



Setting the Stage for Literacy: Background Information

Classrooms filled with print, language and literacy play, storybook reading, and writing allow children to experience the joy and power associated with reading and writing while mastering basic concepts about print that research has shown are strong predictors of achievement.¹

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Key Messages

I. Use print-rich environments to set the stage for early reading and writing.

Family child care (FCC) providers play a critical role in facilitating early literacy. By setting up the home environment to support children's explorations with language, print, and writing, providers introduce children to literacy in real-life, purposeful ways. According to Elaine Weitzman, author of *Making Literacy Part of Every Day in Child Care*², children gain early literacy skills when caregivers offer learning situations that:

- ⇒ Are part of a real event and have real purpose.
- ⇒ Make it possible for the child to experience and experiment with the printed word.
- ⇒ Enable the child to communicate or be communicated with through print.
- ⇒ Are of interest to the child.



*Make Space for Literacy*³

Learning about reading, writing, listening, and speaking is not confined to the boundaries of any one area in the home. Children should use literacy in purposeful and meaningful ways in everything they do. But there should be a designated place in the FCC home that is the hub for literacy learning.

- ⇒ Put your reading area in a quiet area of the home, where children can look at books undisturbed. Make sure soft chairs and pillows are nearby. A rug on the floor, a big beanbag cushion, a rocking chair, or even a mattress or futon covered with an attractive piece of fabric creates a warm, cozy environment. Also, let children know that it's okay to take books to the dining room or coffee table to read.



- ⇒ Include space for looking at books, listening to recordings, writing, and retelling familiar stories. The key to establishing an effective literacy area is to make it an inviting place where children will want to spend time.

(See the **Setting Up Your Environment to Support Children's Literacy Development** handout for more information.)

Selecting the Books

When choosing from the many wonderful and appropriate books available, begin with the interests and skills of the children you care for. Young children's attention is centered on themselves, their families, their homes, and their friends.

Variety

Variety is the key word to consider when selecting books for an FCC program. The “here and now” is a good starting point that allows infants and toddlers to make connections to something meaningful in their lives. As children mature, select books that go beyond the “here and now” to broaden their knowledge of the world.

Language

FCC providers need to include picture books written in the children's home language. This sends a powerful message to the child and to the families that their language is honored and respected.

Culture

Multicultural books are another way of broadening children's experiences. Be sure to include books depicting the cultures of the children who attend the program. Listening to stories, folktales, and experiences of children from other cultures helps develop sensitivity and appreciation for other groups of people.

Consistency

You do not need a large number of books at the start. Many providers find that when they regularly rotate books, children feel they are seeing new books or are reminded of old favorites not seen for a while. Taking children on regular trips to the public library is perhaps the best way of ensuring an inventory that reflects children's changing interests.

(See the **Guidelines for Choosing Read-Aloud Books** handout in the *Reading Aloud* section for more information.)





Choosing Materials for Story Retelling

Asking a child to retell a story is a powerful way for children to build comprehension skills, language structure, and a sense of the story. After children have heard a story several times and seen the story retold using props, they will want to retell it on their own. For retellings, select books that have simple story lines. Also, look for books with:

- ⇒ Repeating phrases—e.g., *Mrs. Wishy Washy* (Cowley, 1999).
- ⇒ Familiar sequences—e.g., *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1970).
- ⇒ Conversation—e.g., *Who Sank the Boat?* (Allen, 1999).
- ⇒ Classic or familiar titles—e.g., *Caps for Sale* (Slobodkina, 1974).

Include materials that encourage children to tell their own stories and act out stories they have heard. Props (e.g., puppets, flannel board, storytelling apron) enhance the storytelling experience.

Equipping a Listening Area

If possible, include one or two small cassette players and a variety of tapes. Headphones will allow children to listen to tapes without disturbing others.

In selecting story tapes, begin with stories that are familiar to children or that go with books in the FCC home. Providers can make tapes themselves or solicit family participation, starting with children's favorites. Books on tape are also available at most local libraries.

Having a listening area is a great way to support children with a variety of developmental delays. Children with visual impairments can listen to stories while other children can look at the words and pictures. Children with possible cognitive delays have the opportunity to hear a story over and over again. And children who exhibit challenging behaviors have an opportunity to be less stimulated by other things.

Equipping the listening center with tapes of books and music in other languages and from a variety of cultures is a great opportunity to support the variety of needs of all learners and expose all children to the richness of other cultures.

*(See the **Equipping a Listening Area** handout for more information.)*

Equipping a Writing Area

It is important for children to have access to writing tools (e.g., paper, markers, crayons). An effective writing area invites children to use writing for a purpose, such as to create a greeting card or write a message to a friend.

*(See the **Equipping a Writing Area** handout for more information.)*



Displaying Materials

How materials are displayed is directly linked to how often and how effectively they will be used.

- ⇒ Books should be in good condition and attractively arranged on shelves in such a way that children will be drawn to them.
- ⇒ Tapes and writing materials can be stored on shelves or grouped in storage containers such as bins, cans, folders, and boxes. Label the shelves or containers with pictures and words, using English and home languages when appropriate.

Caring for Materials

Keeping literacy materials in good condition sends children the message that they are valued. If books are torn and marked up, pencils have no points, and markers are dried out, children soon receive the idea that these materials are not very important.

Providers should also ask for children's help in caring for literacy materials. Books in particular should be checked routinely and mended with the children's help. To do this, keep a “book repair kit” near the books. It can be a shoebox or plastic container with the following: transparent tape to repair torn pages, cloth tape to repair the spines of books, gum erasers to remove pencil marks, and a pair of scissors.

Special Tips

- ✿ Use print to label what things are or where things belong.
- ✿ Use print to remind children what to do.
- ✿ Use print to provide information.
- ✿ Use print that asks children to respond or contribute.
 - ⇒ Use English and home languages.
 - ⇒ Hang text at children's eye level. Print needs to be large enough to be seen from across the room.
 - ⇒ Let children see the provider making signs so they will know why and how print is used.
 - ⇒ Invite children to make their own signs and labels.

(See the Ensuring a “Print-Rich” Environment [handout](#) for more information.)



II. Include literacy activities throughout the daily programming.

Although centered in an area with books, tapes, and writing materials, literacy activities should not be confined to any one area of the FCC home. Literacy learning goes on throughout the day. The National Network for Child Care suggests that providers incorporate these activities into the daily schedule to promote literacy for young children:

- ⇒ Read to children every day.
- ⇒ Sing songs and perform finger plays.
- ⇒ Write what children say.
- ⇒ Provide a variety of opportunities to use language.
- ⇒ Display books and provide a time and place for children to explore them.
- ⇒ Encourage children to write.
- ⇒ Surround children with printed materials, posters, and signs.

*(See the **Including Literacy-related Activities in the Daily Schedule** *handout for more information.*)*

III. Interact with children in ways that promote literacy.

Conversation that goes beyond the “here and now” -language that conveys information about other times and places-leads to literacy learning. These types of conversations, which are known as “decontextualized conversations,” allow children to relate first-hand experiences to the greater world. It is particularly important for providers to use this type of information when reading a story with a child. Rather than merely reading the text word for word, stop to discuss the book's meaning and engage the child in decontextualized talk.



Quality conversations and the amount of one-on-one or small group interactions that children have are highly related to language measures. In addition, cognitively challenging conversation and the use of a wide vocabulary by teachers are correlated with children's subsequent language and literacy development.

Using visual clues in conversation and periodically checking for understanding may help support children whose first language may not be English and children with language processing delays. Providers should engage in cognitively challenging conversation and use a wide vocabulary with all children but be aware that some children might need a little more support with the conversation and vocabulary.



In a review of recent studies on the importance of verbal interactions during storybook reading, Janell Klesius⁴ found that the quality and quantity of interactions, not just the presence of reading materials and a story time routine, shaped early reading development. Early readers talk more frequently about literacy with adults, have interactions that contain more instances of extending a topic, and exhibit more appropriate language.

Likewise, word recognition and vocabulary knowledge are closely linked in development and are influenced by adult interactions. For example, recognizing a word like “rutabaga” or “rhinoceros” is easier if one “knows” the word (has heard it and is familiar with it). Research shows that children with very small vocabularies will start at about fourth grade to encounter unfamiliar words in their reading books and on word recognition tests. Even if these children’s phonics skills are adequate, such words will be hard to sound out quickly and correctly the first few times they are encountered.



IV. Use a variety of strategies to help literacy skill development.³

Children need to explore books and print on their own. They also need to be guided in their literacy explorations. Here are a few more strategies to help them:

- ⇒ Model reading and writing daily.
- ⇒ Read aloud daily to the whole group, to individual children, or to small groups when they ask or when the time seems right.
- ⇒ Help children integrate reading and writing into their play.
- ⇒ Share songs, rhymes, and finger plays with children.
- ⇒ Encourage oral communication.
- ⇒ Invite children to talk about their investigations.
- ⇒ Take dictation from children as they tell stories, label their artwork, prepare messages for others, or discuss things they have learned.
- ⇒ Plan activities that include recognition of letters, words, and numbers, such as cooking or mapping.
- ⇒ Encourage social literacy experiences such as sharing a book with a friend or writing with a volunteer.
- ⇒ Help families become involved in children's pre-literacy experiences.



Using a large variety of strategies will especially benefit children with developmental delays and second-language learners.

(See the **Strategies to Help Children Develop Literacy Skills** *handout* for more information.)

¹ Neuman, S.; Copple, C.; and Bredekamp, S. Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children, National Association for the Education of Young Children. 2000.

² “Making Literacy Part of Every Day in Child Care” Interaction magazine, Spring, 1995.

³ Sections of Part I were adapted from Dodge, D.T., Colker, L.J., and Heroman, C. The Creative Curriculum for Preschool. 4th edition., Teaching Strategies, Inc., 2002.

⁴ Klesius, J. Interactive storybook reading for at-risk learners. *The Reading Teacher*, April 1996, Vol.49, Issue 7, pp.552-561.

