

NEWS YOU CAN USE

News for Head Start, Early Head Start, & Migrant/Seasonal Programs

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■ FOUNDATIONS OF SCHOOL READINESS: LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

The content is also presented in “Hablemos de... lenguaje y la lectoescritura y su relación con la preparación escolar.”

Did you know that, even before birth, babies already recognize the sounds and rhythms of all the languages they have been exposed to? Almost immediately and throughout their first years, they watch and listen to the people around them intently. By the time they are three years old, most children can speak in sentences, talk about stories or events from the past, and understand much of what others say to them. The ability to communicate is a very important skill for later school success. In school, children will need to understand what a teacher is saying, express their own ideas, and learn how to read and write.



“... very young children learn in the context of relationships

In This News You Can Use, we explore some vignettes about language and literacy as they relate to school readiness goals. (See School Readiness Goals for Infants and Toddlers in Head Start and Early Head Start Programs.)

■ What Are Language and Literacy?

Although language and literacy are really two different skills, they are closely related to each other. **Language** is the ability to both use and understand spoken words or signs. Language is all about ideas passing from one person to another. **Literacy** is the ability to use and understand written words, or other symbols, in order to communicate. Typically, most three-year-olds have good language skills. They are able to communicate and understand many words and concepts. Their literacy skills, on the other hand, are still emerging. We don't expect three-year-olds to read or write, but they are growing in their understanding that spoken or signed words can be written down, that written words can be read, that books have stories in them, and that symbols have meaning.

Even though language and literacy focus on different things, adults can support language and literacy learning at the same time. Reading books, having responsive conversations, and respecting children's home languages are all ways to support learning. Remember that very young children learn in the context of relationships with nurturing adults.

■ The Importance of Home Language

Because language and culture are closely related, one of the primary tasks for infants and toddlers is to learn their home language(s).ⁱⁱ Supporting families in maintaining and passing on their home language to their children helps children have a connection to their families and a strong, positive cultural identity of their own. Sometimes, families worry that speaking a language other than English at home might confuse children. In fact, children are able to learn more than one language at a time! It will be easier for them to learn English if they have a solid foundation in their home language.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ideally, staff who work with children and families should speak the language of the families. However, with so many languages represented within programs, this is not always possible. For ideas about supporting dual-language learners and their families, please see the Early Head Start Tip Sheets 42^{iv} and 43.^v To learn about some of the benefits of being bilingual, please see the National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness handout "The Benefits of Being Bilingual."^{vi}



■ Earliest Beginnings

Marla watches as Thalia holds her 10-day-old son, Donovan. On this postnatal visit, Marla is already observing the earliest beginnings of language learning in the interactions between Thalia and Donovan. Donovan moves a bit, and Thalia adjusts how she is holding him. Thalia says, "How are you doing, little one? Are you getting hungry?" She offers him her breast, and he latches on. After a few moments, Donovan begins to fall asleep, but Thalia gently shakes her breast to remind him to keep eating before he naps.

Language is a form of communication, and **communication** is sharing thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people. As Donovan moves, just barely signaling his own hunger or discomfort, Thalia responds. She offers to feed him. This is how we first learn to communicate. These types of interactions will likely be repeated dozens of times a day between Thalia and Donovan. Each time Thalia responds, Donovan gets the message that what he needs, and his expression of those needs, is important to his mother. Over time, Donovan will learn that his thoughts, feelings, and ideas have value, and he will begin to use gestures, sounds, and words to express them.

■ Engaging with Stories and Books

(Example for Goal 5, for young infants)

Four-month-old Giovanni sits nestled in his father's arms while his dad, Eduardo, pages through a board book. Giovanni's mother, Christina, sits nearby and quietly watches. She loves how cozy they look and notes that Eduardo is helping Giovanni focus his attention on the book by pointing to each picture. With a calm, quiet voice, Eduardo speaks in their home language about the pictures in the book, and when Giovanni makes a sound or gesture, Eduardo answers as though it were part of a conversation about the book. Christina is excited to share this moment with their home visitor, Marco, next time he comes over.

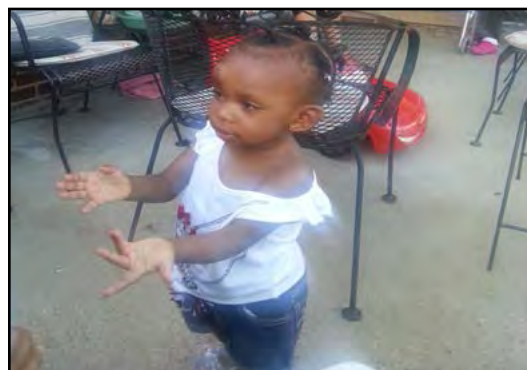
Before Marco started his home visits, Eduardo did not think there was any reason to read to a baby. Marco began the discussion during a prenatal visit with Eduardo and Christina that reading to babies from birth helps them in many ways. Now, looking at books together is part of Giovanni's and his father's daily routine.

As a young infant, Giovanni is learning to associate reading with good feelings of being with his father. In a few months, he may reach for the book and touch the pages, possibly even attempting to put books in his mouth as he explores his world. Before Giovanni can even speak, he may be bringing books to his parents, "asking" to be read to, or looking through books himself. As a toddler, he will likely have favorite books he asks for over and over, pretend to read books, or even recite well-known stories.

Reading and sharing stories with young children are probably the best ways adults can start infants and toddlers on their literacy journey to reading and writing. Using rich language to talk about the pictures and stories in a book, asking questions while reading, and pointing to pictures as you describe them are excellent ways of engaging infants and toddlers in learning vocabulary. A large **vocabulary**, or the amount of words a child understands, supports later school readiness.

For information about using bilingual books with children, check out the following Quick Guides for Teachers from the National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, available in English and Spanish:

- *Selecting Culturally Appropriate Children's Books in Languages Other Than English*^{vii}
- *How to Use Bilingual Books*^{viii}



■ Receptive and Expressive Language

(Example of Goal 1, for older infants)

At 10 months old, Camilla was already using gestures to communicate with her family child care provider, Matilda. She was able to wave "goodbye," shake her hands for "all done," and put her hands together for "more." Now, at 13 months, she is beginning to replace these gestures with sounds like "ba-ba" for goodbye, "ah-da" for all done, and "moo" for more.

By their first birthday, typically developing infants already understand many words and might even begin to sign or speak some words. They may follow your pointing finger with their eyes (joint attention), shake their head when you tell them “no,” or come to you when you call them. These are all examples of **receptive language**, or “the act of attending, listening to, and comprehending language.”^{ix}

At 10 months old, Camilla can communicate some of her needs to the adults who care for her. Her family child care provider, Matilda, believes that, when infants are able to express some of their basic needs, they feel a sense of control over their own lives. When Camila signs, “all done” or says, “ba-ba,” she is using expressive language. **Expressive language** is the ability to communicate to others through gestures, speaking, or writing.^x

Receptive language typically develops ahead of expressive language, meaning that infants and toddlers can understand more than they can say. This makes sense because you need to understand the meaning of a word before you can use it. If you have ever tried to learn a second language, you may have noticed that you first began to understand some words and then sentences you heard before you felt comfortable speaking. Keep in mind that, for infants and toddlers who are exposed to more than one language, they will have the most language ability (receptive or expressive) in the language they hear most frequently.



■ Conclusion

Language and literacy are the main way we connect with other human beings; they are essential to daily life. Children need skills to communicate and understand basic ideas about the use of symbols (such as writing) in order to be successful when they learn to read. Through responsive relationships with family, parents, teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors, children can get all the tools they need to communicate with the world.

Along with the ideas mentioned earlier, here are some more ways adults can support emerging language and literacy:

- Respond to infants’ coos, gestures, and body movements. These are the beginnings of conversation!
- Add descriptions to the words children say. If a toddler points and says, “truck,” you might extend this by saying, “Yes, that is a garbage truck emptying our dumpster,” or “I think you hear the sirens of the fire truck.”
- Talk directly to children from early infancy.
Talk about:

- things you are doing (“I’m making a sandwich. First I’ll get out the bread . . .”);
 - things you see and hear (“Look at that car driving by! Can you hear it?”); and
 - things the child is experiencing (“Your hands got all wet when you touched the fence. The fence was wet.”).
- Read books together from the start. When reading, make it a conversation! Even though a young infant cannot speak, she is paying attention to how you ask questions, the picture you point to, and your delight in sharing the experience with her.
 - Point out examples of written words that have meaning to toddlers, such as their name.



■ Words You Can Use

- **Communication** is sharing thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people.
- **Expressive language** is the ability to communicate with others through gestures, speaking, or writing.
- **Language** is the ability to both use and understand spoken words or signs. Language is all about ideas passing from one person to another.
- **Literacy** is the ability to use and understand written words, or other symbols, in order to communicate.
- **Receptive language** is the act of attending, listening to, and comprehending language.
- **Vocabulary** refers to all of the words a person knows.



ⁱChristine Moon, Hugo Lagercrantz, and Patricia H. Kuhl, “Language Experienced In Utero Affects Vowel Perception After Birth: A Two-Country Study,” *Acta Paediatrica* 102: 2 (2013): 156–160.

ⁱⁱNew Mexico State Children, Youth, and Families Department, Department of Health, and Public Education Department, *New Mexico Early Learning Guidelines: Birth through Kindergarten* (Santa Fe, NM: New Mexico State Children, Youth, and Families Department, Department of Health, and Public Education Department, January 2012), accessed July 9, 2013, https://www.newmexicokids.org/content/caregivers_and_educators/resources/docs/Early_Learning_Guidelines_Birth_thru_Kindergarten_July_2014.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱNational Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, *Importance of Home Language Series: Language at Home and In the Community—Families* (Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, 2013), accessed July 9, 2013, <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/center/home-language.html>.

^{iv}Early Head Start National Resource Center, *Early Head Start Tip Sheet No. 42: How Can Early Head Start Programs Support Language and Communication Development When Staff Members Do Not Speak the Child’s Home Language?*



(Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families, 2010), accessed July 9, 2013,

<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/docs/EHS-Tip-Sheet42.pdf>.

^vEarly Head Start National Resource Center, *Early Head Start Tip Sheet No. 43: Does Early Head Start Teach English to Infants and Toddlers Whose Home Language Is Not English if That Is What the Family Wants?* (Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families, 2010), accessed July 9, 2013,

<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/docs/EHS-Tip-Sheet-43.pdf>.

^{vi}National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, *Importance of Home Language Series: The Benefits of Being Bilingual* (Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, 2013), accessed July 9, 2013,

<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/center/home-language.html>.

^{vii}National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, *Selecting Culturally Appropriate Children's Books in Languages Other Than English* (Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, 2012), accessed July 9, 2013,

<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/center/NCCLRQuickGuide.htm>.

^{viii}National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, *How to Use Bilingual Books* (Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, 2012), accessed July 9, 2013,

<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/center/NCCLRQuickGuide.htm>.

^{ix}Donna S. Wittmer, and Sandra H. Petersen, *Infant and Toddler Development and Responsive Program Planning: A Relationship Based Approach* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2006), 167.

^xIbid.

STUDY GUIDE

for

NEWS YOU CAN USE

FOUNDATIONS OF SCHOOL READINESS: LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

SUMMARY:

This *News You Can Use* (NYCU) discusses language and literacy for infants and toddlers. It explores how very young children depend on responsive relationships with caring adults to build a strong foundation for language and literacy. This NYCU is designed to be used along with the sample goals from *School Readiness Goals for Infants and Toddlers in Head Start and Early Head Start Programs*.



Key Messages:

- Language learning begins prenatally.
- Early language develops in the context of relationships with caring and nurturing adults who respond to babies' and toddlers' attempts at communication and help them make meaning of the world. Language and literacy skills develop simultaneously. Neither one can develop separately.
- Although language and literacy involve different skills, they are related! There are many ways adults can support learning in both areas at the same time.
- Teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers can share information with families about how important their home language is! They can reassure them that children can learn more than one language at a time.



Think:

- How do the ideas in this NYCU support the work you do with infants, toddlers, and their families?
- What ideas do you already use in your practice? What might you change or add based on what you read?



Reflect:

- Although children tend to develop language and literacy skills in the same developmental order, they may reach milestones at very different times. How do you work with families to help them understand if their child is on the later end of typical development for these skills or if he may need some expert intervention?
- In what ways do you think early language and literacy experiences contribute to school readiness and learning?
- How might your own experience with your family (either as a child or parent) influence how



Discuss:

- Look at the "Language and Learning Goals" in the *School Readiness Goals for Infants and Toddlers in Head Start and Early Head Start Programs* resource. What are some other examples for how you support language and literacy with the infants, toddlers, and families in your program?
- What stories can you share from your own work with young children and their families that show how you have nurtured children's language and literacy development?



Next Steps:

- Learn more about how an infant's or toddler's interactions with nurturing adults shape brain development. Read *News You Can Use: Early Experiences Build the Brain Foundations of School Readiness* or watch the video *Serve and Return Interaction Shapes Brain Circuitry*.