

How to help your child develop literacy skills

The two most important things that all parents can do to help their child develop literacy skills are talking and reading. Why is talking to and with your child so important to literacy? It's simple. While "reading" is about being able to pronounce words on a page, "literacy" is about understanding what those words mean. Therefore, the first and most important element in literacy is oral language. Hearing spoken language is how children who hear Chinese learn to speak Chinese, and children who hear English learn to speak English. The difference in number and variety of words that children hear is why some begin school with a huge number of words in their vocabulary and some with regrettably few.

Talking with your child:

From infancy on, parents can help their child develop a rich vocabulary by narrating. Talk about what you are doing and why you are doing it.

As your child becomes more verbal, ask open ended questions. Those are ones that cannot be answered by a simple yes or no – "What do you want to do when we go to the park today?" rather than "Do you want to ride the train at the park?" Follow up and elaborate, "The train is fun, isn't it? What is your favorite thing about the train?" If the child says "the whistle" you can elaborate on that theme, "When the engineer blows the whistle I have to put my hands on my ears because it is so loud. I think it makes almost as much noise as the train that we hear at your school." Engineer, loud, almost, noise – those are all vocabulary that the child is absorbing. If he doesn't already know what one of those words means, he will begin to figure it out from the context. In time, probably without your noticing it, he will incorporate those new words into his own speech.

A word of warning: Listening is as important as talking. Be sure to give your child space to tell you his own ideas, and let them guide some of your conversation.

Another kind of talking -Telling stories:

Stories are another great way to encourage oral language. Children are a very non-judgmental audience. Just start telling a story and see where it leads you. Ask children for their input and incorporate their ideas into the story, "Where do you think the rabbit was hiding?" "What do you think she wanted for her birthday?" "Who do you think was knocking on the door?" These kinds of questions help children develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills as well as creativity.

Reading to your child:

Reading to your child is important on so many levels. It shows children that you value reading. It introduces them to new vocabulary. It helps them develop a sense of story structure and sequencing– beginning, middle and end, first, next and last. It enhances imagination. It teaches them that reading can answer questions and provide information – the basis of research. It also provides an opportunity for that precious one-on-one cuddle time that builds strong parent-child bonds.

As you prepare to read, talk with the child about the book, "The title of this book is If You Take a Mouse to the Movies. It was written by Laura Numeroff. The pictures were drawn by Felicia Bond. We have another book with the same author and illustrator. Do you remember what it's called? It had a mouse on the cover too. That's right, it's If You Give a Mouse a Cookie. It was a funny book. Do you think this one will be funny too? Let's see."

Often, in picture books the illustrations are as important to the story as the words. You may want to talk with the child about the illustrations as you read, or you may want to read the story through once and then re-read it, taking time to look at the illustrations and talk about them. This talking through the book is particularly important for young children, as it adds the element of oral language, but even as you graduate into reading chapter books with older readers they will also enjoy and benefit from “book discussions”. Be careful not to let any of this take away from the fun of reading though. If your child prefers hearing the story with no interruptions, honor that preference. The most important thing about helping a child learn to read is that he/she enjoys books. A child who loves books will be motivated to read.

What about ABCs?

Have you noticed that your child began “reading” environmental print, such as the Chik-fil-a, MacDonald’s or Toy Story logos, at an early age? I call that reading, because it shows the ability to recognize that a symbol stands for something else, and isn’t that what reading is? The fact that they recognize environmental print shows us that children easily learn those things that are meaningful to them. Therefore, a good place for them to begin recognizing letters is with the letters in their name. Start with the first letter in the child’s first name. Label the child’s possessions with his/her name or first initial. (Use a capital letter for the first letter and lower case for the other letters, so that your child learns it correctly and doesn’t have to un-learn how to write it). Write it on artwork. Write it in the sand at the beach or with chalk in the driveway. As you go through your day, make a game of finding that letter on signs, magazine covers, newspaper headlines, pizza boxes or cereal boxes. Later you can move on to other letters in the child’s name, the names of family members, favorite stores and restaurants, ball teams, or whatever is meaningful to your child.

Rhyming

Rhyming calls attention to the sounds in words. Look for some of the many wonderful rhyming books that are available to read with your child. (You can find a booklist with suggestions on our website www.frontplayschool.com). As you read, point out the rhyme. Ask your child to help you think of other words that rhyme. Again, only play this game for as long as it is still fun.

Writing

Reading and writing go hand in hand. Children’s first writing may not look like real writing to you, but it is an important step, showing that they understand that marks on a page represent words. Children typically go through several stages of “writing” before they are ready to write recognizable words. Show an appreciation and encouragement for each stage. Another good practice is to model the uses of writing, “We’re out of milk. Let’s add it to our grocery list.” Whenever you are modeling writing, or responding to your child’s request about how to write a word, remember to use capital and lower case letters correctly to avoid confusing the child.