 1996). Because the language is repetitive, teachers can let children finish reading parts of sentences and phrases. Teachers point to the words as they read with feeling and expression. Using big books helps children to develop an appreciation for reading, make connections between print and oral language, understand directionality (reading left to right and top to bottom), and see relationships between graphemes and phonemes in meaningful context.

Hiebert and Raphael (1998) discussed the importance of texts for early literacy classrooms. They recommended that teachers should pay attention to the following five criteria for selecting literature for their classroom:

- Predictability.
- Contextual support.
- Word density.
- Proportion of decodable words.
- Proportion of core high-frequency words.

Research has shown that a young child's letter knowledge is the single best predictor of first-year reading achievement (Adams, 1990, 1996). Adams (1996), Honig (1996), and Riley (1996) agree that the most powerful predictor of later reading success is the child's knowledge of the alphabet. A child who can easily and accurately recognize letters will have an easier time meeting the school literacy requirements.

Research on early reading suggests that children move through phases in word identification (Ehri, 1994; Snow et al., 1998). During the earliest, *logographic phase*, they “read” a word based on visual cues (e.g., MacDonald's golden arches logo). Although they may have little knowledge of how to process print “out of context” (Ehri, 1994, p. 328), they may know a lot of things about print. According to Ehri (1994), children may know that:

- Print has to do with the real world.
- Print and drawing are different.
- Print can stand for spoken language.
- Print occurs in different places.
- Print is made up of letters.

Gradually, young readers begin to link letters with sounds in reading and spelling—*alphabetic phase*. Invented spelling can support their developing phonemic awareness and understanding about sound-letter correspondences. Over time, with exposure, practice, and knowledge, they enter the *orthographic phase*, and they are able to use spelling patterns or letter sequences that support word identification. With practice, and meaningful experiences, fluency and automaticity are developed through wide reading.

## What Teachers Can Do

The notion of developmentally appropriate practice suggests that the curriculum matches children's developing abilities and level of emergent literacy (Schickedanz, 1998; Bredekamp, 1987). Effective teachers of literacy know

how to design developmentally appropriate experiences and how to accommodate instruction to meet children's needs. Holdaway (1979) argues that teachers cannot meet each child's unique needs all the time, every day. Instead, they can create the necessary conditions for developmentally appropriate learning by creating literate environments and giving children sufficient instructional support to help them learn to read and write successfully.

Duke (2000) studied the differences in print environments and experiences offered to children in different socio-economic status school settings. The results of the study indicated differences between the low- and high- socio-economic status (SES) classrooms in terms of: (a) the amount of print experience; (b) the types of print experienced; and, (c) the nature of print experience. She reported that a child in a low-SES first grade classroom was offered distinctively different print environments and experiences than her high-SES counterpart. According to Duke (2000), a child in low-SES classroom:

- Encountered less print on the walls and other surfaces of the classroom.
- Had fewer books and magazines in the classroom library.
- Received fewer references to classroom environmental print.
- Had fewer opportunities to use the classroom library.
- Was offered a smaller proportion of exposure to and experience with extended forms of text.
- Less often found print integrated across the curriculum.
- Had fewer opportunities to choose what she read.
- Was less likely to have opportunities to write for audiences beyond the teacher alone.
- Spent less time engaged in activities in which she had a high degree of authorship.
- Spent more time in activities such as copying, taking dictation, and completing worksheets.

Duke (2000) concluded that schools, themselves, may contribute to relatively lower levels of literacy achievement among low-SES children in terms of the types of print environments and literacy experiences they provide for children. In addition, teachers need to know their students' ability to process print and select books that support their word identification skills but also enhance their word learning (Johnston, 1998). Teachers can help enhance students' word learning by introducing words in context, covering illustrations in predictable text, examining words in isolation and in context, working with sentence strips, and reviewing words over time. Word study should be meaningful and fun, and it should incorporate the text, the reader, and the task (Johnston, 1998).

Morrow (1993) suggests that teachers can learn a lot from parents who create a language-rich literate environment at home. She recommends that we stop looking at family deficits and start examining the positive things that families do either in terms of interactions or storybook reading. Strickland (1989) proposes that we should concentrate on developing and improving what children and their families already have. She suggests that we need to create safe classroom environments, child-centered environments, and have materials available for all children to use. Stories should be part of daily reading routines, especially during the emergent literacy years and the early primary years. Lastly, because of the importance of reading to children at home, we should be creating solid home-school partnerships.

McGee and Richgels (1989) stated that teachers play three roles in children's alphabet learning, which is summarized below:

- *Capitalize on children's interests*—provide letter activities that children enjoy, talk about letters, and re-

spond to children's questions.

- *Talk about the role of letters in reading and writing*—talk about how letters represent sounds, how they combine to spell words, and point out the differences between capital and lowercase letters. Model reading and writing using the language experience approach and through interactive and independent writing activities.
- *Teach routines and provide a variety of opportunities for alphabet learning*—use environmental print, words and names from children's immediate surroundings in literacy activities, encourage children to use invented spelling, share alphabet books, play letter games, and use music.

Strickland and Morrow (1989) suggested that throughout the emergency literacy years, children combine their developmental skills, rather than use them in isolation, in their efforts to construct meaning with language. “Thus, a focus on learner strategies both develops and depends on skill, but a focus on skills in isolation offers little or no support for strategic learning” (p. 82).

Successful reading instruction demands knowledgeable teachers. Teachers need to understand the structure of the English language, they need a strong knowledge of child development (i.e., language, emergent literacy, psychology), they need to be good diagnosticians of reading problems, be up-to-date with research in reading, and they need to have a sophisticated training in teaching reading (Snow et al., 1998).

Morrow, Tracey, Woo, and Pressley (1999) asked the question: “*What does exemplary first-grade literacy instruction look like?*” They visited six first-grade classrooms in order to identify what exemplary teachers do to provide effective literacy instruction. They found the following characteristics:

- All teachers had a master's degree and many years of teaching experience.
- The principals played an active role in the school's instructional issues.
- The school districts provided extensive staff development.
- Teachers had freedom to make instructional decisions.
- Collaboration existed among teachers, parents, and administrators.
- Teachers integrated reading and writing across the curriculum.
- Teachers provided small group instruction to meet individual student needs.
- Teachers created a motivating and supportive classroom environment.
- Teachers created strong home-school partnerships.
- The classrooms were fun, supportive, and literature-rich environments.
- The classrooms provided for one-to-one, whole-group, small-group, and paired instruction.
- There was an abundance of materials available for students.
- There were many opportunities for students to practice oral language, reading, and writing.
- There were many opportunities for students to interact with one another.
- Reading and writing materials were present in all centers.
- Many types of reading experiences were carried out daily (e.g., morning message, read-aloud, partner reading, guided reading, independent reading, silent reading).
- There were numerous examples of high quality literature available in the classroom.
- Children wrote daily (e.g., journals, spelling, stories, poems).

- Teachers provided specific feedback and modeled strategies, reading, writing, and comprehension.
- Instruction involved explicit skill development taught in the context of authentic literature and was integrated with writing and content area connections.
- Teachers were effective classroom managers.
- Teachers modeled and encouraged self-regulation.
- Teachers assessed children's literacy growth on an ongoing basis. (p. 462)

Morrow et al. (1999) discovered that exemplary teaching is multifaceted; it involves teacher expertise, diverse experiences, resources, and support from school and community. Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (2000) conducted research in 14 schools across the United States. They focused their research on K-3 grades. Taylor et al. (2000) found that in most effective schools reading was the number one priority both at the classroom and school levels. Early reading interventions were available in the most effective schools. Teachers supplemented explicit phonics with small instruction and coaching. Teachers also helped students apply various reading strategies to their everyday reading. In the most effective schools, teachers asked higher-level questions, created local school reform models, allocated time for independent reading, and reached out to parents.

## What Principals/Schools Can Do

Principals play an equally important role in children's early literacy development. They can help by creating and maintaining a school-wide focus on reading, using standards to design the curriculum, become knowledgeable about up-to-date research on literacy, emphasize early assessment of reading difficulties, help develop programs that provide early intervention, encourage teachers to use research-based strategies, enlarge the school's resources, provide professional development for teachers, build partnerships with parents and community, and create a supportive academic environment (Harris, 1996; US DOE, 1999).

In a four-year longitudinal study Yaden, Tam, & Madrigal (2000) examined the effectiveness of preschool emergent literacy intervention in preparing young children to enter kindergarten with the necessary reading and writing skills. They created a 2-to 3-hour morning language and literacy program by establishing a Big Book shared reading program, installing writing centers, and purchasing over 1,000 children's books. In terms of instructional support, they provided ongoing in-classroom support and services regarding emergent literacy theory, activities, and information about children's reading and writing development for child-care agency teachers and paraprofessionals. They also established a book-lending library for the families and have parent workshops on how to read with children at home, and how to encourage children's awareness and knowledge of literacy materials and activities. They found that as a result of the intervention, preschool children were entering kindergarten at or above grade level in understanding print-related concepts. Parents and teachers acquired much knowledge about how to help their young children's emergent literacy.

Because of the significant influence of the family on children's school success, many family interventions have been developed in recent years. Many programs reach out to parents and caregivers with home visits from a parent educator, information on child development, and guidance and literacy training on how to best prepare children for kindergarten, and screening to determine if children have developmental delays (Snow et al., 1998). Hiebert and Taylor (2000) evaluated the effects of early interventions on children's reading development and concluded that one-time interventions cannot solve the complex reading challenges faced by children in high-poverty schools. To

combat reading difficulties, schools need to provide ongoing support to teachers, parents, and children. The National Education Association (NEA, 1998) has identified six key features of high-quality early care and education programs:

- High quality staff-child ratios.
- Small group sizes.
- Adequate staff education and training.
- Low staff turnover.
- Curriculum emphasizing child-initiated, active learning.
- Parental involvement.

In addition, the quality of teacher education is another significant factor. Education and training helps early childhood teachers to develop and improve children's pre-literacy skills (US DOE, 1999).

Finally, schools can help empower parents to become more actively involved in their children's literacy development. Edwards (1995), in her study with low-income mothers and fathers, found that when parents become knowledgeable of the school's expectations, they not only become involved in their child's literacy but they are able to support the school's and the teachers' literacy efforts. Parents received training in effective book-reading behaviors (e.g., how to direct and guide a child's attention to a book, how to preview and explore books with children, and how to connect new information to the child's experiences), modeled reading practices to other participants, and received feedback about improving reading sessions. The parents who participated in her book reading program, made personal decisions to further their education, used literacy to express their opinions publicly in newspaper editorials, and were offered employment based on their new confidence, knowledge, and skills.

## What Parents Can Do

The relationship between family environment and reading achievement has been studied for many years (see Sulzby & Teale, 1991; see Wingfield & Asher, 1984). Sulzby and Teale (1991) concluded that literacy is deeply rooted in the culture of the family and community, and the home plays an integral role in emergent literacy.

Children live in homes that support different kinds and levels of literacy. Snow et al. (1998) suggest that measures of the home literacy environment, itself, may provide an indication of a child's degree of risk for reading difficulties. For children who have little background with print, confusion can quickly turn into a high-risk factor for reading difficulties and possibly failure.

Studies have shown that learning to read is strongly associated with positive home environments (Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Strickland & Morrow, 1990; Teale, 1978). Early readers have access to a variety of reading materials at home and at the local neighborhood library. They are also attracted to anything that surrounds them, from labels on cans and cereal boxes, to menus at restaurants, and TV shows. Although books, labels, and billboards are potential sources for reading, young children need to learn how print functions in their lives.

Reading aloud to young children is one of the most important factors in the learning environment of young readers. Children need to see the importance and function of reading in their own life and in the life of adults and sib-

lings at home. The quantity and quality of interactions young children have with parents, guardians, siblings, and other family members play a significant role in children's reading development. Parents can influence their children's literacy development by creating a literate environment at home by fostering interests, and supporting children's efforts to become readers and writers (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 2000).

Hess and Holloway (1984) identified five general areas of family functioning that may influence children's reading development. Those areas are:

- *Value placed on literacy:* Do parents read? Do they encourage their children to read? Do they model the value of reading?
- *Press for achievement:* What expectations do parents communicate to their children about achievement? Do parents provide reading instruction and support? Do parents respond to the children's initiations and interest?
- *Availability and instrumental use of reading materials:* What type of reading and writing resources are available at home? Literacy experiences are more likely to occur in homes that contain reading and writing materials.
- *Reading with children:* Do parents read to their preschoolers at bedtime or other times? Do parents listen to their pre/school children's oral reading? Do parents provide assistance as needed?
- *Opportunities for verbal interaction:* Do parents provide language-rich experiences at home? Are there book-reading or dinner table conversations? Is English the primary language spoken at home? Do parents have limited proficiency in spoken English?

Researchers have suggested (see Snow, et al., 1998) that a preschooler whose home provides fewer opportunities for acquiring knowledge and skills pertaining to books and reading is at somewhat higher risk for reading difficulties than a child whose home affords a richer literacy environment. Hart and Risley (1995) addressed the role of verbal interactions that take place at home. They suggested that poor and uneducated families provide much less language experiences than middle-class families. This reduced quantity of verbal interactions functions (e.g., book reading, shared dinner table conversations) as a risk factor, especially as it related closely to lowered child vocabulary scores.

Primary prevention of reading difficulties during the preschool years involves ensuring that families and preschool care settings offer the experiences children need for effective language and literacy development (Snow et al., 1998). Parents and other caregivers should spend time in one-on-one conversation with young children, read books *to* and *with* them, provide writing materials, support dramatic play that might incorporate literacy activities, demonstrate the uses of literacy, and maintain a joyful, safe, playful, and enriching atmosphere around literacy activities.

Family-focused efforts should focus on providing support at home, parent education, job training, and the provision of social services. Preschools should provide rich opportunities for children to learn and practice language and literacy-related skills in a playful, safe, motivating, and language-rich setting. Such settings can prevent or re-

duce reading difficulties for at-risk children (Snow et al., 1998).

Many accomplishments during the preschool and kindergarten years are closely related to later success in conventional literacy tasks (Adams, 1990; Snow et al., 1998). These accomplishments include skills that are directly related to literacy, such as letter identification, reading environmental print, phonological awareness, oral language skills, and general skills in understanding and producing discourse (Snow et al., 1998).

Although excellent preschool and kindergarten settings can provide children with wonderful opportunities to develop and expand these skills, it is widely acknowledged that linguistically rich home environments contribute more powerfully to the early development of these critical abilities (Hart & Risley, 1999). Differences in home environments have been linked to differences in early achievement and later school success (Heath, 1983). Although excellent formal reading instruction can ensure success even for at high-risk readers, considerable efforts to involve the partnership of families greatly increase the chances of success (Edwards, 1995; Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999).

Gough and Tunmer (1986) suggested that during the early years, literacy accomplishments can be viewed as a sum of abilities in decoding (i.e., letter recognition, environmental print knowledge, and phonological awareness) and language comprehension. Many researchers (e.g., Heath, 1983; Wells, 1983, 1985) have shown that school literacy requirements are much easier for children who come from homes where parents model literacy behaviors and use language that prepares children for classroom discourse. Children who have been participating in high-quality language interactions with parents, siblings, and other adults are better prepared for the school language and literacy demands (Snow et al., 1998). High-quality language interactions contribute to reading success and improved vocabulary (Snow et al., 1998).

Strickland (1989) found that children who come from homes where storybooks are read have an advantage over the children who are not read to at home. These parents use literature as a way of communicating family values and helping children construct meaning by relating new information to what they already know. During storybook reading, parents also talk about words and pictures and help the child to move to higher levels of thinking during family reading.

Repeated storybook reading contributes to positive language changes (Yaden, 1988). With repeated reading, children began to ask fewer questions about the book's pictures and instead began asking more questions about the meaning of words and the story. Children have been found to begin emergent readings spontaneously when parents read books repeatedly (Sulzby & Teale, 1987).

Senechal, LeFevre, Hudson, and Lawson (1996) examined the effects of storybook exposure and the amount of teaching in reading and writing skills needed to be provided by parents to enhance the language skills and emergent literacy of first grade children. The results showed that storybook exposure might have a direct impact on children's language skills whereas additional support in the form of teaching is necessary to enhance emergent literacy.

In a later study, Senechal, LeFevre, Thomas, and Daley (1998) examined the relations among early home experiences, oral and written language development, and reading achievement in a middle-to-high-SES sample. They found that parents frequently read storybooks to their children. In this sample, parents' interactions were focused in exposure rather than in teaching their children to read and print words. Storybook reading helped children's

phoneme awareness and vocabulary and it also helped build children’s oral-language skills. Senechal et al. (1998) concluded that storybook reading and parent teaching might be independent experiences with separate set of skills and links to children’s literacy development.

Jordan, Snow, and Porche (2000) examined the efficacy of parent training and its effects on children’s language and literacy skills in four Title I schools through Project EASE. The Parents were trained in 1) parent-child interactions, 2) how to engage children in extended discussions surrounding a book, and 3) how to support and enlarge their child’s vocabulary by engaging in vocabulary-enriching interactions. The results of their study showed that parents were enthusiastic about participating in training that helped them promote their child’s school success, and the parental efforts resulted in improved language and language analysis skills. The kindergarten children who scored low on language measures at the beginning of kindergarten really benefited from the intervention.

Baker and Serpell (1999) used the recommendations about family practices given by the International Reading Association/National Association for Education of Young Children (IRA/NAEYC) position statement to study the

<b>NAEYC/IRA Position Statement</b>	<b>Evidence from Baker &amp; Serpell (1999)</b>
<p>1. Engage in shared book reading</p> <p>2. Provide frequent and varied oral language experiences.</p> <p>3. Encourage self-initiated interactions with print.</p> <p>4. Visit the library regularly.</p> <p>5. Demonstrate the value of literacy in everyday life.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared book reading is a common activity but over the years parents read less often to children—especially in grade 3.</li> <li>• Parents talk about books that have an explicit educational focus.</li> <li>• The best atmosphere is when parents read because they talk and extend the story content.</li> <li>• Children who have more opportunities to talk with parents at mealtimes and to participate in storytelling have greater narrative competence than those who do not.</li> <li>• Children who have more opportunities to learn nursery rhymes and engage in word play activities have greater phonological awareness than those who do not.</li> <li>• The more children initiate interactions with print and the more they are independently engaged in reading and writing activities, the better their reading.</li> <li>• Frequency of visits to the library in pre-kindergarten was a strong predictor of word recognition in grades 1-3.</li> <li>• Children participated in shopping and food preparation and they understood the function of reading and writing.</li> </ul>

family practices of 54 diverse families from preschool to third grade. The following table is designed to show a

6. Promote children’s motivation for literacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children whose parents viewed literacy as a source of entertainment performed better in reading in grades 1-3 than those whose parents viewed literacy as a set of skills.</li> </ul>
7. Foster a sense of pride and self-efficacy in literacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents verbally reinforced children and displayed their work around the house.</li> </ul>
8. Communicate with teachers and be involved with school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most parents believed that literacy is a shared responsibility of parents and teachers.</li> <li>• The amount of parental contact with teachers declined by grade 2.</li> </ul>

The results of their five-year study showed that the majority of the parents from diverse sociocultural backgrounds engaged in many of the recommended practices with their children. However, very few parents engaged in developmentally appropriate activities such as explicit instruction of letter names, letter-sound correspondences, and word identification. Baker and Serpell (1999) proposed that the associations should help parents understand *how* to help their children and not just tell them *what* to do to support their children’s literacy development.

## Summary

Parents, caregivers and preschool teachers, and the community at large play the critical roles in preparing a successful reader. Allington and Walmsley (1995) stated that “designing schools that offer instruction that accelerates development early in kindergarten and first grade, must become our priority” (p. 8).

- Families can develop and maintain ongoing parent-child communication from birth.
- Caregivers and preschool teachers can be given training and resources to encourage emergent literacy.
- Children deserve well-trained teachers who have a solid understanding of reading development, who can diagnose and assess reading difficulties, and who can provide the necessary instruction to address the effectively (National Research Council, 1998).
- Communities can support their children and families for literacy successes through successful partnerships between schools and communities, and more volunteers, mentors, and tutors.

Snow et al. (1998) shared various conclusions and recommendations about literacy development during the preschool years. The following table crystallizes their conclusions and recommendations:

<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>
1. Important experiences related to reading begin early in life. Prevention steps designed to reduce the number of children with inadequate literacy-related knowledge (e.g., concepts of print, phonemic awareness, receptive vocabulary) at the onset of formal schooling would reduce the number of children with reading difficulties.	1. Organizations and governing bodies concerned with the education of young children should promote public understanding of early literacy development.

2. Children who are at-risk for reading difficulties should be identified as early as possible. Pediatricians, social workers, speech and language therapists, preschool practitioners, and parents play a significant role in identifying children who need assistance.

3. Providing preschool opportunities to lower-income families in ways that fully support language and literacy development is possibly one of the more important public policy issues raised by welfare reform.

4. Central to the goal of primary prevention of reading difficulties is the teacher's knowledge base, experience, and support provided to the teacher.

5. Preschool teachers' role is a very important one in promoting literacy through acquisition of rich language and emergent literacy skills.

2. Public authorities and education professionals should provide research-derived guidelines for parents, pediatricians, and pre-school professionals so that children who need intervention are identified as early as possible and are given the necessary support for language and literacy development.

3. All children, especially those at risk for reading difficulties, should have access to early childhood environments that promote language and literacy factors in an integrated fashion. The following should be included in home and preschool activities:

- Adult-child shared book reading that stimulates verbal interaction to enhance language development and knowledge about print concepts,
- Activities that direct young children's attention to the phonological structure of spoken words (e. g., games, songs and poems that emphasize rhyming or manipulation of sounds), and
- Activities that highlight the relations between print and speech.

4. Teachers at all levels need to understand the course of literacy development and the role of instruction in optimizing literacy development.

5. Programs that educate early childhood professionals should require mastery of information about the many kinds of knowledge and skills that need to be acquired in the preschool years. Their knowledge base should include at least the following:

- How to provide rich conceptual experiences that promote growth in vocabulary and reasoning skills;
- Knowledge about lexical development;
- Knowledge about the early development of listening skills;
- Information on young children's sense of story;
- Information on young children's sensitivity to the sounds of language;

- Information on young children’s understanding of print, and the developmental patterns of emergent reading and writing;
- Information on young children’s development of concepts of space, including directionality;
- Knowledge of fine motor development.
- Knowledge about how to motivate children to read;

There are no simple explanations for the development of emergent literacy behaviors. There is a need for all key stakeholders to understand the complex cognitive, social, and cultural influences on emergent literacy. There is also a need to understand the unique characteristics of children and families, discover their strengths and capitalize in them, and find ways to help all students succeed in school (Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray, 1999).

The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children issued a joint position statement, titled *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children* (1998). These associations believe that achieving high standards of literacy for every child in the United States is a shared responsibility of schools, early childhood settings, families, and communities with teachers of young children having an integral responsibility to promote children’s literacy development.

IRA and NAEYC (1998) also reported that goals and expectations for young children’s achievement in reading and writing should be developmentally appropriate with sufficient adult support. Effective teachers understand that the development of literacy skills is not automatic but unique for every child. Effective teachers make instructional decisions based on their knowledge of reading and writing, research, and their knowledge of children’s unique strengths and needs. Teachers need to respect children’s home language and culture, and use it as a base to build and expand children’s language and literacy experiences. “If we start early and finish strong, we can help every child become a good reader” (US DOE, 1998, p. 15).

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# Emergent Literacy Glossary

**Alphabetic Phase** — A stage where young readers begin to link letters with sounds in reading and spelling.

**Basal Readers** — A compilation of materials such as student texts, workbooks, writing folders, and teacher's manuals used for developing reading skills.

**Big Books** — Books containing large pictures and print that children in group settings can easily see; stories often use predictable, repetitive language and are frequently in supportive shared-reading activities.

**Blending** — Combining sounds (phonemes) together to form words.

**Decoding** — Translating the alphabet letters into words and sounds.

**Direct/Explicit Instruction** — Teaching involving systematic modeling and demonstration of material with emphasis on the student's understanding and taking responsibility for their learning.

**Emergent Literacy** — A developing range of understanding about print and nonconventional reading and writing behaviors that begin before schooling and lead into conventional reading and writing.

**Environmental Print** — Print included in everyday life, such as signs, advertisements, newspapers, and packages.

**Graphemes** — A symbol, or symbols, that represent sounds (phonemes).

**Guided Reading** — Teacher works with small, homogeneous reading group, guiding them through instructional-level books.

**Independent Reading** — Where children have daily opportunities to read high quality books, of their own choosing, independently or with a peer.

**Invented Spelling** — A child’s made-up system of spelling based on the sounds they hear.

**Language-rich Classroom (Print Rich)** — An environment which contains print in all shapes and forms. Examples are newspapers, posters, environmental print, poems, and signs.

**Literacy** — A process that includes reading, writing, thinking, and listening to communicate effectively.

**Logographic Phase** — A stage when young readers “read” a word based on visual cues.

**Onset** — The letters in a word located before the first syllable.

**Oral Language Development** — Activities such as singing, choral reading, and reading aloud that help promote oral language.

**Orthographic Phase** — A stage where young readers are able to use spelling patterns or letter sequences that support word identification.

**Phonemes** — The smallest unit of a speech sound.

**Phonemic Awareness** — Part of phonological awareness; the understanding that words are comprised of individual sounds (phonemes).

**Phonics or Phonics Instruction** — Refers to using letter-sound relationships and other rules to identify words.

**Phonological Awareness** — An awareness of all levels of the speech sound system, including word boundaries, stress patterns, syllables, onset-rime units, and phonemes

**Print Awareness** — The ability to attend to the conventions and formats of print.

**Read-alouds** — Involves the teacher or another adult reading a variety of texts to a group of children; it helps to develop vocabulary by the teacher or parent/caregiver giving a short explanation or uses the word in context.

**Reading** — An active and complex process of constructing meaning from written text in relation to the reader’s experiences, knowledge, motivation, and the context of the reading situation.

**Rhyming** — Words whose final phonemes share identical or similar sounds in the final syllable.

**Rime** — The letters in a word located after the onset.

**Segmentation** — To break words into particular pieces or segments, such as breaking or segmenting a word into its individualized phonemes.

**Shared Reading** — Teacher and students read big books together; teacher reads most of the text while students repeat predictable parts or refrain.

**Sight Words (High Frequency Words)** — Words that the reader knows and can identify instantly. There are approximately 220 words in the English language that are considered under this category.

**Syllabication** — The separation of words into basic units of pronunciation