

## The Importance of Early Language and Literacy

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### **NMAIMH competencies addressed:**

Working With Others:

- Building and maintaining relationships
- Empathy and compassion

Reflection:

- Self-awareness
- Personal development

Direct Service Skills:

- Observation and listening

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In thinking about the overall development of a child, many of us focus on the physical, emotional, and social aspect of development and how these developmental areas will continue to look over time. As a Developmental Specialist, for example, it is the job of the professional to ensure that a young child is developing appropriately in all their areas of development. Some questions that often come to mind are how much of this child's development is affected by their environment? How much of their development is hereditary? How could these affect the child as they begin their journey as a student? In working with young children, it is appropriate to wonder how these variables could potentially have positive or negative effects on the child.

In talking about child development, one essential element that is focused on by early childhood professionals is that of early language and literacy. These help support all areas of development and will aid in developing understanding in all subject areas as they grow. "The ideas of babies and toddlers talking and reading can seem incredible. It isn't necessary to 'teach' very young children, but learn how you can begin to help your child develop their language and literacy skills" (Zero to Three, 2020).

Ellen Galinsky puts this beautifully in her book *Mind in the Making* by stating "Our words have enormous power: to wage war or bring about peace; to change an individual—or an era—for better or for worse. Yet we enter life knowing none, understanding none." (Galinsky, 2010). Even though we enter life not knowing what communication necessarily means, we are born primed to communicate with those around us. The question then comes to mind, how can parents, caregivers, etc. ensure that their child or children are getting the appropriate exposure to early language and literacy and what does that look like?

One concept that is important to keep in mind in building language and literacy is that a child is learning all of the time through everyday routines and activities. Sometimes we might think or feel that we have to sit down with an entire script or plans to "teach" a child how an object works or what a word means, when honestly they learn through simple, everyday moments. Children learn language when you talk to them and they

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attempt to communicate back to you, by hearing stories and being read to and even by listening to songs and singing. “Language development is not an end point. It’s a process that starts with the very first smiles, the very first gaze, the very first back-and-forth (connection). That turns into an opportunity for us to label words and for children to map those words together with their ideas, to understand the intents and minds of others, and to express what they want to say.” (Galinsky, 2010). Exploration through play and allowing children to look at books, magazines, newspapers, etc. helps build not only their language skills, but literacy as well. Language and literacy, while two different skills, build upon one another.

Some examples of simple language and literacy activities that can be incorporated into everyday routines may include the following: Chatting with your child as you are cooking: What are you doing with the ingredients? What are you making? Why did you choose to make that particular dish? As you are reading with your child, noticing your child’s interests and building upon them by pointing to pictures in the books and asking them questions as you are reading to them. A book creates a platform on which conversation can take place. It is also important not to worry about speech mistakes at this time; the exposure to words and pictures is the focus during this time of connection. When giving your child a bath talk to them about the importance of baths, what is happening during the bath, helping them learn body parts, why they may or may not enjoy baths and having a conversation about the reasons, etc.

As you may have noticed, these types of activities are part of a child’s typical day, with no need to find extra time. Parents and/or caregivers are the experts on their child, therefore they know what their interactions will look like every day. A focus on our daily engagement with our children will have a huge impact of their understanding of language and literacy as they grow. “Children’s individual differences in language and early literacy skills at the start of school have been attributed to the quantity and quality of language interactions with their parents and exposure to print in the home environment. Parents, therefore, play an essential part in encouraging language and literacy development, creating opportunities to engage with language and text, and reinforcing early literacy development.” (Carter, D.R., Chard, D.J. & Pool, J.L., 2009).

### **Resources from the Field:**

New Mexico Home Visiting Programs across the state are able to provide families and caregivers extra support surrounding early language and literacy development. This includes providing information from curriculums such as *Parents as Teachers* and *Partners for a Healthy Baby*, which both contain literacy components to be discussed with families, as well as activities that are offered within the curriculum that parents are able to incorporate into everyday routines with their children. Also, many, if not all programs around the state, gift picture books and other board books on a regular basis to their families, as well as offering lending libraries in the community that families have regular access to. An assessment tool that is used by home visiting programs, the ASQ-3, also provides learning activities that families can use regularly to increase literacy and language development.

One great support is the home grown, award winning Moments Together campaign that was recently launched in New Mexico by the Early Childhood Education and Care Department. Moments Together was developed to help families around the state increase their awareness and understanding of early learning, as well as provide access to educational resources. As reported in a recent Albuquerque Journal article, “A statewide TV, radio and billboard blitz is now underway to encourage parents and caregivers to visit the Moments Together website <http://momentsnm.org/> , where animated characters and videos highlight seven everyday moments that parents can take advantage of to help build toddlers’ brains. That includes playing, sharing stories, singing, talking, smiling, snuggling and dancing.” These specific tips on parent child interactions can be accessed by visiting the website and downloading *Step-by-Step With Moments Together* which is a guide for helping parents and caregivers learn all that they can do with their infant and young child to promote learning and brain development.

Another program in Sierra County actually manages a Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library for residents with children up to age 5. These types of supports can assist those with young children and may also aid in their understanding of the daily impact they have on their children’s learning.

There cannot be enough emphasis placed on the importance of early language and literacy development and how the amount of exposure to language and books can impact a child’s learning for a lifetime. Understanding that parents and/or caregivers are their children’s first teachers is a conversation that needs to continue across all entities of early childhood education. The more we involve our children in every day routines and activities, the more they will learn and understand the world around them. Benjamin Franklin said this well when he stated, “Tell me and I’ll forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I learn.”

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### Questions for Reflection:

- How can I improve my ability to help parents understand the impact early literacy and language can have on their child?
- What are some ways I can help parents involve their child more in their day to day family routines?
- How can I help parents use community resources to improve their child’s literacy and language development?

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### Resources:

Moments Together  
<https://momentsnm.org/>

New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership:  
<https://www.nmecdp.org/>

New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department:  
<https://www.nmececd.org/information-for-parents/>

United Way of Treasure Valley:  
<https://www.unitedwaytv.org/fifty-top-literacy-statistics>

Zero to Three:  
<https://www.zerotothree.org>

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## References:

Carter, D.R., Chard, D.J. & Pool, J.L. A Family Strengths Approach to Early Language and Literacy Development. *Early Childhood Educ J* **36**, 519–526 (2009). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-009-0312-5>

Galinsky, E. (2010). *Mind in the Making*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Zero to Three. (2020). Supporting Language and Literacy from 12-24 months.  
<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1285-supporting-language-and-literacy-skills-from-12-24-months>