From Birth...For Life

Research Summary

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CANADIAN LANGUAGE &
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Early Learning and Child Care Practitioners:

Supporting Children to Make the Connections

Language and literacy development are interrelated. Children with positive early language experiences develop literacy skills, which in turn contribute to language growth. ELCC practitioners play an active role in both language and literacy development. They introduce children to words, sounds, letters, and books and they highlight the relationships among them. The following section outlines a number of key emergent literacy skills as well as empirically based strategies for encouraging successful language and literacy development.

This section describes how practitioners use a variety of evidence-based strategies to build children's language and literacy skills. It also illustrates the benefits of scaffolding in terms of helping children to develop these skills. For example, when a child is first learning to count, the practitioner may sit with her and provide the names of the numbers through modelling. The next time, the practitioner may sit with the child again to give encouragement and support but only supply the numbers when the child gets stuck. The practitioner will provide less and less support as the child develops the skills and confidence to count by herself. Many practitioners already use a number of strategies, including scaffolding, in a purposeful way but may benefit from learning about research that reinforces these strategies and provides new ideas for supporting language and literacy development in everyday practice.

Print awareness

One of the activities most commonly associated with language and literacy development is shared reading. Shared reading is the interactive reading of a book, magazine, or other text between an adult and a child or a small group of children. ELCC practitioners often read storybooks, information books and other texts with the children in their care, and in doing this are fostering print awareness (Justice & Pullen, 2003). When adults and children read together, children learn about the letters, words and other characteristics of print. However, young children do not naturally focus on the print during shared reading. In fact, during shared storybook reading they spend most of their time looking at the illustrations (Evans & Saint-Aubin, 2005). Drawing children's attention to print by pointing to the words when you say them or by asking questions about print features (e.g., "Where is the title?" or "We know this letter – it's an A!") can help improve word awareness and alphabet knowledge (Justice & Ezell, 2002). Focusing on print is most successful when shared reading takes place in smaller groups (i.e., less than four) and using Big Books (e.g., books with large pictures and print) so that everyone can see the text.

Alphabetic principle

Learning the alphabetic principle is important for long-term reading success (Stanovich, 1986). The alphabetic principle is composed of two parts: (1) letter knowledge – an awareness of letters and how they relate to sounds and (2) phonological awareness – an awareness of speech sounds and the ability to manipulate sounds in words (Moats, 1999). The child who acquires the alphabetic principle has the ability to associate sounds with letters and use these sounds to form words (http://reading.uoregon.edu/au/).

Letter knowledge

Knowing the alphabet doesn't necessarily make a child a successful reader. Nevertheless, there is a strong correlation between knowledge of the alphabet in preschool and kindergarten and future reading ability, which makes letter knowledge a powerful preschool predictor of learning to read (Foulin, 2005). Children do not learn the alphabet and the relationship between letters and sounds on their own; they benefit from being explicitly taught (Aram & Biron, 2004). ELCC practitioners teaching children about letters and their relationship to sounds may instruct children by choosing a letter (e.g., "M") and planning several activities to increase children's awareness of that letter, such as asking the children to make an "M" recipe by naming "M" words and putting them in an imaginary mixing bowl. In addition, children can practice writing the letter "M" or draw pictures of things that start with "M." Practitioners may also facilitate children's letter knowledge by reading an alphabet book and pointing and naming letters in environment (e.g., "The stop sign has four letters S-T-O-P" or "Your name starts with the letter B and the sound /b/). Children who engage in a spectrum of structured activities that foster letter knowledge learn more letters by the end of kindergarten than those that do not (Brodeur et al., 2006).

Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness refers to the ability to recognize and manipulate the individual sounds in speech. It includes the developing understanding that speech is made up of sounds (e.g., understanding that the spoken word "sun" has three sounds /s/, /^/, /n/). In practical terms, phonological awareness involves understanding that words break down into the parts. Linguists refer to these parts as phonemes, onsets, rimes and syllables (See Glossary for more details). Children learn about the largest sounds first and become aware of smaller and smaller parts over time. First they may demonstrate their knowledge of sounds by clapping for each syllable in a song (e.g., Ma-ry had a lit-tle lamb). Next they may identify words that rhyme (e.g., map-tap) and eventually they will be able to choose which word does not belong (e.g., hat, house, or dog).

When measured in kindergarten, this awareness of the speech-sound relationship predicts reading ability in the primary school years (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 1999; NICHHD, 2000; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Children with advanced phonological awareness skills perform better than peers who have similar intelligence, receptive vocabulary, and socioeconomic status (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Although some children have better phonological awareness skills than others, regularly exposing children to this skill enhances reading development for everyone (Blachman, 2000). More importantly, providing support from a young age is particularly critical, because early phonological training remains influential well into the elementary school years (NICHHD, 2000).

Many ELCC practitioners help promote children's phonological awareness through daily activities that focus on the sounds of speech (NICHHD, 2000; Rvachew, Nowak, & Cloutier, 2004), such as singing songs, chanting and reading poems with sound repetition and rhyming. Practitioners also capitalize on teachable moments to raise children's phonological awareness. For example, during attendance a

practitioner may say "Did you notice that Ben-ja-min and Mo-ha-med both have three sounds groups in their name? How many sounds groups are in my name? Lu-cy." Or she may say "Callie and Karen both start with the sound /k/. What sound does my name start with?" Older children may be able to recognize the individual phonemes in a word. Practitioners may encourage them to break words down into parts and blend them back together. For example, the word spill has four phonemes, /s/-/p/-/I/-/l/, and saying those sounds together quickly (i.e., blending) produces the word spill. This task, in particular, is an example of the relationship between letter knowledge and phonological awareness. In breaking down words children name the letters, which may foster letter awareness. Children with greater knowledge of the alphabet, tend to have better phonological awareness skills (Johnston, Anderson & Holligan, 1996).

Phonological awareness can also be enhanced using computer programmes and talking books. Children experience growth in the skills targeted by computer programmes (Lonigan, Driscoll, Phillips, Cantor, Anthony & Goldstein, 2003). Playing computer games that offer practice in rhyming, matching words with the same onsets or rimes (e.g., cat-coat or cape-scrape), and counting the number of syllables or sounds help foster those skills. Practitioners can be flexible with the frequency and nature of their phonological awareness activities; focus on one or two types of activities at a time; work with small groups of children; and be aware of individual variation in developmental level and interest (NICHHD, 2000).

Vocabulary

There is an immense range from child to child in the amount of language they may be exposed to on a daily basis. On average, children hear between 250 and 3,600 words per hour (Hart & Risley, 1992; 1995). By age three, a child could have heard between 10 million and 40 million new and repeated words (Hart & Risley, 1995). Therefore, a child exposed to large amounts of vocabulary may hear as many as 30 million more words than a child with minimal exposure. This gap may influence vocabulary development and future school achievement (Weizman & Snow, 2001).

Despite the differences in early language exposure, the vocabulary development of all children can be promoted and supported in ELCC settings. Practitioners can use new or complex words during playtime and mealtime. They can scaffold children's understanding of new words by providing definitions, examples or other support that gets the meaning of new words across (Weizman & Snow, 2001). For example, a practitioner may introduce the word "vehicle" by saying, "Sarah, you are playing with many different vehicles. Trucks, cars, and ambulances are three types of vehicles."

Practitioners also promote vocabulary growth through shared reading. When practitioners and children read together, children are exposed to a variety of new words and phrases and their vocabulary learning is enhanced when they point and label pictures and words (Ard & Beverly, 2004; Sénéchal, Thomas, & Monker, 1995). This learning can be further enhanced through repeated reading activities, i.e., reading a text several times (Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005). For example, preschool and kindergarten children learn more new words when they listen to a storybook three or four times than if they hear the story only once (Justice et al., 2005; Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Sénéchal, 1997). Children often initiate this practice by asking practitioners to read the same story again and again. They may also play games and sing songs related to the story, or act out certain scenes. Repeated readings may be beneficial because new words are heard in a context in which the meaning is illustrated by the story. For example, children may learn the word "fangs" because they hear it several times in the story that says "The snake used his fangs to bite and catch the mouse," and that has a picture showing a snake with big teeth. Hearing the meaning of new words (e.g., "Fangs are very long sharp teeth.") or answering questions about them (e.g., "Why does the snake

have fangs?") further enhances word learning experiences during repeated reading (Justice et al., 2005; Senechal, 1997).

Writing and written language

Children's concepts of print and their ability to write change dramatically from age two through primary school. Three- and four-year old children generally assume that all pictures and scribbles are readable. As they grow, around the age of five they learn that English writing is made up of specific shapes oriented horizontally on the page (Bialystock, 1995). Eventually children learn that writing is made up of words and that words are made up of letters. During this developmental process children will write scribbles and pretend words, which are an important part of emergent literacy learning. Generally, they begin by scribbling, then they may use shapes and eventually letters to create pretend words (e.g., "daxy") or real words with invented spelling (e.g., "kr" for the word "car"). With continued experience children eventually learn to write using the grammatical and spelling conventions of the language (Levy et al., 2006).

Learning to recognize and write their name is a critical skill for young children. Four-year-old children tend to know the name and sound of the first letter of their name better than other letters of the alphabet (Treiman & Broderick, 1998). Children learning English, Dutch, Hebrew and possibly other languages all learn to recognize the initial letter in their name by practicing to write their name (Levin, Both-De Vries, Aram & Bus, 2005; Treiman & Broderick, 1998).

Practitioners often initiate joint writing activities which help children not only develop their writing skills (e.g., holding a writing utensil, fine motor ability, etc.), but also build phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and listening comprehension (Aram & Biron, 2004). For example, practitioners can help two-year-olds learn to hold and use a crayon. They can help preschool children to print their name, make a birthday card together, or check items on a list.

As young children learn to form and write letters and words, they learn about the characteristics of written language and how it differs from spoken language. Written language uses words not commonly found in speech. For example, the word "happy" would be used in speech, while "thrilled" or "gleeful" may be used in written text. Written language also contains more complex grammar, such as passive phrases (e.g., "the monster was defeated by the magician"), and decontexualized language (referring to people, places, and things that are not visible to the listener). For example, in spoken language a person may say "He spoke to her over there," but in writing, without environmental or physical cues (such as pointing), the phrase might be: "David spoke to his sister in the backyard." The written sentence includes names and descriptions of context that provide the reader with enough information to picture the scene. Children learn about these and other unique characteristics of written language through shared reading and exposure to text (Purcell-Gates, 2001).

Environmental print

Children are sensitive to print in the day-to-day environment, such as logos (e.g., Lego), signs (e.g., stop signs), and labels (e.g., kitchen centre) (Kuby, Goodstadt-Killoran, Aldridge, & Kirkland, 1999). Children as young as three can recognize logos and associate them with the products they represent (Masonheimer, Drum, & Ehri, 1984). Familiarity with logos and other forms of environmental print is a sign of emerging print awareness (Cronin, Farrell, & Delaney, 1999; Masonheimer et al.; 1984, Whitehurst & Lonigan 1998).

Children with less access to print materials (e.g., books, magazines, labels, posters) at home or in their ELCC environments have fewer opportunities to interact with literacy materials (McGill-Franzen,

Lanford, & Adams, 2002). Providing large amounts of print materials, and displaying them in eye catching and easily accessible ways throughout the centre (e.g., book displays) helps to develop children's concepts of print, writing, and narrative (Dunn, Beach, Kontos, 1994; Neuman, 1999). Table 5 lists a number of ways to create print-rich classrooms.

Exposing children to print-rich environments is important, but exposure alone does not necessarily improve literacy outcomes. Children learn from adult explanations about the use and value of the print in the environment. ELCC practitioners who have benefited from training on how to use classroom libraries can optimize literacy learning; they tend to use the materials frequently and benefit from learning new ways to highlight the connections between books, words, letters and sounds (McGill-Franzen, Allington, Yokoi & Brooks, 1999).

TABLE 5

Print-Rich ELCC Centres

- Include a variety of print in the classroom library (e.g., fiction, non-fiction, poetry, humour and magazines), and make those resources accessible.
- Choose a theme for the month, and display books related to the theme.
- Hang printed materials (e.g., posters, pictures, word walls, stories, calendars, labels) at the child's eye level.
- Create a book nook with comfy rugs, chairs or pillows.
- Have writing and listening centres (e.g., paper, markers, and music or books on tape).
- Have literacy-related props for children to act out stories and narratives (e.g., puppets, dress-up clothes, book sacks).
- Incorporate print into other ELCC areas (e.g., daily "to do" list, recipes, mailboxes for each child, etc.).

(Dowhower & Beagle, 1998; Neuman, 1999)

Gender

A number of studies of elementary school children suggest that boys and girls differ in their reading behaviour and preferences. School-age girls tend to prefer realistic fiction, while boys prefer more fantasy fiction (Boraks, Hoffman, & Bauer, 1997). On average, boys report being less confident about their reading ability, less motivated to read, and generally read less frequently than girls (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). This is a pressing issue in the field of education, because several studies have demonstrated stability in reading achievement overtime (Juel, 1988). From as early as kindergarten, boys, on average, achieve lower scores than girls on reading tests (Chatterji, 2006). There are concerns that these differences in achievement in the elementary years could persist through their lifetime (Phillips, Norris, Osmund, & Maynard, 2002). One possible method of fostering literacy in both boys and girls is to encourage them to pursue their literary interests, whether it is information books, comics or fairy tales.

There is still much research needed on the relationship between gender and language and literacy however. Along with the generalizations about gender, it is important to respect and accommodate the individuality of each child while still providing a full range of literacy materials in the ELCC centre. Further, before they reach school-age, boys and girls generally show similar book preferences (Mohr, 2006; Robinson, Larsen, Haupt, & Mohlman, 1997). Both groups appear to enjoy fantasy and information books with strong narratives (Robinson et al., 1997). Familiarity with books also appears to play a role in reading preferences at young ages (Robinson et al., 1997). Both boys and girls tend to repeatedly select books that they have read or seen before.

Extended interactions

ELCC practitioners foster receptive and expressive language development by encouraging talking during shared reading, conversations and play. Practitioners can promote these skills by using elaborative techniques (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Whitehurst et al.,, 1988, 1994; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), which encourage children to explain and discuss their ideas and feelings about a book or activity. One way to do this is to engage children in discussions before, during and after shared reading (Dickenson & Smith, 1994). Practitioners can use questions and prompts (e.g., "What kind of fruit did the very hungry caterpillar eat?") because children respond more frequently to them than to comments (e.g., "The very hungry caterpillar ate many different fruits") (Justice, Weber, Ezell, & Bakeman, 2002). A list of elaborative reading behaviours is available in Table 6. This list draws on several types of shared-reading strategies, because to date the different strategies have not been combined into a single, empirically-validated approach. In general, all of the techniques encourage active child participation.

In addition to shared reading, practitioners can encourage language development and extended speech by responding to children warmly and sensitively, and engaging in conversations and interactions that focus on the child's interests (Girolametto & Weitzman, 2002). Children use more words and speak for longer periods of time when playing with an adult, than when playing near, but not with them (Bornstein, Painter, & Park, 2002). For example, if a child is packing a play picnic basket, the practitioner may join in and encourage the child to talk by following up on and extending her actions and verbalizations (e.g., "It looks like you are making a picnic. Where will you be having the picnic?"), and by asking questions and prompting (e.g., "What type of food are you taking?" or "Why is that your favourite food?"). Practitioners are guided by the child's interests but also by his developmental level. They ask more complex questions to older children (e.g., "What will you do, and who will you invite to your picnic?") and simpler questions to younger children (e.g., "What songs will you sing at your picnic?"). Fostering spoken language development through responsive behaviour has a long-term impact on literacy, because spoken language skills in kindergarten can predict early reading achievement (Catts et al., 1999).

TABLE 6 **Shared Reading**
Encourage the children to participate.
• Ask open-ended questions (e.g., who, what, where, when, why, and how). • Ask open-ended questions of more advanced preschoolers (e.g., questions requiring more than one-word answers). • Read to children individually, in pairs, or in groups (optimal number for shared group reading is 3-4). • Engage in immediate talk (i.e., Talk about the book, the content or the story). • Engage in decontextualized talk (i.e., Talk about ideas or topics that are not available in the surrounding environment or have happened in the past). • Point to the words when you read them. • Use repeated readings of a favourite book, and incorporate the book into a number of settings and activities (e.g., dress-up, puppet-show, the listening centre by recording it on tape/CD, etc.). • Use lift-the-flap books, slot-books, and predictable books to encourage active involvement in the story.
Provide feedback.
• Follow up on children's answers/comments with questions. • Expand on the answers/comments of more advanced preschoolers. • Repeat what the children say, if it may help others in the group. • Praise and encourage the children frequently.
Adapt your reading style to the children's linguistic ability.
• Follow the children's interests. • Help the children as needed (e.g., modelling, or scaffolding). • Discuss the story before, during and after shared reading. (Why did you choose that book or how is it related to the children's lives? Recall what happened in the story. Who were the favourite characters? What was the favourite part? • Draw attention to print (title, author, letters, words).
(Arnold et al., 1994; Kaderavek & Justice, 2002; Justice & Pullen, 2003; Massey 2004)

Modelling

Modelling literacy is an important way to encourage children to experiment with literacy themselves. ELCC practitioners act as models of both language and literacy throughout their daily interactions with children. They model a variety of different types of speech, because they use language differently in different situations throughout the day (Kontos, 1999; O'Brien & Bi, 1995). For example, during craft play, language may be used to keep children focused on and progressing through the activity (e.g., "What colour are you going to use next?") (Kontos, 1999). During dramatic play, practitioners ask questions and comment on the activities and objects in the environment (O'Brien & Bi, 1995). For example, if the children are setting up a pretend restaurant, the practitioner may ask, "What is on the menu today?" or "How do you make these delicious eggs?" While in the truck and block centres, practitioners may model non-word sounds (e.g., "vrrrooomm"), and attention-seeking statements (e.g., "Look how tall your tower is!") (O'Brien & Bi, 1995).

ELCC practitioners model reading and writing literacy behaviours by engaging children in literacy activities throughout the day. For example, demonstrating how to hold a book properly and carefully turning the pages provides a model of appropriate book handling behaviour that children can follow. Also, when practitioners use the writing centre and the various writing materials available there, children are able to see how these tools can be used.

Literacy through play

The study of literacy-related play has its roots in the theories of Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1978) who both suggest that children learn through play. One critical assumption of the research focused on learning literacy through play is that play contributes to literacy development and vice versa (Roskos & Christie, 2001). Literacy and play are inter-related in three ways. First, children enhance their play by drawing on topics and stories they have learned about through books and conversations. For example, after reading a story about a race, children may create a track with blocks and race toys. Or, children may act out their favourite parts of a story, by pretending to be the Very Hungry Caterpillar (Carle, 1979) and eating all the food in the kitchen centre. Second, literacy-related activities can be included in play using literacy materials in play centres. For example, a kitchen corner might include cookbooks, labels, coupons, money, measuring cups and paper to make grocery lists and write recipes. Third, play is an opportunity to learn about literacy from adults and peers who model literacy activities (e.g., observing a peer writing in a notebook in the science centre). Children also learn when they act as models for their peers (e.g., "reading" labels to a friend in the dramatic play centre).

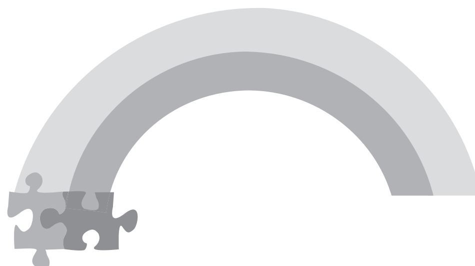
Part of an ELCC practitioner's role during free play activities is to encourage the use of literacy materials. Children playing in environments filled with literacy materials use those materials more than their peers with fewer literacy resources (Christie & Enz, 1992; Vukelich, 1994). However, providing the materials is not enough. Children benefit most when they observe adults modelling the use of literacy tools, and when they are encouraged to engage in literacy-related play. In order to hold the children's interest, the literacy play materials should be replaced frequently (e.g., the theme of the dramatic play centre may change monthly from restaurant, to post office, to barber shop). Increasing the frequency and quality of children's play with literacy materials improves their literacy skills. Playing in literacy-enriched settings improves children's ability to read words found in that centre (Neuman & Roskos, 1993a; 1993b; Vukelich, 1994). For example, children are able to read the words "exit" and "office" after playing in an enriched office-play centre. Reading improvements are greatest for children who are guided by adult participation in the play centre.

TABLE 7	
Literacy Play Materials	
Kitchen centre	• shopping lists and coupons • recipes and recipe cards • birthday cards • newspapers, magazines, and books • food cartons (e.g., cereal box, soup can) • labels
Science centre	• picture and information books • paper and pencils • rulers and measuring cups • tracing materials • child-size chalk board and chalk
Block centre	• maps • road or building plans • picture books • design materials (e.g., paper and pencils) • labels • figures of people and animals

Literacy through multimedia

Literacy is not simply books and reading. There are many different forms of information media available, and children learn about listening, speaking, reading and writing from numerous sources. Computers are one source of multimedia text experience. Parents report that children first start to use computers, with parental assistance, at around 2½ years of age, and children begin to use computers independently at 3½ years of age (Calvert, Rideout, Woodlard, Barr, & Strouse, 2005). Therefore, from a very young age children are becoming familiar with technology and can benefit from these experiences. Playing computer games that focus on sound matching, rhyming games and breaking words into parts helps to build the phonological awareness skills of children ages 3½ to 5 (Lonigan et al., 2003). Electronic stories provide children with an opportunity to independently interact with stories before they are able to read conventional print on their own (De Jong & Bus, 2004). The animated pictures that accompany the narrative, help promote children's understanding of story elements that are not explicitly stated (i.e., the information "between-the-lines") (Verhallen, Bus, & de Jong, 2006).

Educational television programmes (e.g., *Between the Lions* [Stoia & Sullivan, 2005], *Blues Clues* [Wilder & Santomero, 2004], *Dora the Explorer* [Gifford, 2004]) can foster emergent literacy skills (Linebarger, Kosanic, Greenwood, & Doku, 2004; Linebarger & Walker, 2005). Programmes that promote expressive language and vocabulary development are characterized by encouraging interaction with on-screen characters, labelling objects and strong narratives (Linbarger & Walker, 2005). The skills fostered through television viewing are specifically targeted by the programmes (Linebarger et al., 2004). Frequent labelling and repeating new words help promote vocabulary growth, and naming letters, and showing examples of words help promote letter knowledge. However, children benefit from educational programmes differently based on their initial level of skill. Children who have less developed phonological awareness and letter knowledge may benefit from repeated viewings and follow-up support from caregivers (Linebarger et al., 2004). Children may extend their interactions with these television programmes through related computer games, websites and books.



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