

Promoting early literacy



A guide for clinicians

Early literacy

Early literacy—also called emergent literacy—develops when adults read, speak, or sing with babies and children. It doesn't matter what language the adult uses, or what their skill level is. They can look at books, tell stories, make music, or use sign language. What makes these activities so important to health and development is that they are interactive, reciprocal, shared, and connected to a family's culture. These early experiences eventually lead to what we usually think of as "literacy," which is a stronger determinant of lifelong health than occupation or income.

Why promote early literacy in health settings?

Evidence shows that:

- Parents follow the advice of health care providers when they promote literacy.
- Health-based interventions can improve a family's literacy practices.
- Referring parents to local libraries for programming and support leads to richer and more frequent literacy practices with babies and toddlers.

How to promote early literacy

- **Encourage literacy-promoting habits** like daily book sharing, singing, and talking. Explain how these interactions will nurture a child's development.
- **Build on a family's strengths:** Encourage families to tell stories, speak, and sing in their home language or the language in which they feel most comfortable having fun.
- **Connect families with community resources** like libraries, early years centres, and book-gifting programs.
- **Ask families regularly** about stressors or barriers that may interfere with one-on-one time with young children.

Serve and return

"Serve-and-return" interactions—such as responding with a smile and encouraging words when babies babble—are critical to brain development. These daily interactions are also important for early relationships and happen through close attention to babies' cues and by speaking, singing, and reading with children in their earliest years. These same behaviours help foster emergent literacy skills, which are language-based, socially acquired, and involve cognitive and socio-emotional domains of learning that are crucial for healthy child development.

For more information: www.cps.ca/en/strategic-priorities/literacy



Talking about early literacy with families: Conversation starters

There are many ways physicians and other professionals can initiate discussions about language and early literacy development in clinical settings. The following **conversation starters** can be natural segues to:

- Better understand a family’s culture, traditions and circumstances
- Explain the parent’s role in their child’s early brain development
- Provide age-specific ideas to promote language-rich environments
- Connect families to community resources
- Flag potential concerns about language development

Prenatal visit
<i>Baby loves hearing your voice all day. In fact, your baby starts to recognize your voice before birth. Do you like singing or reading out loud?</i>
At 1 week
A non-threatening way to encourage families who haven’t read to their baby, without putting off those who have been reading to baby regularly: <i>Have you had a chance to start reading with baby yet?</i> If one parent is doing most of the feedings: <i>Babies this age spend a lot of time feeding, but there are ways to feel close to your baby between feedings by talking, singing and even reading to them.</i>
At 1 or 2 months
<i>Catch the baby gazing at the parent: What great attention! They really love looking at your face. Your baby learns so much from you when you sing and talk to them.</i>
At 4 months
<i>After discussion about the baby’s feeding or growth you can say: Not only is it important to feed baby’s body, it’s also important to feed their mind.</i>
At 6 months
<i>If baby is sitting independently: I see they are sitting independently. They might be ready to hold a book or photos.</i>
At 9 months
<i>If baby vocalizes, respond and offer praise: Your baby is trying to communicate. They are always learning language, especially when you use lively or different voices when reading, singing, and talking.</i> <i>If baby has developed pincer grasp: See how they are able to put their index finger and thumb together? This is called pincer grasp. They may be able to help turn pages of a book soon.</i>

At 12 months

To explore parents' comfort with reading: *What are some of the things you like to do with baby for fun? Do you enjoy reading? If appropriate: Did you ever wish to expand your reading skills?*

If they say they enjoy reading, explore further. If they don't: *Have you ever tried looking at books with your baby?*

If baby is isolating finger: *I see they are able to isolate their finger and point. You may notice they will start pointing at pictures in a book, photos or cards.*

At 18 months

Link early literacy and language activities to other anticipatory guidance conversations.

When giving advice about sleep routines: *Parents often find it useful to read or tell a story before going to bed. Is this something that might help?*

Toilet learning: *Many families prefer reading books or singing with their child instead of using digital devices to entertain during potty time. What are your thoughts?*

For difficulty with transitions: *At this age it can be difficult to get children to listen. Incorporating music and singing into the day can really help get through challenging moments.*

Suggest situation-specific songs such as: *"Clean up, clean up, everybody do their share"; "This is the way we wash our hands, wash our hands";* goodnight songs, and so on.

At 2 and 3 years

What is the most challenging part of the day with your child?

Discuss feasible ways to incorporate language fun into challenging times, such as:

Mealtime: *Have you tried playing games like describing the colours and textures of the food you are eating?*

Bath time: *Have you tried singing bath time songs or body part songs while in the tub?*

Dressing: *Have you tried telling stories or making up rhymes while putting on items of clothing (i.e., "Hat on the cat!" "Socks in a box!" "Shirt full of dirt!"). Young children often find these games funny and are more likely to follow through with dressing.*

Respond to communication during your appointment (non-verbal, words, singing, etc.), offer praise: *I can see your little one is developing their communication skills.*

At 4 and 5 years

Will your child be attending school this year? How are you feeling about how prepared they will be when they start?

Have you noticed any changes in their language and literacy skills since school started?

In a hospital setting

In the NICU:

It can be scary to see your baby looking so fragile and wondering what you can do to help them. Did you know that even at this age, they can recognize and love hearing your voice?

Depending on the age of the child and resources available at the hospital:

It can be hard to be in this room for so long, would you like....

...to borrow some books to look at with your baby/child to help pass the time and feel more at home?

...a list of songs with lyrics you can sing with your baby/child to help pass the time?

...a list of fun language games like 'I spy' you can play with your child to help pass the time?

Flexible and adaptable: Finding what works for your context

Early literacy promotion can happen in a variety of ways and clinical settings. Here are a few examples from across Canada:

Hospital-wide programs

At the Montreal Children's Hospital, Lire/Imagine/Read is a program that integrates literacy promotion into health care practice, and provides books to families of children who visit or stay at the hospital. For example, all children aged 0-5 who visit selected clinics receive a book in their mother tongue. Some outpatient waiting rooms have a "reading corner," where volunteers read to children. This models reading for parents and helps decrease the stress of waiting. All wards have volunteers trained to read to individual children.

Neonatal Intensive Care Units

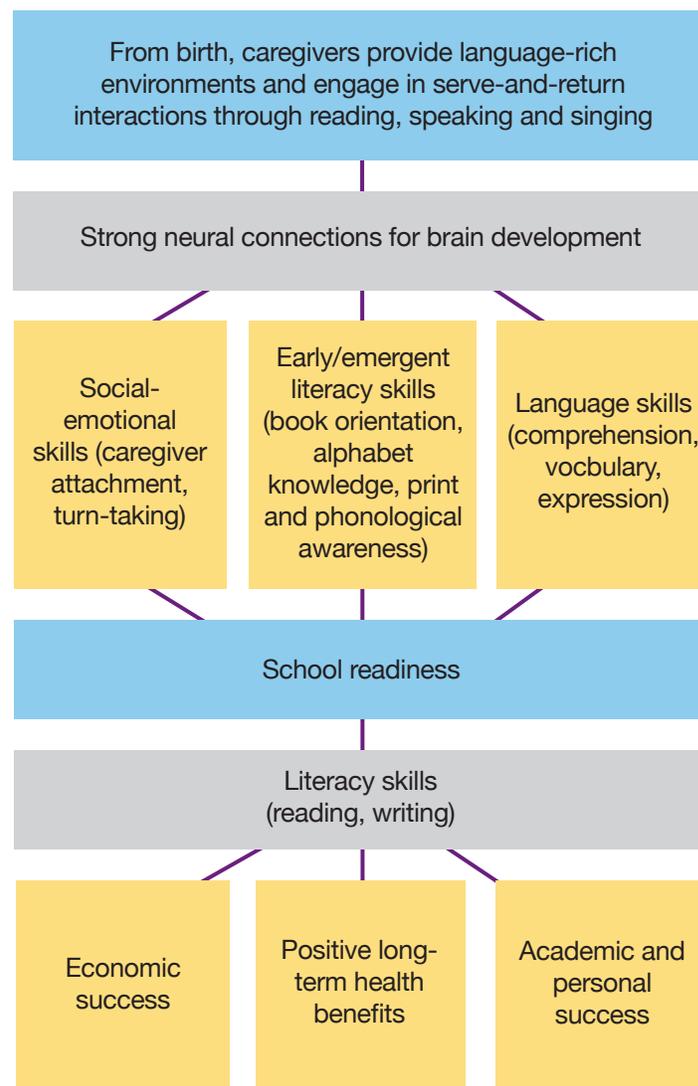
In Winnipeg, the NICUs at HSC Women's Hospital and St. Boniface Hospital partner with the city's library system to provide families with a reading package that includes a book, library information, and nursery rhymes. Parent volunteers run a NICU library and encourage parents to borrow books. NICU staff receive education about the importance of reading, speaking, and singing to babies, so that they can share that information with families. At their NICU follow-up visit, families receive another book and advice about the importance of reading, speaking, and singing.

Through public health

In northern Saskatchewan, the Northern Healthy Communities Partnership works with nurses to distribute books during five well-child clinic visits from birth to age four through a program called Babies, Books, and Bonding. In 2018, the program added a book called *Are You Hungry*, written and published in Saskatchewan in three Indigenous languages—Cree, Dene, and Michif—alongside the English translation. The book is provided to families of all 18-month-old children who are immunized on or off-reserve. The program also has videos showing an Elder reading the book to a child in each language.



The pathway from early literacy to lifelong health



For more information

Canadian Paediatric Society: www.cps.ca

Canadian Children's Literacy Foundation: www.childrensliteracy.ca

Reference

Canadian Paediatric Society Early Years Task Force (principal author: Dr. Alyson Shaw). Read, Speak, Sing: Promoting early literacy in health care settings. January 2021. Available at www.cps.ca

