



# Family Literacy

*Parents are a child's first teachers. This idea, which we all know intuitively, is a cornerstone of a child's Head Start experience. And when parents are educated as to how children learn, they can better act in their capacity as teachers. This is the rationale behind the emphasis on Family Literacy in Head Start. Family literacy is parents working together with children to achieve literacy and reading skills.*

Research has shown over and over that children who are raised in homes that promote family literacy, homes that see learning as important and where lifelong learning is encouraged, do better in school and in life. Literacy is more important today, in our technological, knowledge-based global economy, than it has ever been.

What, exactly, is literacy? A person who is literate can listen, see, speak, read, and write in order to interact with others. Interactions can take the form of learning new ideas, exchanging information, expressing thoughts and feelings, or making decisions. To do these successfully, a person needs to be able to read fluently, comprehend what he or she is reading, and transmit this understanding to others using appropriate vocabulary. Math and technology skills are also necessary in this day and age.

How can parents help children achieve these complex skills? The most obvious answer has to do with reading. Parents need to make books key members of the family. Books should have a place of pride in the family home. If possible, children's books should be given their own space, so that children can feel ownership of their own library. A

variety of books on different subjects should be available, but children's preferences should be respected. (Research has shown that older children prefer books they choose themselves. Not surprisingly, research has also shown that these children prefer books that make them laugh.)

Children also need to see parents reading. Having parents who are frequent readers is a powerful predictor for children becoming frequent readers themselves. Visiting the library with children is a fun family literacy activity.

The most important reading activity, however, is parents reading to children. Research has shown that reading aloud to children is the single most effective parent practice for enhancing language and literacy development. Parents can even start reading to children when they are infants. Infants should also be encouraged to play with books specially designed for their age group. If a child is read to for only 10 minutes a day from the time he is an infant, that child will have heard more than 3,000 hours of reading by the time he goes to school. That means he will have heard many new words and interesting sentence constructions, which



will not only help him learn to read, but also help him express himself.

Toddlers love to "read" books on their own as well as to hear parents reading to them. Picture books allow toddlers to interact with parents, as children point to and identify what they see. Preschoolers are beginning

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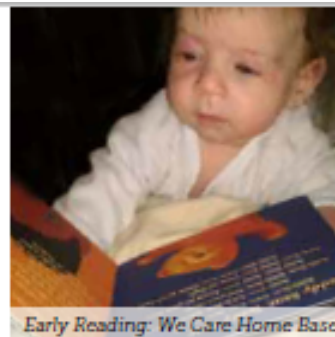
## How Can I Help My Child Be **Ready To Read and Ready To Learn?**

- Talk to your Infant and toddler to help him learn to speak and understand the meaning of words. Point to objects that are near and describe them as you play and do daily activities together. Having a large vocabulary gives a child a great start when he enters school.
- Read to your baby every day starting at six months of age. Reading and playing with books is a wonderful way to spend special time with her. Hearing words over and over helps her become familiar with them. Reading to your baby is one of the best ways to help her learn.
- Use sounds, songs, gestures and words that rhyme to help your baby learn about language and its many uses. Babies need to hear language from a human being. Tapes or television are just noise to a baby.
- Point out the printed words in your home and other places you take your child such as the grocery store. Spend as much time listening to your child as you do talking to him.
- Take children's books and writing materials with you whenever you leave home. This gives your child fun activities to entertain and occupy him while traveling and going to the doctor's office or other appointments.
- Create a quiet, special place in your home for your child to read, write and draw. Keep books and other reading materials where your child can easily reach them.
- Help your child see that reading is important. Set a good example for your child by reading books, newspapers and magazines.

*From: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs, Educational Partnerships and Family Involvement Unit, Reading Tips for Parents, Washington D.C., 2003.*



*YyY We Care library time.*



*Early Reading: We Care Home Base*

to learn about letters, numbers, and shapes. Looking at alphabet books and pointing out letters in books as the parent reads will teach the child to associate letters with specific sounds. Developing print awareness is a key element in learning to read.

Reading aloud to children has benefits beyond helping them become proficient readers. A Scholastic survey found that the top reason children say they enjoy being read aloud to is that this is a special time with their parents. Even older children enjoy being read to for this reason.

Children who have books in the home, who are read to, and who develop print awareness have a head start on reading and literacy skills. However, family literacy activities do not only have to center directly around reading. We know that much learning occurs beyond the school setting, occurring naturally, not just in school-like activities. Parents can also promote literacy skills during the ordinary daily routines of life. One such activity is conversation.

Young children love to talk. Once they discover that sounds have meaning, they enjoy trying to communicate. Parents should begin conversation when their children are infants, by answering their babies' sounds and talking to them. Infants learn from listening, observing, and following. Simple talking games such as peek-a-boo delight babies and help them learn to form the kinds of sounds they need in order to speak their mother tongue. The more words and stories children hear during this time, the easier it will be for them to learn to read and write later on.

It is important to continue to talk to children when they reach toddlerhood. Naming objects and commenting on what is happening around the child comes naturally to most parents, but parents should also remember to ask children questions that require more than a yes or no answer. When a toddler asks questions, it is important to answer accurately, within the child's understanding. Children learn by asking questions and having them answered.

One of the earliest literacy skills children need to develop is the concept of

sequencing, telling a story from start to finish in the right order. Preschoolers can practice these skills by arranging cards in the proper order in special sequencing games. They can also put family pictures of a specific event in the right order. Children can be asked to repeat stories told to them by older family members. As children re-tell the story in their own words, they build vocabulary, recall information, and learn to understand the importance of sequencing.

Parents can discuss many different topics with their children. They can start by naming the objects the child sees. They can discuss the books they read with them, asking questions that have specific answers, but also discussing "what if" scenarios. Parents can use a technique that teachers of young children are encouraged to use, called "self talk," describing what they are doing as they are doing it. This teaches children new vocabulary and initiates them into household routines.

Children need to hear many different words. Explaining words they do not understand builds an awareness of words and enriches vocabulary.

Parents need not only to talk but also to listen. Children should be encouraged to tell stories and to describe what their drawings represent. Specific questions are answered more readily than a general, "How was your day?" or "What did you do in school today?" When parents listen patiently as children ask questions and give them satisfying answers, children are more likely to talk.

Singing with children, reciting nursery rhymes with them, and playing pretend games with them are fun activities that also promote literacy. Providing an enriched environment by taking children on outings to zoos, parks, museums, and other cultural institutions can also enhance literacy. Children are exposed to new experiences, which helps them build a storehouse of knowledge and new vocabulary. Discussing these outings with children helps them process what they have seen and make sense of the new experience.

Encouraging children to draw and write is another way to encourage literacy. Learning to read and learning to write

go hand in hand. Having drawing and writing materials handy encourages children to practice writing. With very young children, parents can write down a story as the child tells it and read it back to him. When it's time to give gifts, books, crayons and special papers can contribute to children's enjoyment while encouraging literacy. Children should be encouraged to send notes at every stage of their development, including scribbles and misspelled notes.

Every child is unique and learns at his or her own pace. Some children learn to read early, while others may take a bit longer. When parents surround a child

with many opportunities to read, write, speak, listen, and learn, they open the door to learning and make literacy a family affair. Becoming literate is one of the most important journeys that a child will take, and parents are the ones who share most of this wonderful journey with their child.

**Resources:**

*Yeled V'Yalda Children's Library, 1257 38 Street  
[www.yeled.org](http://www.yeled.org) for previous articles on school  
readiness*

*The Jewish Youth Library (Brooklyn)  
Your local Public Library*

## Help for Struggling Readers

### *Don't panic!*

Sometimes children do not learn to read easily and your child may struggle. Here are some things you can do to help him:

**CONTINUE** to read to him. Make reading a regular and enjoyable family activity. Let him see you and other important adults read books, magazines and newspapers regularly.

**ENCOURAGE** him to read at home. Have interesting books and magazines available and give him time and space at home to read. The more young people read, the better they can read.

**HELP** him select a variety of materials from the school, neighborhood, or public library. These might include audio books, novels, fact books, magazines, graphic novels and children's books.

**READ** to and with him several times a week in whatever language you speak in the home. The more he hears language, the more he will be able to adopt and adapt language for his own expressions.

**TALK** with his teachers so that you know what they expect of him at school.

**PROVIDE** opportunities for him to read books with lots of visuals. Many libraries offer an enjoyable variety of graphic novels, illustrated information books and picture books that are appealing.

**ENCOURAGE** him to read different genres, including poetry, short stories, autobiographies, memoirs, essays and historical fiction as well as novels.

*Adapted from Opening the Door to Learning: Literacy is a Family Affair, Random House, Bartelsmann, NYC Department of Education.*