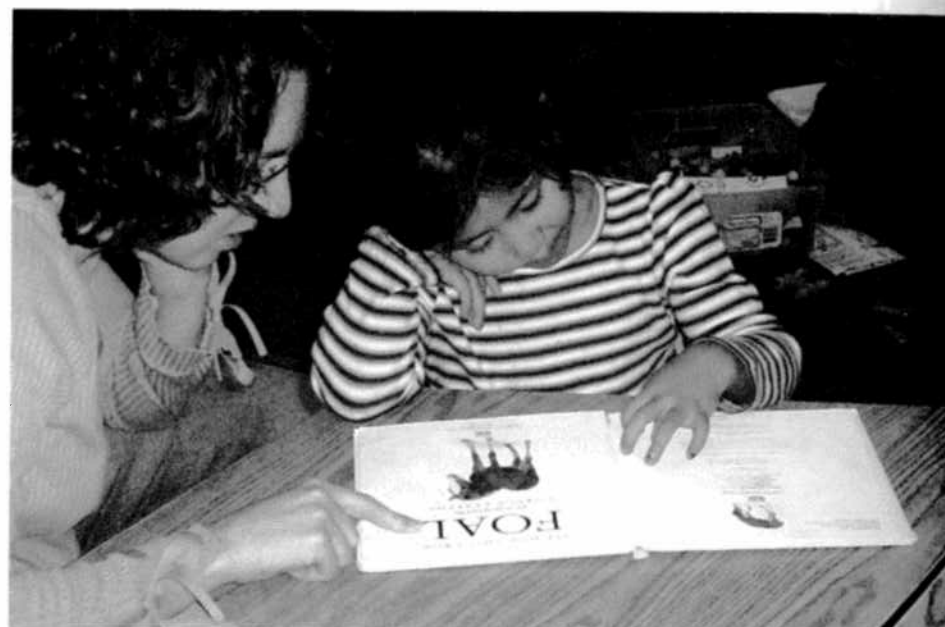


# Let's Read Together: Tools for Early Literacy Development for All Young Children

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Four-and-a-half-year-old Dex and his father, Samuel, live in a small town in the Midwest. Samuel has a factory job and works as a dishwasher at a restaurant to earn extra money for household expenses. Samuel, however, is functionally illiterate. He is able to complete most daily living activities requiring reading but has difficulty with text above a fourth-grade level and writing notes and letters beyond short

paragraphs. Samuel tries to read to his son every night, but his work schedule and limited literacy skills often interfere. Dex attends a prekindergarten program in his local public school. Ms. Wang, his teacher, notes that Dex displays an interest in print but is able to identify only a few letters by name and even fewer by their corresponding sound. Ms. Wang incorporates a variety

of literacy activities including repeated book reading, skits, art extensions, cooking activities, and writing projects related to book characters and themes into the daily routines and activities for all of her students. Ms. Wang notes Dex's progress but feels he needs additional instruction to increase his phonological and print awareness to better prepare him for his upcoming transition to kindergarten.

Early literacy development is the gateway to reading and future academic success. Learning about sound-letter correspondence and basic decoding strategies are but two fundamental skills that have been found to support this later success (International Reading Association, 2004). In addition, an emphasis on environmental print (e.g., McDonald's, Wal-Mart, Shell) and functional print (e.g., men/women bathroom designations, lunch menu, labels on classroom materials) assists children in recognizing uses of print and encourages literacy in familiar environments (Xu & Rutledge, 2003). Repeated book reading and shared book experiences including reading, writing, and arts-related activities (e.g., music and movement, painting) are also avenues for young children to acquire print and literacy skills (Bobys, 2000; Isbell, 2002; Petersen, 2000). Yet some young children require more intensive approaches to facilitate their literacy development. These approaches are often reflective of a direct approach to instruction with prepared materials, massed opportunities for practice, and specific feedback strategies (e.g., Goodman & Lynch, 2002; Nelson, Benner, & Gonzalez, 2003).

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the skills included in effective early literacy development activities, an example of an empirically validated early literacy intervention program, and several options for supporting families' involvement in literacy development efforts for all young children. This information is intended to assist practitioners working with preschoolers and primary children with and without disabilities as well as family members and other caregivers.

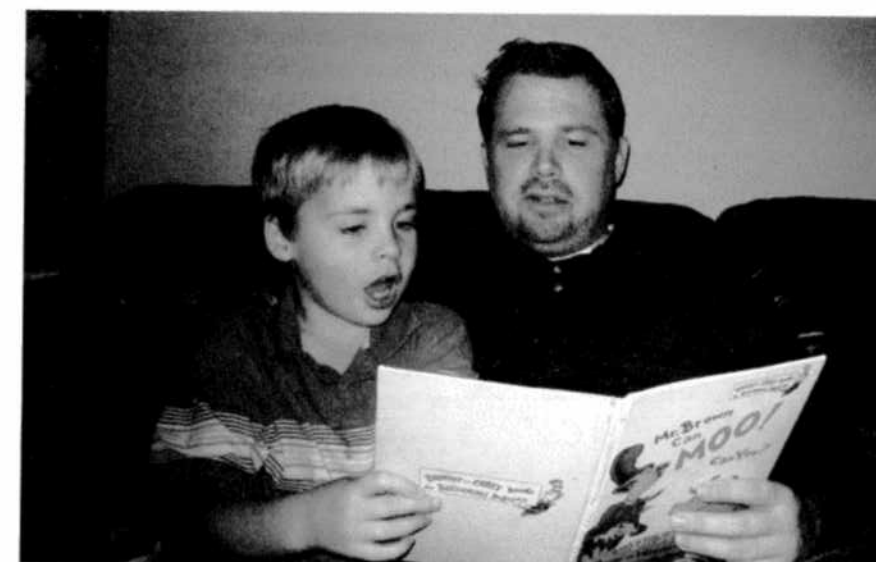
*Early literacy development is the gateway to reading and future academic success.*

## Overview of Effective Early Literacy Activities

A young child's understanding of letter sounds and patterns is the foundation for successful reading (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000; Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003). Furthermore, effective early literacy programs help children master the five early literacy skills that are pivotal to fully benefiting from beginning reading programs offered in kindergarten and the primary grades. The skills include (a) listening, (b) conventions, (c) phonological awareness, (d) phonemic awareness, and (e) serial processing.

## General Early Literacy Concepts

Researchers have emphasized that early reading instruction positively affects a child's long-term success with finding meaning in print materials (e.g., Hammill, 2004; Nelson et al., 2003; Torgesen, 2000). For example, Torgesen (2000) calls attention to children with limited skill in letter-sound correspondence and the relationship to the problems these children have processing the phonological aspects of language. It is also important to examine a child's cognitive skills and verbal abilities as an indicator of future reading success. Hammill (2004) provides a perspective on the



Selection of a literacy program should depend on three factors: (a) current academic and behavioral skills the child possesses, (b) teaching experience of the individual providing instruction, and (c) ease of implementation.



need to address print awareness along with phoneme-letter association and knowledge of the alphabet. These skills are especially critical for young children with limited exposure to literacy materials as well as those experiencing problems with establishing the foundational skills for reading. In addition, rapid naming, a process of quickly naming letters, pictures, or objects by making connections between visual and language-based properties, is necessary for reading at all age levels but is especially critical for young children (Nelson et al., 2003).

Samuel has also approached Ms. Wang about additional literacy activities to work on with his son. She told him to continue reading to Dex and pointing out environmental print as well as working on /h/, /u/, and /l/. She also told Samuel about monthly reading events at the local public library.

#### Components of Effective Literacy Programs

The National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) found that effective literacy programs teach children phonemic and phonological awareness, including fluency skills and target comprehension skills, in a structured and systematic sequence. Programs offering carefully sequenced lessons with the above components aid in teaching these critical literacy skills and improving the early reading skills of young children (Nelson, Stage, & Epstein, 2005). Although many early literacy programs are available, teachers and parents are encouraged to investigate available programs and assess whether a particular program they learn of or is being used by colleagues would help meet the specific literacy needs of the young children with whom they work. Selection of a literacy program should depend on three factors: (a) current academic and behavioral skills the child possesses, (b) teaching experience of the individual providing instruction, and (c) ease of implementation. A partial list of early literacy programs is provided in Table 1 to help begin such an investigation.

Returning to our opening vignette, we note that Ms. Wang is interested in learning additional methods to enhance literacy instruction in her classroom. Recently, the prekindergarten administrator purchased *Ladders to Literacy* (Notari-Syverson, O'Connor, & Vadasy, 1998) for use with all the children in the classroom. Ms. Wang has found these activities useful but also would like to know of other individualized literacy programs for children such as Dex. She has spoken with her colleagues at other prekindergarten sites in the area and has learned that several teachers in the next county are implementing the *Stepping Stones to Literacy* (Nelson, Cooper, & Gonzalez, 2004) program with individual children, and one teacher has started to incorporate the lessons into her daily activities. Ms. Wang is interested in finding out more about *Stepping Stones to Literacy*. So let's join Ms. Wang in learning more about a literacy program to make an informed selection.

#### Investigating a Program

*Stepping Stones to Literacy* (Nelson et al., 2004) is an empirically validated early literacy intervention program composed of lessons aimed at teaching foundational skills as identified and described by the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). *Stepping Stones to Literacy* (Nelson et al., 2004) is composed of twenty-five 10- to 20-minute daily lessons. The scope and sequence of *Stepping Stones to Literacy* focuses on



Table 1  
Selected Early Literacy Programs

Early Literacy Programs	Publisher Web Site
Edmark Reading Program Print Level 1 (Riverdeep Products)	www.riverdeep.net
Ladders to Literacy: Preschool Edition (Notari-Syverson, O'Connor, & Vadasy, 1998)	www.pbrookes.com
Paths to Achieve Literacy Success (Mathes, Allor, Torgesen, & Allen, 2001)	www.sopriswest.com
Sounds and Symbols Early Reading Program (Goodman & Lynch, 2002)	www.agsnet.com
Stepping Stones to Literacy (Nelson, Cooper, & Gonzalez, 2004)	www.sopriswest.com

acquisition of early literacy skills, moving from developing listening skills requiring identification of sounds in isolation to mastering the ability to manipulate initial, medial, and final phonemes to make new words. Each lesson consists of four to six brief instructional activities following a consistent instructional format designed for mastery learning. In a flipbook format, instructional prompts are presented on one side, and corresponding instructional activities or prompts for the child are presented on the opposite side. The format and presentation of the lessons increases the ease and accuracy with which instructors are able to deliver the *Stepping Stones to Literacy* lessons.

*Stepping Stones to Literacy* can be delivered in a one-to-one or small-group format. Small-group formats are most effective with children

who display mild deficits in early literacy skills (Nelson et al., 2004). A one-to-one instructional format is best for young children requiring more intensive instruction, such as children displaying severe deficits in literacy development, displaying behavioral problems, or identified with preexisting conditions affecting learning (e.g., developmental delay, behavioral disorder). In this way, the instructor can provide additional support through the use of supplementary examples, vary the level of task demands, and offer additional praise and immediate corrective feedback. A list of the skill areas and corresponding instructional activities for *Stepping Stones to Literacy* is provided in *Table 2*.

Whether presented in a one-to-one or small-group format, *Stepping Stones to Literacy* lessons follow a three-step procedure. *Figure 1* provides a graphic representation of the three steps. First, the teacher demonstrates the skill through use of the flipbook and verbal model. Then, the teacher and child practice the skill together multiple times. Finally, the child demonstrates the skill independently. It must be noted that *Stepping to Stones to Literacy* (Nelson et al., 2004) is a relatively new curriculum. As such, the research cited here addressing its effectiveness with young children is based only on work of the curriculum's developers. Additional study of its effectiveness is under way.

Armed with information on the *Stepping Stones to Literacy* (Nelson et al., 2004) program that she has gathered by talking with colleagues

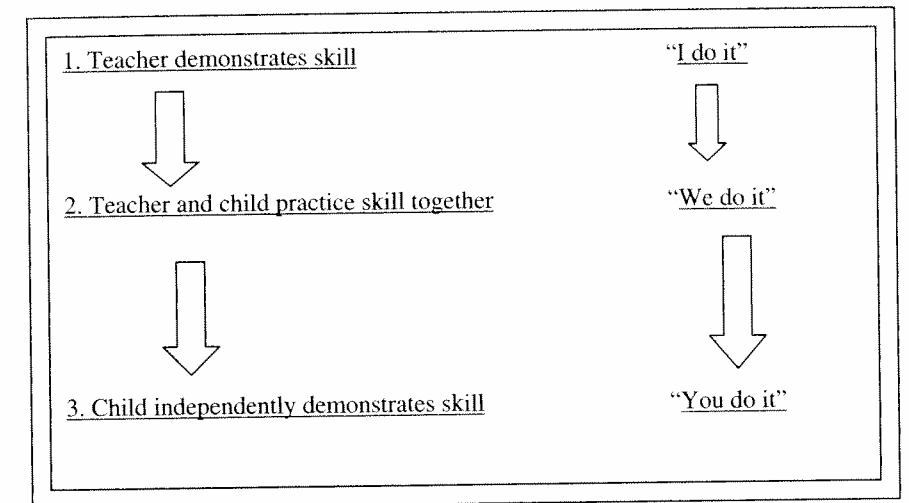
and reading a variety of professional resources (see *Table 3* for suggested list of resources), Ms. Wang is ready to implement it in her classroom. However, particularly given Samuel's expressed interest in working with his son, Dex, Ms. Wang establishes procedures for supporting family involvement in literacy development of their young children.

#### Supporting Family Involvement

In addition to the focus on phonological awareness and instruction, a number of additional literacy-related skills are necessary for young children, including print-rich home and program environments and family participation in all aspects of literacy development (e.g., Neuman et al., 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Practitioners and researchers in the early childhood field have developed strategies and methods to address these recommendations. For example, DeThorne and Watkins (2001) provide techniques to increase vocabulary such as offering sophisticated words and overdoing it with repetition. The authors stress that "limited vocabulary skills . . . place them at risk in key areas of development such as peer relations and reading achievement" (p. 38).

Dex is nearing the end of his last prekindergarten year. He has shown improvement in all areas of his development, most notably in his literacy skills. He recognizes letter names and sounds, words, names,

Figure 1  
Instructional procedures for *Stepping Stones to Literacy*



and phrases in his classroom environment and is beginning to read several of the books Ms. Wang has used in reading activities throughout the year. Dex's father has been a big support to his son and continues to provide him with a variety of literacy-based materials. Ms. Wang has sent home sample materials and instructions from both the *Ladders to Literacy* (Notari-Syverson et al., 1998) and *Stepping Stones to Literacy* (Nelson et al., 2004) programs for Samuel to use with Dex. He has been able to work on some of these activities when he doesn't have to work at the restaurant on Monday and Tuesday evenings.

Family involvement offers an additional means to support the learning outcomes from programs

Table 2  
**Stepping Stones to Literacy (Nelson et al., 2004) Skill Areas and Instructional Activities**

Skill Area	Instructional Activities
Listening	Sounds in isolation; sound relationships; sounds in sequence; sound expectations; omit a sound
Conventions	Sentence recognition; sentence generation; letter names; letter name practice; letter name cumulative review
Phonological awareness	Rhyme identification; rhyme generation; word segmentation; syllable blending; onset-rhyme blending
Phonemic awareness	Phoneme deletion; initial, final, and medial phoneme change; phoneme segmentation; phoneme identification

Families have many natural contexts in which to create opportunities for practicing skills related to (a) early phonemic awareness tasks, (b) learning new and more complex vocabulary, and (c) heightening motivation to read.

such as *Stepping Stones to Literacy* (Nelson et al., 2004). Torgesen (2000, 2005) stresses that family members often have the best opportunity to support their children's development of literacy skills that will help them be successful readers in school. In particular, families have many natural contexts in which to create opportunities for practicing skills related to (a) early phonemic awareness tasks, (b) learning new and more complex vocabulary, and (c) heightening motivation to read. Parents, siblings, and other family members offer young children many chances for literacy development through daily activities such as

shared book reading, awareness of environmental print during community outings, and modeling a variety of literacy skills (e.g., writing letters, reading electronic mail).

Shared literacy experiences can foster parent-child interpersonal skill development. A number of widely implemented home intervention programs such as Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPI, n.d. and Parents as Teachers, PAT, 2005) offer parents lessons and materials to prepare young children for kindergarten with an emphasis on literacy activities. The literacy skills addressed include phonological and phonemic awareness, letter recognition, and book knowledge (e.g., reading from left to right, identifying front and back book covers). Another approach is the Even Start Family Literacy program (Even Start, n.d.). Even Start is a national program focusing on literacy experiences for at-risk families with children from birth to age 7. Literacy development is one component of the program, which also includes adult education and parenting education.

Increasingly, early childhood teachers encourage parents to take advantage of opportunities to read to their children and/or complete literacy activities at home, with promising results demonstrated in the research (e.g., Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Rebello Britto, 2001). Interactions rich in vocabulary and text-based experiences offer young children opportunities to build both language and literacy skills critical to their future success. School and

program involvement approaches, including literacy events (e.g., family reading night), distribution of books for short-term use or for a family's home library, and skill development in all developmental areas, accentuate practice and reinforcement for young children, allowing them to acquire and generalize critical literacy skills (Wolery, 2000). Recommendations have been made regarding specific behaviors parents should model for their children during shared reading experiences. For example, Ezell and Justice (2000) recommend the following behaviors: (a) ask questions about print, (b) make comments about print, (c) pose requests about print, (d) point to print when talking about the story, and (e) track the print when reading. Importantly, these behaviors can be adjusted to the young child's language skills and attention span. For example, a more advanced 4-year-old can provide more comments about print, whereas a parent or caregiver can assist a 3-year-old with a language-delay track print.

Dex has completed his kindergarten year. His teacher, Mr. Marks, has implemented activities from *Ladders to Literacy: A Kindergarten Activity Book* (O'Connor, Notari-Syverson, & Vadasy, 2005). The reading specialist also works with Dex twice a week individually using a combination of decoding and text-based exercises. Dex is also part of a small group that meets with the reading specialist during classroom reading time on Thursday mornings.

In addition to classroom instruction and reading opportunities during the school day, Dex and Samuel have attended family reading night events and have gone to their local library to attend programs and check out books at least twice a month. In addition, the National Center for Family Literacy has recently established an after-school program at Dex's school. Mr. Marks and several other teachers, as well as parents and community volunteers, manage the day-to-day operations of the program. Dex attends the after-school program three afternoons per week. Dex continues to make gains in his comprehension level and has developed an interest in writing. With assistance from Mr. Marks, Dex and his father keep a journal of stories and events about their daily lives.

### Conclusion

Phonological awareness and literacy-rich environments coupled with family involvement in literacy experiences can provide all young children with the tools to become life-long readers and learners. With these key components in place, young children can gain the necessary skills to become competent and confident in the critical areas of reading and writing. As Neuman and colleagues (2000) noted, "The picture that emerges from research in these first years of children's reading and writing

Phonological awareness and literacy-rich environments coupled with family involvement in literacy experiences can provide all young children with the tools to become life-long readers and learners.

Table 3

#### Additional Early Literacy Resources

Armbruster, B. B., Lehr, F., & Osborn, J. (2003). *A child becomes a reader: Birth through preschool*. Jessup, MD: National Institute for Literacy.

Armbruster, B. B., Lehr, F., & Osborn, J. (2003). *Put reading first: The research building blocks for teaching children to read* (2nd ed.). Jessup, MD: National Institute for Literacy.

Even Start. <http://www.evenstart.org/default.htm>

Get Ready to Read. <http://www.getreadytoread.org/>

Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPI). <http://www.hippyusa.org/Model/curriculum.html>

National Center for Family Literacy. <http://www.familit.org/>

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction: Reports of the subgroups* (NIH Publication No. 00-4754). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

is one that emphasizes wide exposure to print and to developing concepts about its forms and functions" (p. 9). Programs such as *Stepping Stones to Literacy* (Nelson et al., 2004) and the family literacy activities outlined here offer meaningful and developmentally appropriate literacy experiences for the youngest learners. Program staff, administrators, and families should facilitate all children's participation in these programs. Through continuing literacy opportunities, young children can acquire the skills necessary to be successful readers in home and school settings beyond the early childhood years.

#### Note

You may reach Deborah Bruns by e-mail at [dabrun@stiu.edu](mailto:dabrun@stiu.edu).

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