

A Joyful Journey to Literacy

The Great Debate

by Pam Schiller

Every few years we find ourselves in a debate over the systematic instruction of phonics versus some other less direct form of instruction. During the '50s and '60s the Language Experience approach was in vogue. This approach relied heavily on sight word recognition and suggested that sound/symbol recognition would occur on its own.

instructed using the Whole Language method encounter difficulties later in reading. It is evident that some children need more formal instruction in phonetic awareness. It is this recognition that has moved us to our current instructional approach to early literacy — the integration of language experience and the systematic teaching of phonics.

This is why talking and reading to infants is so important. Hearing is wired during the fifth month in utero. The brain begins to wire itself for sound at that time. So literally, we can start talking and reading at that point and know that we are contributing to an infant's development of auditory discrimination.

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During the '80s and '90s and still today, the Whole Language approach is popular. This approach is an attempt to blend the Language Experience approach and the use of phonics within meaningful context. This approach requires

that the teacher be constantly surveying upcoming instruction for opportunities to point out phonetic connections. There is no systematic plan for teaching phonics in this approach. Phonics instruction is intended to spontaneously *pop up* in daily lessons and routines. It takes a skilled and practiced teacher to do this well.

As time has passed it has become apparent that some students who are

It seems that we have finally hit a balance. We recognize that many children need more direct instruction in phonics and that all children need to experience phonics in meaningful context, as it *pops up* in daily routines and lessons.

Now the debate has turned from what to when. At what point do we begin a more systematic approach to reading instruction? What is the appropriate developmental sequence and timetable?

Looking to brain research for answers

The crucial first few years of life lay a foundation for reading skills in later years. Between the fourth and eighth month of life a child's brain develops what is called a native language map. A neuron is assigned to every sound in the native language. So argue as we may about when phonics should be introduced, it is clear from the research that infants are already way ahead of us.

Continuing to talk and read to the infant will contribute to the development of syntax and vocabulary, but it will take matching this information with real life experiences to prepare a child for reading.

There is no absolute timetable for learning to read. Normal ranges vary by as much as three years. According to many experts, providing rich experiences for brain development and then leaving children to their own unique timetable is still the best practice.

First things first!

What makes sense developmentally? First we speak then we read, but what happens between these two great human accomplishments?

It takes most infants two years to master speaking. Two years filled with many maturational achievements and experiential opportunities. An infant's sense of

hearing matures around the third month of life. Neural connections for the sounds in an infant's native language are assigned between the fourth and eighth month of life. Experientially, infants are spoken to, read to, saturated in language, and rewarded with many celebrations of small approximations of speech like cooing and babbling along the way. The process for learning to read is dependent on similar maturational achievements and experiential opportunities.

Between the ages of two and six years, a child's wiring for vision matures, small muscle coordination is achieved, and critical thinking skills emerge. The child becomes capable of longer periods of attention and is rapidly developing a more sophisticated vocabulary. These maturational achievements make the years between two and six fertile ground for introducing reading.

Experientially during this time, children need multiple and repetitive opportunities to play with language (i.e., rhyming, singing, looking for patterns) before they begin the more formal process of mastering the mechanics of reading (i.e., matching sounds with symbols). Language is a relatively new accomplishment that will be perfected with appropriate experiences and plenty of exploration.

Before the formal process of reading begins, children need to experience language from the inside out. They need opportunities to talk and opportunities to write (in their own way using invented spelling and drawings).

The following is a list of developmental stages and skills that children need to master on their reading journey. This continuum is sequential to some degree and overlapping in many respects.

As children practice using language, they need to receive feedback. They also

need time to reflect on and evaluate their own progress. And don't forget to celebrate the many milestones they achieve as they navigate the road to reading.

In short, children need time. Time to experience language and time to practice and evaluate what they experience. Time to reflect. Time to develop and time to grow. Then, time to reflect and grow some more.

Basic principles of emergent literacy

What is emergent literacy? It is a term used to describe the beginnings of oral and written language proficiency. According to research, here are the basic principles of emergent literacy.

- Literacy is a social process. It occurs in the context of children's interactions with other children and adults.

- Literacy begins at birth. From an infant's first observations of human behaviors and her resulting imitations of adult sounds and social cues, literacy is developing.

- All aspects of literacy: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking develop interdependently.

- Literacy develops along a continuum just like intellectual and physical growth. Children will develop literacy at their own pace. Slow times are often times when internalization is occurring.

Realistic expectations

No two children are alike. Each is uniquely individual, based on both genetic make-up and environmental influences they encounter. However, there are some general expectations for specific age-related accomplishments that have emerged from years

Stages of Development	Skills
Getting Ready Listening Falling in Love with Sounds	Auditory Memory Auditory Perception
Developing Oral Language Extending and Enriching Vocabulary Matching Words to Thoughts and Actions	Language Development Auditory Perception
Comprehending Enacting, Dramatizing, and Recreating Stories Answering Multi-level Questions	Language Development Conceptual Development Critical Thinking
Understanding Functions of Print Understanding Spatial Orientation Recognizing Part/Whole Relationships Putting Thoughts on Paper	Visual Perception Visual Memory Motor Coordination Visual Motor Coordination Conceptual Development
Acquiring Reading Skills Reading Predictable Text Recognizing Sight Words Developing Phonological Awareness	Auditory Memory Auditory Perception Visual Perception Visual Memory Visual Motor Coordination Language Development Conceptual Development Critical Thinking

of research, observation, and study.

Celebrating milestones

Just think how we celebrate children's first words and even their first sounds. We pick them up and hug and squeeze them. We laugh with glee. We have them say the words over the telephone to a distant relative or friend. We can't stop celebrating and reinforcing these remarkable achievements.

Think about how we celebrate children's first steps. Again we are exuberant. We have them demonstrate this new skill to everyone. We are happy at first just to see them stand with balance. Then one step delights us. Two steps is even more exciting. And when a child takes several steps between two loving parents she receives support from start to finish.

Reading needs this same attention to celebration. It is equally as complex a task as speaking and walking. Find ways to celebrate each tiny accomplishment along the way to mastery. Bring in other children and teachers to listen to the group story your class has written. Build and develop class cheerleaders. Children are very interested in peer approval. Be sincerely enthusiastic about children's ability to hear rhyming sounds. Encourage children to use a checklist to check off skills as they accomplish them. Have a *Green Eggs and Ham* Party when children become competent at injecting the predictable lines in the story.

A road map for instruction

Pay attention to the developmental sequence of skills that will be used in reading. Remember that this sequence of skill is overlapping to some extent, but that generally speaking it is a good guide for sequentially building the foundation for reading. Developing lis-

tening skills, taking time to encourage children to fall in love with the sounds of language, and allowing children to experience the joy of reading will help ensure that children develop the disposition (desire) to read. Remember that disposition is equally as important as skill, because no matter how well you may be able to read you will not read if you haven't got the desire to read. Fill the beginning stages with listening activities, songs, stories, finger plays, and rhymes that allow children to play with and fall in love with language. Help them become acquainted with and accustomed to the rhythm and patterns of language.

As children develop more refined auditory and visual skill, you will be able to focus more specifically on individual letter sounds and other mechanics of reading. Build sound/symbol recognition in meaningful context. If you are reading *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin, Jr., you might use the opportunity to discuss the sound made by the letter B. Point out your left and right and top to bottom progression as you read.

Reading successfully requires having the big picture of what reading is all about. Children will need to understand that written words have meaning and words can be represented by printed symbols (letters). They will need motivation and desire to tackle the challenge of distinguishing similar sounds and seeing discrete differences in letter shapes. If you have laid the right foundation you will have all the motivation you need.

Take it slow. Consider reading a journey, a journey with many sights to explore, stops to enjoy, and milestones to celebrate. Let the children be your guide. As Daniel Greensberg says, "When the brain is ready you can't stop a child from reading." Happy journey!

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Milestones on the Way to Literacy

Below is a list of age related accomplishments published in *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (National Academy Press, 1998). Keep in mind the timing of these accomplishments are contingent on maturational and experiential differences among children.

Birth to Three-Year-Old Accomplishments

- Recognizes specific books by cover.
- Pretends to read books.
- Understands that books are handled in particular ways.
- Enters into a book-sharing routine with primary caregivers.
- Demonstrates enjoyment of rhyming language and nonsense words.
- Labels objects in books.
- Listens to stories.
- Requests adult to read or write.
- Begins to show attentions to specific print, such as letters in names.
- Uses increasingly purposeful scribbling.
- Begins to distinguish between drawing and writing.
- Produces some letter-like forms and scribbles with some features of writing.

Three- to Four-Year-Old Accomplishments

- Knows that alphabet letters are a special category of visual graphics that can be individually named.
- Recognizes print in the local environment.
- Understands that different text forms are used for different functions of print (e.g., a grocery list is different from a menu).
- Recognizes separable and repeating sound in language (e.g., in Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater: Peter, Eater).
- Uses new vocabulary and grammatical constructions in own speech.
- Understands and follows oral directions.
- Is sensitive to some sequences of events in stories.
- Shows an interest in books and reading.
- When being read a story, connects information and events to real-life experiences.
- Demonstrates understanding of literal meaning of a story being told. Uses appropriate questions and comments.
- Displays reading and writing attempts.
- Identifies some alphabet letters, especially those from own name.
- Writes (scribbles) messages as part of playful activity.
- Recognizes beginning and rhyming sounds in familiar words.

Five-Year-Old Accomplishments

- Knows the parts of a book and their functions.
- Begins to track print when listening to a familiar text being read or when rereading own writing.

- “Reads” familiar texts emergently (i.e. not necessarily verbatim from the print alone).
- Recognizes and can name all uppercase and lowercase letters.
- Understands that the sequence of letters in a written word represents the sequence of sounds (phonemes) in a spoken word.
- Recognizes some one-to-one letter/sound correspondences.
- Recognizes some words by sight like *the, I, my, you, is, are*.
- Uses new vocabulary and grammatical constructions in own speech.
- Makes appropriate switches from oral to written language styles.
- Notices when simple sentences fail to make sense.
- Connects information and events in text to life and life experiences to text.
- Retells, reenacts, and dramatizes stories or parts of stories.
- Listens attentively to books the teacher reads to class.
- Names some book titles and authors.
- Demonstrates familiarity with a number of types or genres of text (e.g., storybooks, expository texts, poems, newspapers, and everyday print such as signs, notices, labels).
- Correctly answers questions about stories read aloud.
- Makes predictions based on illustrations or portions of stories.
- Demonstrates understanding that spoken words consist of sequences of phonemes.
- Given spoken sets like “pan, pan, pen,” can identify the first two as the same and the third as different.
- Given spoken sets like “ran, pat, did,” can identify the first two as sharing one same sound.
- Given spoken segments, can merge them into a meaningful target word.
- Given a spoken word, can produce another word that rhymes with it.
- Independently writes many uppercase and lowercase letters.
- Uses phonemic awareness and letter knowledge to spell independently (i.e., invented spelling).
- Writes (unconventionally) to express own meaning.
- Builds a repertoire of some conventionally spelled words.
- Shows awareness of distinctions between “kid writing” and conventional writing.
- Writes own name (first and last) and the first names of some friends and classmates.
- Writes most letters and some words when they are dictated.