

# Early literacy

## Promote children's early language and communication skills

Early Years Learning Framework | All outcomes



This guide is one in the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s Tried and Tested series on evidence-informed teaching practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings that make a difference. Educators and teachers can use these guides to reflect on their practice and inform their planning for future instruction.

For this guide, AERO has synthesised the most rigorous and relevant evidence-based practices from meta-analyses, systematic reviews and literature reviews. AERO has rated these sources of information against its [Standards of Evidence](#), focusing on evidence generated in an Australian context where possible.

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) defines **literacy** as 'the capacity, confidence and disposition to use language in all its forms'. It can include talking, listening, viewing, reading, writing, music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media and drama. Children develop a wide range of literacy skills in the early years, from infancy through to the start of school, which form the foundation for reading, writing and communicating. Early literacy approaches aim to promote the development of these foundational skills.

Early childhood educators and teachers play an essential role in providing opportunities for children to learn early literacy concepts. The EYLF encourages early childhood educators and teachers to support positive attitudes in relation to language and literacy, as well as knowledge and skills. As all the EYLF outcomes are interconnected, early literacy also helps children to develop a strong sense of identity, wellbeing, and be connected and contribute to their world. When children use language (verbal and non-verbal), they can express who they are, create connections with others and start to influence the world around them. Fostering early literacy is therefore an important part of developing the whole child, and improving wellbeing and belonging.

This guide lists evidence-based practices for promoting early literacy in ECEC settings. Some of the examples offered may not apply in all contexts and/or may be more suitable for particular learners or age groups.

1. **Incorporate literacy into every aspect of your program.** This means making the most of moments throughout the day to support learners' skills and interest in literacy.

- Oral language skills are the foundation for literacy, so simply talking with children is a highly effective strategy. Engage in back-and-forth conversations with learners, modelling language use, and asking questions about their experiences or current activity that encourage them to think and express their ideas<sup>1,2</sup> (for example, 'I really want to know more about this – can you tell me more?').
- Create language-rich environments that help learners develop a love of language from infancy.<sup>3</sup> As well as talking with children, fill the learning environment with books, visual representations of print, writing materials and literacy props. Help children explore these resources, posing questions to develop and extend their thinking.<sup>4</sup>
- Play provides a wonderful opportunity for children to talk to each other and develop their early language and literacy skills.<sup>5</sup> Notice opportunities to extend children's learning during imaginative play – for example, if learners are stuck in their play not knowing what to do next, you can

extend their thinking by helping to create pretend scenarios or problems for children to solve ('What if we did...?'), or encourage them to see different uses for familiar props ('What if we used this...?').

- Encourage families to read books to their child and engage their child in conversations at home.<sup>6</sup> Seek to understand families' language backgrounds and how they use language in their lives. Children's first languages are valuable resources for their literacy development, so explore ways to incorporate them into your program.

## 2. **Balance child-initiated activities with teacher-led early literacy opportunities.** Plan activities that allow you to extend on children's learning, either in groups or in individual interactions with learners.

- Experiment with opportunities to plan activities that support learners' language development. For example, engage learners in storytelling and shared reading activities.<sup>7</sup> When reading a story, have conversations with learners about features of stories, relating them to learners' own experiences, and enacting stories through play.
- Support learners' vocabulary by repeating and defining new words (for example, words that you read in a book), talking with children about the words, using props to illustrate word meanings and providing extension activities to further explore a new word.<sup>8</sup>
- Support learners' decoding skills by using activities that combine a focus on alphabet knowledge (letter names and sounds – for example, 'This is the letter B – it makes the sound /b./') and phonological awareness.<sup>9</sup> For example, you can show learners picture cards with different animals (bear, dog, bat) and help them to recognise which ones have the same first sound and identify the letter that makes the sound.<sup>10</sup> Singing and rhyming activities also help children to notice the sounds in words. Use phrases like 'Snug as a bug in a rug' or make up rhymes about things you're doing.

## 3. **Be a learner yourself.** Develop your knowledge of early literacy to support learners' development and keep track of their progress.

- Understand how learners develop early literacy skills and the developmental trajectories of these skills in early childhood, from infancy through to school. This content knowledge will allow you to scaffold learners' literacy development effectively.<sup>11, 12</sup>
- Know how to assess what learners know and can do, and use this information to reflect on each child's learning and make sure your interactions with learners are closely linked to their abilities and needs.<sup>13</sup> A range of techniques can be used to gather information about learners' language and literacy skills, including observing children's interactions and play, talking with children and formative assessment.
- Work with your educational leader to identify priorities for professional learning about early literacy, and seek support on how to learn, apply and reflect on your early literacy practices.<sup>14</sup> Structured professional development is most effective for learning specific teaching strategies, which can then be adapted and incorporated into child-centred programs.<sup>15, 16</sup>



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To provide feedback on this guide or view further information, including full references and additional resources, visit [AERO's website](https://aero.edu.au).

- 1 Pullen & Justice, 2003
- 2 Whorral & Cabell, 2016
- 3 Hall et al., 2015
- 4 Piasta, 2016
- 5 Hall et al., 2015
- 6 Sénéchal & Young, 2008
- 7 Pesco & Gagne, 2017
- 8 Wasik et al., 2016
- 9 Piasta & Wagner, 2010
- 10 Piasta, 2016
- 11 Cunningham et al., 2009
- 12 Campbell, 2018
- 13 Dunphy, 2010
- 14 Elek & Page, 2019
- 15 Ciesielski & Creaghead, 2020
- 16 Markussen-Brown et al., 2017



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September 2021 | 140624.CH.AA.V2