



THE WORD IS OUT

THE IMPORTANCE AND BENEFITS OF LAYING A STRONG FOUNDATION IN READING, WRITING AND SELF-EXPRESSION IN THE EARLY YEARS.

A baby's babble. A toddler's first attempt at sounding a word. A kindergartener's early reading and writing endeavours. These are all important milestones of a child's language development. Language and literacy abilities support a range of important skills such as being able to socialise and interact with others, build relationships, ask questions and much more. *Beanstalk* chats with educators and parents on the significance of language and literacy development in early childhood.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO LAY A STRONG FOUNDATION IN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN THE EARLY YEARS?

Jocelyn Ter: It helps us communicate with others. The early years are the best time to develop these skills. Research shows that when we communicate and talk with children earlier, they tend to get a good start in developing language and literacy abilities.

S Kasthuri Waani: Children with a good language foundation can understand those around them better, socialise with ease and express their ideas confidently.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LANGUAGE SKILLS AND LITERACY SKILLS?

Jocelyn: Language development refers to the ability to communicate our ideas and thoughts, and express our emotions and feelings.

Waani: Literacy generally involves four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing.

HOW DOES LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT LEARNING IN OTHER AREAS?

Jocelyn: For example, after reading *The Three Little Pigs* in class, we asked the children, "Why do you think the little pigs need to build their own house?" The children had to think through reasons for this, which developed their cognition. When they engage in discussions and share their thoughts and ideas with peers, they learn to take turns, listen and negotiate their point of view. It helps them build relationships with friends and adults.

Waani: Using language helps children understand and make sense of the world



A child's vocabulary expands from about 200 words at 2 years old to around

20,000 words

by age 6.

That's the number of words children understand, although what they actually use to express themselves is closer to 2,600 words.

around them. Children can also better convey their feelings, which boosts their social and emotional development. Instead of crying, a child who feels unwell is able to tell the teacher, "I am scared. I have a tummy ache."

PARENTS, WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON LAYING A GOOD FOUNDATION IN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY?

Binoy Chacko: Whatever children listen to, read and understand in the early years sets their direction in life. It is through reading and listening that they get to know about the world and the many opportunities it offers.

Joyce Ong: Be it in the early years or in adulthood, thoughts, feelings and ideas can be better communicated if you have a good foundation in language and literacy. The stronger you are in this area, the better people are able to understand you.

WHAT LANGUAGES ARE USED AT HOME? DO YOU HAVE ANY CONCERNS ABOUT THIS?

Binoy: At home, my wife and I speak mostly in our mother tongue, Malayalam. We also have a helper who speaks Tamil to our daughter. It's good for children to be exposed to different languages at a young age as it helps them acquire and appreciate a wider lexicon.

Joyce: My husband and I speak Mandarin and English to our three children. The children's grandparents speak mainly Mandarin to them, but their conversations may also include some Hokkien dialect and even Malay. Our children sometimes ask us to explain the meaning of an unfamiliar word. We are fine with exposing them to multiple languages.



“The environment and experiences play a contributory role in a child's readiness for language and literacy development.”

MS JOCELYN TER, 44
Principal, Queenstown Good Shepherd Kindergarten

TEACHERS, WHAT ARE SOME WAYS IN WHICH YOUR CENTRE NURTURES LANGUAGE AND LITERACY SKILLS?

Jocelyn: We have a lot of discussions and hands-on activities, and encourage children to verbally communicate their thoughts. For example, children select a story that they want to explore. The teachers then plan learning activities around the story to enable children to express themselves through words, drawings or dramatisation.

Waani: We have a language learning corner in each classroom that is equipped with spelling boards, puzzles and storybooks ranging from beginner to challenging levels. Children can also listen to stories every morning to improve their listening and verbal skills.

Jocelyn: We use different strategies based on the child's level of understanding and language use. Teachers may use hand gestures or facial expressions, coupled with simple English words, to help the child understand the task at hand. It is important to understand that every child learns and develops at a different pace. The environment and experiences play a contributory role in a child's readiness for language and literacy development.

Waani: We incorporate picture cards into our daily routine as a means of communication. I may show a picture card of a toilet bowl to a child who comes from a non-English-speaking home. I will repeat the word "toilet" as I hold up the card. Gradually, the child will learn to say the word and understand its meaning. He may progress to saying, "Teacher, I want to use the toilet." Children become more confident when they can understand and will attempt to speak more. As children come from diverse backgrounds, we need to customise our approaches to teaching language and literacy.

PARENTS, HOW DO YOU SUPPORT YOUR CHILD'S LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT?

Binoy: We take Cathlyn to the library at least once a month and we read books that have large fonts and pictures. We let



AT THEIR OWN PACE

While there is mounting pressure on parents to make their children independent readers earlier and earlier, bear in mind that each child has their own reading journey, says Dr Leher Singh, an early childhood expert from the National University of Singapore (NUS). "Reading progress can be gradual and laborious for some children, but remaining patient and supportive will help. Don't compare your child to other peers," she advises. (See more tips from Dr Singh on the opposite page.)



her watch educational videos on TV or the iPad, and read her bedtime stories featuring her favourite character, Peppa Pig. She relates them to her own experiences. For instance, if a story features Peppa Pig celebrating a birthday, Cathlyn will talk about how she celebrated her birthday and her plans for the next one.

Joyce: I play vocabulary-building games with Janelle. I might say, "What are some words associated with the sky?" Her reply could be, "Blue, aeroplane, moon, clouds." Sometimes I will say a word in Mandarin and ask her to say it in English. When Janelle plays these games together with her siblings, it makes things more fun, and motivates them to think and expand their language use.

TEACHERS, HOW CAN EDUCATORS AND PARENTS SUPPORT EACH OTHER TO BUILD CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AND LITERACY SKILLS AT HOME?

Jocelyn: When children learn sight words or letters of the alphabet in preschool, parents can extend the learning by having their child look for words on road signs, notice boards or newspapers. Point out the letters or talk about the meaning of the words. Encourage your child to talk about what they know about the words. When teachers assign a parent-child project, take time to work on it with your child by discussing ideas and researching for information together.

Waani: Parents and teachers should proudly display children's early writing attempts. Showcase your child's work on a wall display or in a portfolio. Write a label, title or caption with their help. Ask your child

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MR BINOY CHACKO, 34
Business Analyst, father of Cathlyn Sarah Binoy, 5



“Parents and teachers should proudly display children's early writing attempts.”

MS S KASTHURI WAANI, 41
Teacher, Bumble Bee Child Care Centre

to talk about their work. Having extended conversations with children will enrich their language and literacy skills.

PARENTS, HOW DO YOU WORK WITH YOUR CHILD'S TEACHERS TO ENSURE THAT THE LANGUAGE AND LITERACY ACTIVITIES IN PRESCHOOL ARE SUPPORTED AT HOME?

Binoy: Cathlyn's teachers provide daily updates on class activities through circulars, a diary and a mobile app. I also speak to them to understand what is being taught, so that I can reinforce these ideas at home.

Joyce: Janelle's preschool uses a notebook as a communication tool to share with parents what is being taught that week. If the current theme is transportation, I will sing Janelle a related song like 'Wheels on the Bus', or ask questions such as "What sort of transportation do you find in the sky?" If the topic of the week is animals, I may bring her to the zoo or sing 'We're Going to the Zoo'. By doing this, I support her learning at home.



STRATEGIES TO EXCITE CHILDREN TO READ

Dr Leher Singh, Associate Professor of Psychology at NUS who directs the NUS Infant and Child Language Centre, shares some tips to nurture a love for reading.

What matters more than *what* your child is reading is *whether* they are reading. Build motivation by getting them excited about the reading process.

- **FOLLOW THEIR INTERESTS.** Help your child browse for books and let them discover their own reading interests. Look at picture books together to start building an appreciation and love for books.
- **EMPOWER CHILDREN TO DIRECT THEIR READING EXPERIENCE.** Letting toddlers choose a book, turn the pages and point out what draws their attention makes for a wonderful learning opportunity. Let your baby turn the pages as you bring the pictures to life by reading the words.
- **GO BEYOND READING WORD BY WORD.** Picture books that label and describe images build vocabulary development. Parents of toddlers can focus on developing pre-reading skills by playing word games, such as asking children to come up with words that rhyme with "car" or "ball". Focus on fun activities that allow children to play with words and sounds.

Some children are not ready to read independently prior to age five or six. Putting undue pressure on them can backfire, leading to reading anxiety or avoidance. Remember that reading progress can be gradual and laborious for some children, but remaining patient and supportive and maintaining a positive reading environment will really help.

Dr Singh is also a member of the Ministry of Social and Family Development's Advisory Panel on Parenting (APOP). For more parenting resources on encouraging your child to read, visit www.babybonus.msf.gov.sg/parentingresources.

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MDM JOYCE ONG, 39
Accounts Executive, mother of Janelle Cheng, 4



THE WRITE WAY

ECDA FELLOW MELISSA GOH-KARSSSEN SPOTLIGHTS THE DIFFERENT STAGES OF WRITING AND SUGGESTS HOW SPACES CAN BE DESIGNED TO SPARK AN INTEREST IN WRITING.

How we respond to children's first writing attempts can either foster or dampen their motivation to write. Understanding the various stages of writing development is the first step towards encouraging positive attitudes toward writing in children.

➤ **STAGE 1: Mark-Making, Scribbling or Drawing**

At this early stage, children engage in mark-making. Have conversations with them on what the marks mean. When we discuss children's drawings with them, we will discover deep meaning and thinking behind the images they produce.

➤ **STAGE 2: Letter-like Forms and Shapes**

As children start to recognise the letters of the alphabet, they enjoy incorporating them into their writing. Once children are comfortable writing a particular letter, it will appear often in their work. Pay attention to children's comments about what they are writing.

➤ **STAGE 3: Letters**

Children become fascinated with writing 'readable' words and begin asking for the correct spelling of words. Teach children to identify the sounds that letters make instead of spelling out the word for them, for a smoother writing experience.

➤ **STAGE 4: Letters and Space**

Children begin to use writing to communicate more complex sentences, ideas and stories. They still rely heavily on listening to sounds in words, but they are also building a repertoire of basic words that they know how to read and write from memory.

DESIGN A WRITING ENVIRONMENT

Both the physical environment (design, space and arrangement) and psychosocial environment (atmosphere and aesthetics) can motivate and inspire interest in writing among young children. As educator and author Jim Greenman said, "Language should be built into the environment through the organisation of space, time and materials, and expectations of adults and children as to verbal and written communication."

Here are some strategies to enthuse children about writing:

• **Use Environmental Print**

Draw children's attention to print in the environment such as posters and signs. When children are

looking for items, point out letters and read the labels. Reading food packaging is another fun activity.

• **Supply Materials**

Make available writing tools like paintbrushes, pencils, oil pastels and crayons. You can include other items such as picture dictionaries, large sheets of paper, blank note cards with envelopes, alphabet stickers and an alphabet chart.

• **Inspire Writing**

Consider these: Are the materials presented in an inviting manner, and well-organised and labelled? Is the space calming enough so that children can focus on the task at hand without being easily distracted? Is the lighting conducive?



MS MELISSA GOH-KARSSSEN

ECDA Fellow and Acting Assistant Director, NTUC First Campus

Ms Goh-Karssen's approach is guided by the philosophy that diversity is a strength, and that relationships should be built on trust, guidance and empowerment. She aspires to influence educators to look beyond operational demands and truly connect with children to effect significant and lasting outcomes.