



## The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program



# Becoming literate

## Setting the scene

The *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009, p. 38) uses a broad definition of literacy that includes children learning to express themselves and communicate through a range of forms and symbols:

*Literacy is the capacity, confidence and disposition to use language in all its forms.*

*Literacy incorporates a range of modes of communication including music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media and drama, as well as talking, listening, viewing, reading and writing.*

The EYLF (p. 46) defines 'texts' as '... things that we read, view and listen to and that we create in order to share meaning'. Traditionally 'texts' has referred to books, magazines and advertising material and to film and TV. But internet-based texts have made our literacy world 'multi-modal':

*Contemporary texts include electronic and print-based media.*



## The foundations of literacy

The EYLF explains that literacy develops from birth as humans strive to express feelings, exchange thoughts and connect with others through gestures, sounds and language.

From infancy, children use sound, gesture and body language to communicate their needs and feelings. As Julie Campbell notes in her book *Everyday learning about talking* (Campbell, 2005, pp. 3–5):

*We know all the words, but babies show us what they're interested in. They 'lead' the conversation by pointing or holding out something for us to see.*

In early childhood settings, we are aware of how amazing babies and toddlers are at communicating. And we know that caring, responsive interactions are vital for children's wellbeing and language learning.

Julie goes on to explain that oral language or 'talk' sets the scene for literacy:

*In the first two years, before children are talking a great deal, they are listening and learning about what language is and what language does ... At about six months, babies begin to 'tune in' to the sounds of the family language. The sounds they make will become more and more like the sounds they hear in the talk around them.*

This early learning is the beginning of a child's awareness of sound and adults and siblings support this by singing songs, jingles and rhymes as they change, wash and feed the baby—*Round and round the garden, like a teddy bear ...*

As children grow and develop, adults continue to play with sounds, drawing children's attention to patterns of repeated letters and words and making up rhymes containing a child's name:

*Penny, Penny in the tub  
The butcher, the baker,  
the candlestick maker  
They all began to scrub.*

As Christine Topfer (2007, p. 4) explains: 'Playing with rhymes helps children learn about sounds. It is an important part of tuning a child's ear to the rhythms and sound patterns of language.'

As children learn more words, they take turns in a conversation and begin telling stories:

*I know what happened! Nana Jen was talking and she fell over my pink trike and tumbled over and over.*

As they become proficient in oral language, children begin to learn polite forms of language and how to show empathy and concern:

*Maria not here today; she sick. Did mummy tell you? I pick a flower for Maria.*

Knowing the right form of words to use in different situations is a high-level skill that enables children to 'switch' from everyday talk to language that works at school and in the broader society (Lakoff, 2000).

That's why Denise, at Yarrabah Pre-Prep helps Aboriginal children to know when it's best to use 'Yarrie Lingo' and when it's best to use 'Miglo' or standard Australian English. They want their children to grow up strong in culture and strong in the skills that underpin success at school.



Bella sat at the table set up with letter magnets and magnetic boards. She said to Danna “I want to write my family’s names”. Bella sticks letters on magnetic board to spell Bella, Montanna, Mum and Dad. Bella said to Danna “I want to write Zander’s, I can’t spell his name, I know it has an A in it”. Danna spelt Zanders name, as she did Bella found the letters and placed them on the magnetic board.

## Using symbols

As Leonie, Felicity and Marina suggest in their Research in Practice Series book *Stars are made of glass: Children as capable and confident communicators* (Arthur, McArdle & Paptic, 2010, p. 2):

*The arts (music, dance, drama, visual arts and media) provide powerful ways to communicate. Sometimes, the arts can be used to express when words are not available, or are inadequate.*

Balaclava Rd Children’s Centre makes a feature of music and movement and children in the Nursery (0–2 years) explore sounds with keyboards, drums, ukulele, bells and dancing to music. The centre also provides a wonderful range of visual arts materials for babies and toddlers to experiment with, including leaves to rub, paint to squish around with fingers and wet chalk to smear.

Young children in early learning settings often use arts forms and materials to express and communicate complex ideas and feelings for which they don’t yet have the word vocabulary.

*A four-year-old Asian boy at a kinder, for example, created rich, expressive paintings for six months when he first arrived. The educator knew he was listening, engaging with the language and events around him and picking up the nuances of ‘the way things are said around here.’*

Puppetry, role play and dramatic play are vehicles through which young children reflect on, represent and communicate their experiences.

Anne Stonehouse in her forthcoming Research in Practice Series book (Stonehouse, in press, 2011) gives a lovely example of Cedric, who is 19 months old, ‘comforting’ his soft toy dog Woof when he feels sad because his grandmother is leaving for the day:

*Cedric takes a tea towel from the oven door, walks to a chair, places Woof gently on it, pats him and places the tea towel carefully over him. ‘Woof sleep, feed fish now.’*

Cedric is using ‘dramatic play’ to deal with his feelings. He is probably comforting his toy because he feels the need to be consoled.

His educator notices:

- his ability to manage his feelings—resilience (Outcomes 1 and 3)
- his capacity for gentleness and care—empathy (Outcome 2)
- his ability to create an imaginative story—creative symbol making (Outcome 4)
- his increasing power over words—developing verbal language (Outcome 5).



## Towards writing

Making marks in various ways—in the sand, on paper, in chalk on concrete—teaches children that signs and symbols communicate meaning; drawing and scribbling lead to writing. Over time, children learn that writing is a particular kind of symbol system that carries a message from one place and one person to another.

Sharon, at her Family Day Care in Brisbane, provides a ‘language book’ for each child. The books contain a few digital photos at first, which adults talk about with the children. ‘The idea is that stimulating pictures of themselves will encourage children to recount the events and experiences behind the images’. Adults scribe children’s stories and children draw or write ‘comments’ which inspire further discussion as the book expands over the year.

As children grow and develop in stimulating literacy environments, they begin to associate sounds with letters of the alphabet. This ‘alphabetic principle’ is very important for learning to read, write and spell, but the relationship is complex in English, because a letter often represents more than one sound. For example, ‘a’ is used for one sound in ‘cat’, another in ‘came’ and a different sound in ‘car’.

As children become familiar with print in the environment—in magazines, posters and catalogues, and on shop signs, buses and public buildings—we talk about words which have the same letters. Often, their own name has special significance and children notice the starting letter of their own and their friends’ names. We help them to ‘do different kinds of writing’—making lists, writing invitations and thank you cards, composing messages and emails, signing in and signing out for activity centres and making purposeful signs and labels.



## You can't have too many stories

'Learning to read' is a big topic for another e-Newsletter, but the foundations of reading lie in story—recounting stories from our own experience, retelling traditional tales and making up stories.

From infancy, we read and tell stories to children; stories about them and their family, stories about where we're going and where we've been; stories about what will happen next ... and we introduce them to the wonderful world of 'book stories'.

Sharing books is beginning to learn to read, whether the adult is with a child in the home, or with a group of children in an early learning setting.

In the preschool room at a setting in South Australia, educators plan a range of 'book experiences' over the course of the day:

Small group experiences offer opportunities to focus on early literacy skills such as concepts about print and how stories are made, playing with rhyme and alliteration to develop phonological awareness, connecting what happens in a story with their own experience and following the pattern and sequence of the narrative. At the end of the day, we share 'big book time' with the whole group, purely for the pleasure of the story and to enjoy being together before we go home.

## Literacy in the EYLF Outcomes

Literacy is most evident in Learning Outcome 5: 'Children are effective communicators'—which includes: verbal and non-verbal interaction; engaging with texts to make meaning; expressing ideas ... using a range of media; beginning to understand how symbols and pattern systems work; and using ICTs.

However, other Outcomes also contribute significantly to children becoming literate:

**In Outcome 1**—Children have a strong sense of identity—for example (pp. 21–23), children: 'communicate their needs', 'openly express their feelings and ideas', 'initiate interactions and conversations' and 'use their home language to construct meaning' and 'explore different points of view through dramatic play'.

**In Outcome 2**—Children are connected with and contribute to their world—(p. 28) they: 'begin to understand and evaluate ways in which texts construct identities and create stereotypes'.

**In Outcome 3**—Children have a strong sense of wellbeing—(p. 31) they: 'experience and share personal successes ... in their home languages or standard Australian English'; and (p. 32) 'respond through movement to traditional and contemporary music, dance and storytelling'.

**And, in Outcome 4**—Children are confident and involved learners—(p. 37) 'children explore ideas and theories using imagination, creativity and play' and 'use ICTs to investigate and problem solve'.



## Conclusion

Literacy learning takes a lifetime and we continue to gather more pleasure and understanding as we encounter more texts, more conversations and more cultural and arts experiences.

What is important is that we are set on a positive path from the beginning so that we expect to gain control and power and competence. We can only do that if more experienced learners—parents, carers and educators—inspire, encourage and extend us.

Literacy learning does not 'begin at school'; it begins at birth. Caring families foster and applaud children's early achievements and early childhood educators complement and enhance this important learning which underpins school and life success.

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A voice for young children

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