

Overview of Supercharged Storytimes

Four Elements of a Supercharged Storytime

When you supercharge your storytimes, you boost your storytimes to a new level through a heightened awareness of the VIEWS2 study research¹ and the value of storytimes, and by the *intentional* incorporation of early literacy components into the activities you do in storytime. There are four key elements to “supercharging” your storytime.

Interactivity: providing ways for children and their parents and caregivers to participate with storytime content and be actively involved with what you are sharing with them.

Intentionality: connecting storytime activities to early literacy skills and development, being more aware of and articulating those connections during planning, delivery, and reflection.

Intentionality includes:

- **Scaffolding:** adjusting the level of activities and interactions to children’s developmental stages, abilities, and interests, and stretching them to support learning.
- **Early Literacy Tips:** becoming comfortable with sharing early literacy tips and modeling of behaviors with parents and caregivers to emphasize how what they do supports their children’s learning outside of storytimes.

Assessment: includes self-reflection about your storytime—particularly as it relates to the elements of a supercharged storytime; peer mentoring and peer observation to improve your storytime; and observing early literacy behaviors in children and their caregivers.

Community of Practice: building a community of peers/colleagues allows you to share and receive ideas and get ongoing feedback on your storytime practice.



What is Early Literacy?

Early literacy is what children know about communication, language (both verbal and non-verbal), reading, and writing *before* they can actually read and write. It encompasses all of a child's experiences with conversation, stories (oral and written), books and print.ⁱⁱ

Early literacy is NOT the teaching of reading. It is laying a strong foundation so that when children are taught to read, they are ready.

Why does early literacy matter?

Over one thirdⁱⁱⁱ of our children enter school without the skills to be ready to learn to read. Children who enter school without these reading readiness skills find learning to read harder and they start at a disadvantage. There are many ways in which parents, educators, library staff and others who work with children, can do to support our children's readiness to read.

The Reading Process

Before we look at early literacy skills and behaviors in more detail, it helps to understand what goes into reading, what prepares children to become successful readers in school.

- **Learning to read includes two major skill areas: decoding and comprehension.**^{iv} Both decoding and comprehension are necessary for reading.
 - **Decoding** is being able to recognize the words from the text. Children recognize some words by sight. Other words they sound out to figure out what the words are.
 - **Comprehension** is understanding what the words mean. Children may be able to sound out words but cannot necessarily understand the meaning of the words. They must understand the meaning of individual words as well as the whole idea.
 - **Fluency** is the ability to read text accurately, quickly, with expression.

Researchers have identified early literacy skills that support both these aspects of reading.^v If children come to school with a solid background in these skills, it will be easier for them to learn to read. Researchers choose to divide the aspects of early literacy in different ways, sometimes using different terms. The skills needed and the basic information are the same.



Early Literacy Components

Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) defines six early literacy components, which embody the skills, knowledge and aptitudes that children need for reading readiness. These components are supported by any literacy structure, including Head Start child development outcomes, VIEWS2 early literacy skills, or your state's early learning guidelines. (See the [ECRR-VPT Crosswalk](#) for details.)

Researchers have found that phonological awareness, print awareness and letter knowledge most directly support decoding.^{vi} A strong vocabulary also helps children be able to recognize words as they try to sound them out. Vocabulary and background knowledge most directly support comprehension, understanding what they are reading. From kindergarten through grade 2 reading instruction mostly focuses on decoding, learning to read. After grade 3, reading instruction mostly focuses on comprehension, reading to learn.

Children need ALL the early literacy components starting from birth to be good readers.

- **Oral language**—listening, speaking, communication skills; it is the foundation of language and literacy and the basis of all other components, like the roots of a tree
- **Phonological Awareness**—the ability to hear and play with the smaller sounds in words
- **Print Awareness/Concepts**—the knowledge that print has meaning, environmental print, how print works, knowing how to handle a book, how to follow words on a page
- **Letter Knowledge**—exploring letters, knowing that the same letter can look different, that letters have names and shapes, and represent sounds
- **Vocabulary**—recognizing words and knowing the meanings of words, including objects, actions, concepts, feelings, and ideas
- **Background Knowledge**—prior knowledge about the world, including content knowledge, book/story knowledge, and conceptual thinking



Oral language

Oral language is the foundation for all later language. It is the roots of the tree. It includes speaking, listening and communication skills.^{vii} The root of language also includes non-verbal language, which includes body language, facial expressions and gestures. All of these are ways that we communicate with each other. Even infants are learning to communicate through all of these techniques.

Children learn to read our facial expressions. By four months they recognize the difference between a smile and a frown. Young children watch our gestures, as we point to things or use hand motions and other movements to help explain what we say. As they get older they learn to follow directions, to ask and respond to questions, and to tell stories and tell us what they know.

Oral language suffuses all of the other areas of early literacy, making it the base for—rather than separate from—the rest of the early literacy components.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is the ability to hear and play with the smaller sounds in words. It includes hearing and recognizing environmental sounds (doorbell, car honking, animal sounds, etc.), hearing and recognizing speech and syllables in words, and making beginning sounds and rhymes. Helping children recognize sounds, especially the smaller sounds in words, will later help them to sound out words when they learn to read.

Print Awareness/Concepts

Print awareness is understanding that print has meaning, that the printed word represents the words we speak. Children may start out by recognizing signs or logos they see, like the McDonald's arches. They learn how to handle a book—which is the front and back, what is upside down, and the direction that we read the print—from left to right and top to bottom in English. Preschoolers will also learn to identify the author, title and illustrator and what the author and illustrators of books do.

Letter Knowledge

Letter knowledge is knowing that the same letter can look different, that letters have names and shapes, and represent sounds. There are two beginning concepts that lead to letter knowledge, concepts that children learn before they are able to identify letters. One is the ability to recognize and identify shapes. Researchers have found that children identify letters by their shapes.

The second concept is being able to discern visual similarities and differences. Children also need to be able to notice what is alike and different. An “n” and an “h” are similar and also different in the height of the line.



That difference indicates a different letter. Some differences may not matter; for example, the color of a letter does not change its name or the sound.

Because letters are abstract, it helps children connect to letters by using the letters in their names or in words of topics of interest to them.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is recognizing words and knowing the meanings of words. Some children enter school knowing 5,000 words; some enter knowing 20,000 words. The more words children know before entering school, the easier it will be to recognize words correctly as they try to sound them out. AND they will understand more words, which will help them comprehend what they are reading. Children build their vocabulary most effectively as you talk, play and read with them, not by drilling them on lists of words.

Even if your baby or toddler does not understand all the words you say, it is still beneficial to use those words. Exposure to the words is the first step to learning what they mean—words for objects, actions, concepts (colors, shapes, sizes, etc.), feelings, and ideas. Preschool children benefit from your explanations of what words mean and how two words may mean something similar but not exactly the same. Books often use words that we do not normally use in conversations. Use both story and factual books.

Background Knowledge

Background knowledge is what children know about the world when they enter school. It is the sum of their experiences, their cumulative knowledge about people, animals and objects, and the relationships between them and how things work. There are three areas of background knowledge:

- **Conceptual Thinking**—thinking skills, processes like cause and effect, predicting what might happen as well as knowledge of shapes, colors, etc.
- **Content Knowledge**—factual information a child knows about different topics
- **Book/Story Knowledge**—experiencing books as enjoyable; understanding how stories work (they have a beginning, middle and end), the ability to recount events and to tell and retell stories; and that books have different purposes—story, poetry, informational.



The Five Practices

Every Child Ready to Read has identified five practices or activities that parents and caregivers can incorporate into everyday life to help children enter school ready to learn to read. In your library storytimes, you can engage parents and caregivers to help them understand how they make a big difference in children's early literacy development. You can model the five practices and inform them that as they sing, talk, read, write and play with their young children, they have the opportunity to support their children's pre-reading skills in little ways that add up to a big difference by the time children enter school.

As with intentionality around the early literacy components, HOW you sing, talk, read, write, and play with children makes a difference in supporting their early literacy skills.

Sing

Singing slows down language. It helps children hear the smaller sounds in words. There is a different note for each syllable, so they hear words broken down into parts, which supports phonological awareness. This exposure helps children later sound out words. Some songs have interesting words that we would not hear in normal conversation with young children, so they are also building vocabulary.

Talk

Children start to learn language by hearing people talk. This is oral language! When talking with a baby, the baby is hearing the sounds of the languages; pointing to and labeling things helps a baby learn what words mean. Babies will start to babble and their babble uses the sounds they have heard. As children get older they follow directions, repeat words they hear and respond with their own words, phrases and then whole sentences. Listening to children while they speak is as important as talking to them. Young children need more time than adults do to figure out what to say and how to say it. Having children talk, tell and retell stories and express what they know all helps them to later understand what they read. Adding new words and information to conversations with children develops their vocabulary and background knowledge. Talking with them about signs and logo develops their print awareness. Talking with them about shapes, observing what is visually alike and different, or pointing out letters develops their letter knowledge.

Read

Shared reading is the single most important activity that adults can do help children get ready to read, even from birth. Remember to keep the interaction around the book a positive one. When children have positive experiences around books and reading they are more likely to persist with learning to read when they get to school, even if it is difficult.



Books have different words than the words of conversation, so children learn more words when you read books to them. Some board books for babies may not have many words, so you could add more words to those on the page. In this way you are developing children's vocabulary.

Reading books helps develop children's background knowledge. Reading story books teaches them the structure of story so that when they are asked to write a story in school, they know what to do. Reading factual books with young children responds to their curiosity and helps them learn about the world.

Pointing to the words in the title or a repeated phrase supports print awareness. You can point out letters in any book or share alphabet books to support letter knowledge.

Many books for young children include the sounds of animals and have rhymes, both of which support phonological awareness.

Write

Reading and writing go together. Both are ways to represent the spoken word. Children go through developmental stages with writing, starting with light markings and graduating to letter-like forms, drawing letters and then forming them.

Writing helps children understand that print has meaning. When children scribble and then say what it means, they are demonstrating understanding that what they have written or drawn means something. The beginning of writing for very young children is learning how to use their hands and fingers so that later they will know how to hold crayons and pencils.

Play

In addition to being fun, play helps children to think symbolically. They learn that one item represents another—a block might represent a telephone. This kind of symbolic thinking is used for reading, where it's important to understand that pictures and letters represent real things.

Dramatic play, when children act out stories, helps them build book/story background knowledge—how stories are structured.



Resources

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ⁱ VIEWS2 (Valuable Initiatives in Early Learning that Work Successfully). University of Washington Information School. <http://views2.ischool.uw.edu/> retrieved January 21, 2018.

ⁱⁱ 2011 Policy Brief from Zero to Three. *A Window to the World: Early Language and literacy Development*. <http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/policy-toolkit/early-literacywebmarch1-6.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Carnegie Foundation of New York. *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children*. Waldorf, MD: Carnegie Corp of NY, 1994

^{iv} *Every Child Ready to Read @ your library Manual Section II page 8*

^v Neuman, p 40. Developed by Saroj Ghoting for Library of Virginia based on Every Child Ready to Read®2 www.earlylit.net

^{vi} *Every Child Ready to Read @ your library Manual Section I page 6*

^{vii} *Learning to Talk and Listen: An Oral Language Resource for Early Childhood Caregivers* (Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, 2009), 14. <http://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/LearningtoTalkandListen.pdf>

