

# Infant and Toddler LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

## Issue Brief



*“You became a reader because you saw and heard someone you admired enjoying the experience, someone led you to the world of books even before you could read, let you taste the magic of stories, took you to the library, and allowed you to stay up later at night to read in bed.”<sup>1</sup>*



### Why is Early Literacy Important?

Children develop key early literacy skills during the first five years of life. These skills prepare them to learn and succeed when they enter kindergarten. Additionally, in first grade, when children typically learn to read, they will have greater success if they have been exposed to books and early literacy skills beginning at infancy. Language, reading and writing skills develop at the same time, and are intimately linked. These skills develop in real life settings through positive interactions with literacy materials and other people.

### How Can We Best Support Infant and Toddler Literacy and Language Development

For babies and toddlers, early literacy and language development presents in various ways. Parents have instinctively known for years that talking to babies in a sing-song, higher pitched voice can get a baby to take notice. Science now supports this common wisdom, along with other time honored ways that parents instinctively encourage language and literacy development in their children<sup>2</sup>. Infant - toddler cognitive development is developed within relationships. We, as humans, are relational learners, and for babies, this is even more heightened. Reading to very young children is a powerful way to build emotional attachment and influence a child's cognitive development.

Reading to children is the one early childhood experience identified as making a difference in later success in school. As children are read to, they acquire an enormous amount of information about reading and the world of books. They learn what books are, what you do with them, and how you talk about them. Reading to infants and toddlers builds the foundations for understanding features of written languages such as that the black marks on the page are letters and words, and



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that print is read in a direction. Gradually, children learn that print has a fixed meaning. And, they come to expect that books will be appealing, challenging, and comforting.<sup>3</sup>

## Best Practices for Promoting Infant Toddler Literacy

Many of the ways to best promote infant toddler literacy are equally accomplished at home, in a child care setting, in a home visitation program, or in community institutions. Listed below are some ideas that can work in every part of a child's world:

**TALK TO CHILDREN, EVEN THE YOUNGEST BABIES.** Hearing language means learning language, even for our very youngest children. Ensure that books are visible and accessible to young children.

**ENCOURAGE INFANTS AND TODDLERS TO EXPLORE BOOKS FREELY.** Children learn by fully exploring the materials presented to them. This means that a six month old may need to taste the book, a one year old may need to spread all the books across the floor. Older toddlers request the same "favorite" story over and over (and over) again and may enjoy acting out the story or creating a different plot.

**USE BOOKS AS TOOLS TO HELP WITH TRANSITIONS.** Having books in the car, or reading a book at the

beginning and/or the end of your time together when with a very young child are all ways to assure an easier transition and instill a love of reading.

**MAKE READING PART OF A CHILD'S ROUTINE.** Traditionally, reading at bedtime creates a consistent routine to reduce stress, and is the building block for a future love of books.

**LOOK FOR BOOKS THAT HAVE BRIGHT COLORS,** sharp contrasts between the picture and the page, rhythmic writing, and plots that are simple but engaging. As children grow, look for books (like "lift the flap" books) that capitalize upon their growing intellectual and motor skills.

**POINT OUT THE WRITTEN WORD IN PLACES OTHER THAN BOOKS.**

**ALLOW OLDER TODDLERS TO BEGIN EXPLORING WRITING INSTRUMENTS** (pens, markers and crayons). Provide them with other toys and activities (e.g., pouring water) that develop the hand-eye coordination and fine motor skill necessary for writing.

**MAKE BOOKS!** Making books that are relevant to a child's life, such as books with pictures of family members or of different parts of his neighborhood all contribute to strengthening the learning connections for young children.<sup>4</sup>



## Maine Programs That Work

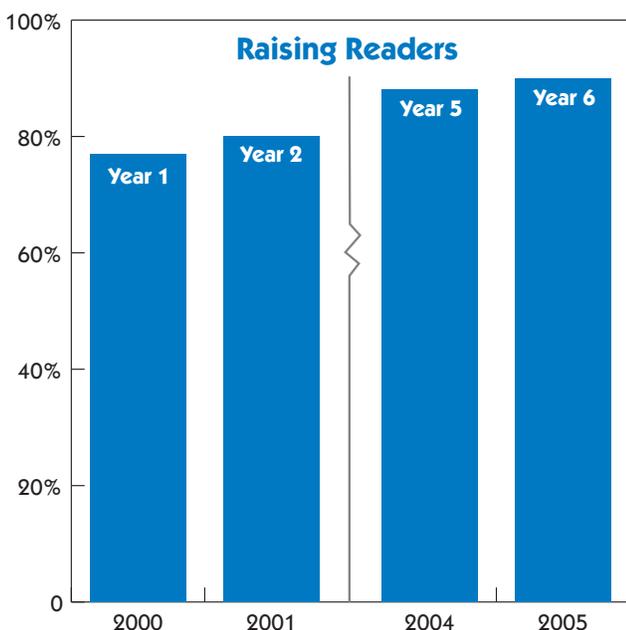
According to the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (National Institute for Health 2006), children who are read to at least three times a week, demonstrate significantly higher overall reading knowledge and skills in the spring of kindergarten and the spring of first grade compared to children who do not have these experiences. The National Survey of Children's Health (2005) found that Maine had the second highest percentage (64%) of children who were read to every day in the past week. There are a number of programs contributing to Maine's success in this regard. Highlights of three very successful efforts are cited below:

### Raising Readers

The child's health care provider can play an important role in educating parents about the importance of reading aloud to children and its positive effect it has on developing early literacy skills. The Raising Readers Program, funded by the Libra Foundation, provides books to all Maine babies at birth and subsequently, through the age of five, at regular well-child check-ups. In 2007, healthcare providers distributed over 175,000 books at well-child visits, reaching over 74,000 individual Maine children.

Since 2000, the rate of Maine families reading at least once per week to their child has continuously risen, which infers that Raising Readers had a contributing role. (Data from Maine Marks for Children, Families and Communities Survey 2006).

Maine Families Reading to Their Child at Least Once a Week



Source: Maine Marks for Children, Families and Communities Survey, 2006

### Even Start

The LEAP (Literacy Education at Parkside) Family Literacy Project is a federally funded Even Start program. It supports 15 to 20 immigrant families (from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sudan, Puerto Rico, Iraq, Guatemala) with children ages 3 – 5 in the Parkside neighborhood of Portland. In partnership with PROP Head Start, LEAP provides educational support services for families in the four components of family literacy:

**ADULT EDUCATION** Parents attend ESOL classes provided by Portland Adult Education at the Parkside Community Center.

**EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION** Children aged 3-5 attend Head Start. LEAP provides child care for children under 3 at a nearby church while their mothers attend class.

**PARENT TIME** Parents learn about child development and how they can help their children prepare to succeed in U.S. schools.

**INTERACTIVE LITERACY ACTIVITIES (ILA)** Parents work with their children in the classroom and learn how to support literacy and language development at home.

When compared with a classroom of similar diversity, the Head Start classroom with Even Start showed striking differences. In comparison to the Head Start class without Even Start support, attendance was 17.2% higher, participation in adult education classes was 71% higher, and the number of families participating in Family Goal Setting was 11% higher.

In one year, Even Start children made remarkable gains in receptive and expressive language. Tested with the standardized Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test of receptive oral English, the average gain was 88 points. On the Expressive Vocabulary Test the average gain was 33 points. An expected yearly gain for both of these tests is 4 points. Many of these children began the program too low to score but, with the support of their teachers and parents, they made tremendous gains over the year.<sup>5</sup>

### Born to Read

Born to Read, a program of the Maine Humanities Council, serves two distinct audiences: children, birth through age five, and the professionals who provide care for these children. The program goal is to ensure that Maine children under five receive a read-aloud experience daily. To that aim, Born to Read holds training sessions, seminars, and confer-

ences for early childhood educators, volunteer readers in child care programs, and others who work closely with young children. Born to Read's programs put great emphasis on preparing children not just for school but for a tradition of lifelong learning.

	2006	2007
<b>Providers Reached</b>	568	694
<b>Children Reached</b>	Over 5,000	Almost 7,000
<b>Towns Reached</b>	274	261
<b>Books Given Away</b>	5,624	7,348 <sup>6</sup>

### Summary

Although Maine has one of the highest rates in the nation for children being read to every day (64%), increasing the rate should be a priority. Brain development in the first three years of life lays the foundation for all our future cognitive efforts. Supporting early literacy programs, such as the three highlighted above, improves school readiness in young children.

A more prepared child finds more success in school, as literacy is a foundational skill that all future learning builds upon. A deficiency in literacy skills can lead to poor grades, grade retention and disengagement from school, all of which are precursors to a student's decision to drop out of school. Increasing literacy rates in young students, by investing in early literacy programs, may eventually increase graduation rates from Maine high schools, an outcome with far-reaching effects, as high school graduates earn higher salaries than drop outs. Investing in early literacy is an investment in the future of the individual child as well as an investment in increasing the minimum education level of the state.



### FACT

Children who were read to frequently are nearly twice as likely as other children to show three or more skills associated with emerging literacy.

Source:  
 Nord, C.W., Lennon, J., Liu, B., and Chandler, K. (1999).  
 Home literacy activities and signs of children's emerging literacy 1993 and 1999 (NCES No. 2000-026). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

- 1 Trelease, J. *The Read Aloud Handbook (6th Edition)*. Penguin Publishing: 2006
- 2 Shonkoff, J. and Phillips, D., Editors; Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, Board on Children, Youth, and Families, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, National Academies Press 2000
- 3 Brooks McLane, J. and Dowley McNamee, G. "The Beginnings of Literacy." *Zero to Three Journal*: September 1991
- 4 Adapted from *Zero to Three: Tips on Encouraging Infant-Toddler Literacy in Your Program: resources for professionals* (Internet).
- 5 LEAP Even Start Program Evaluation, conducted by Educational Skills, Inc. 2007.
- 6 *Born To Read Annual Report, 2007*.