

## on learning to read and write

**L**earning to read and write is critical to a child's success in school and later in life. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is committed not only to helping young children become literate but also to fostering their motivation to read and write for enjoyment, information, and communication. To reach these outcomes, teaching practices must be appropriate and effective for *young* children, not just adaptations of what may work in the later grades. These practices must respond to young children's changing developmental characteristics as well as to their culture, language, and individual learning needs. Teachers must be prepared to implement varied, research-based teaching methods that will help all young children gain competence in language and literacy. If these results are to be achieved, policies and resources must provide essential supports.

### What research reveals

- **Children take their first critical steps toward learning to read and write very early in life.** Literacy doesn't begin at kindergarten—or even in preschool. Babies respond to adults talking to them; 1-year-olds point to pictures in books; and 2-year-olds chant nursery rhymes. These and other first steps lay the foundations for literacy.
- **Children do not become literate automatically; careful planning and instruction are essential.** Adults—parents and teachers—must give young children the experiences they need, including exposure to books; rich conversations; experiences in drawing, pretend play, and other symbolic activities; and instruction in recognizing letters and making connections between letters and sounds. At all times, experiences should be challenging yet achievable, creating interest, engagement, and responsiveness.
- **Ongoing assessment of children's knowledge and skills helps teachers plan effective instruction.** Careful assessment helps teachers know where children are on the continuum of early literacy development, and it provides other essential insights into children's interests, strengths, and needs. This information can then help programs make better instructional decisions.
- **No one teaching method or approach is likely to be effective for all children, at all times.** Because children are diverse, the ways in which they learn best are also diverse. Good teachers make instructional decisions based on their knowledge of reading and writing, current research, appropriate expectations, and individual children's strengths and needs. Excellent instruction builds on what young children already know, and it recognizes that children have had very different prior experiences with books and with oral and written language. Programs can incorporate a focus on reading and writing into play as well as structured activities, including but not limited to direct teaching of key literacy skills.
- **As children move from preschool into kindergarten and the primary grades, instruction focused on phonemic awareness, letter recognition, segmenting words into sounds, and decoding printed text will support later reading competence.** Many factors influence whether a child becomes a competent reader, but research underscores the importance of alphabet knowledge and an understanding of connections between letters and sounds. The developmental continuum identified by research suggests that children at different ages and developmental levels need different kinds of literacy instruction, with more explicit emphasis on phonics and word analysis as they get older, but still with emphasis on obtaining meaning and enjoyment from books.
- **Children who are learning English as a second language will become literate more easily if they have a strong foundation in their home language.** Learning a second language should not mean losing the first language. In fact, early childhood programs that support children's development in their home language are, at the same time, helping children develop future proficiency in English.

## Recommendations for supportive policies and resources

For all young children to benefit from excellent early literacy experiences, adequate policies and other resources are essential. Recommendations include:

- 1. A comprehensive, consistent system of early childhood professional preparation and ongoing professional development.** Both college students and practicing teachers need to know current research about early literacy development and effective teaching practices. This literacy focus should be embedded within a systematic approach to all aspects of professional development for everyone who works with young children.
- 2. Resources to ensure small class sizes and low ratios of teachers to children.** Teachers will more effectively implement and individualize the recommendations from literacy research if they can work with smaller groups of children.
- 3. Extensive literacy resources, including high-quality children's books, educational software, and other technology tools.** Responding to young children's varied developmental levels, interests, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds requires rich literacy resources—in classrooms but also in libraries and other places where children and families spend time.
- 4. Resources to support continuous progress for children who are having, or are at risk of developing, difficulties in learning to read and write.** For some children, individualized intervention strategies, which may include

### To Learn More

- Bennett-Armistead, V.S., N.K. Duke, & A.M. Moses. 2005. *Literacy and the youngest learner: Best practices for educators of children from birth to 5*. New York: Scholastic. [Available from NAEYC: [www.naeyc.org/store](http://www.naeyc.org/store).]
- Roskos, K.A., P.O. Tabors, & L.A. Lenhart. 2009. *Oral language and early literacy in preschool*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- IRA (International Reading Association). 2004. *Preschool Literacy Collection* (five books). Newark, DE: Author. [These and other resources are available from the International Reading Association: [www.reading.org](http://www.reading.org).]
- NAEYC position statements such as *Screening and assessment of young English language learners* and *Early childhood curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation*, available online at [www.naeyc.org/positionstatements](http://www.naeyc.org/positionstatements).
- Neuman, S.B., C. Copple, & S. Bredekamp. 2000. *Learning to read and write: Developmentally appropriate practices for young children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. [Also available in Spanish.]
- Dickinson, D.K., & S.B. Neuman, eds. 2005. *Handbook of early literacy research. Volume 2*. New York: Guilford.
- Tabors, P.O. 2008. *One child, two languages: A guide for early childhood educators of children learning English as a second language*. 2d ed. Baltimore: Brookes.

### From Infancy through Third Grade: Phases in Children's Development of Reading and Writing

- Phase 1:** Awareness and exploration (infancy through preschool)
- Phase 2:** Experimental reading and writing (kindergarten)
- Phase 3:** Early reading and writing (grade 1)
- Phase 4:** Transitional reading and writing (grade 2)
- Phase 5:** Independent and productive reading and writing (grade 3)

*Note:* Grade levels are approximate. Many children function at higher or lower developmental levels than their grade would predict, requiring that early childhood programs be prepared to differentiate and individualize instruction.

- high-quality tutoring, intensive focused instruction, or other approaches, will accelerate progress toward literacy.
- 5. Policies that promote appropriate assessment strategies.** In assessment of young children's reading and writing skills, policies should avoid reliance on group-administered, multiple-choice, standardized achievement tests in favor of more comprehensive assessments and responsive teaching, with special attention to appropriate assessment of young English language learners.
  - 6. Access to regular, ongoing health care for every child.** Healthy children are better able to benefit from good teaching, yet many children and families lack access to appropriate health care. Early screening for hearing problems may prevent language delays; similarly, if vision problems are identified and corrected, children may have fewer reading difficulties.

- 7. Increased public investment in high-quality early education.** Children's ability to become successful readers and writers is enhanced by investments in early education, especially for children who are at greatest risk of school failure. Expanded and affordable access must go hand in hand with enhanced quality.

The joint position statement "Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children" is available online at [www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/learning\\_readwrite](http://www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/learning_readwrite)

where we STAND  
naeyc and ira