



How to Use this Guide

In this chapter:

- Readers of this *Guide*
- Topics Addressed in the *Guide*
- Using the *Guide* for a Variety of Tasks

On the Road to Reading: A Guide for Community Partners addresses the essential knowledge and skills needed to support the America Reads Challenge or to implement any literacy development program for children from preschool through grade three. The *Guide* introduces a range of topics of interest to individuals who want to contribute to initiatives that promote children's reading:

- how children become readers;
- teaching and tutoring strategies that promote reading and literacy development;
- the important role of families as children's first and primary educators; and
- building community partnerships to support literacy.

The basic information provided in *On the Road to Reading* will help community partners get started in their literacy efforts. Readers can learn more about reading and literacy through Web sites, books, journals, audiovisual materials, and public and private organizations that focus on helping young children become engaged readers. Many of these resources are listed in Appendix B, Resources for Tutoring Programs, and Appendix C, Organizations that Support Literacy.

This chapter covers the following topics:

- readers of this *Guide*;
- topics addressed in the *Guide*; and
- using the *Guide* for a variety of tasks.

We ought to commit ourselves as a country to say by the year 2000, 8-year-olds in America will be able to pick up an appropriate book and say, 'I read this all by myself.'

President Bill Clinton, Fresno, California, September 12, 1996

Readers of this Guide

On the Road to Reading is directed to community projects that support the America Reads Challenge goal—that all children read well and independently by the end of the third grade. Users include AmeriCorps members, Senior Corps volunteers, VISTA volunteers, national service participants, work-study college students, and other tutors and reading helpers; administrators and teachers in child care, Head Start, and other preschool programs; school administrators, reading specialists, and teachers in kindergarten through grade three; administrators and staff in before- and after-school programs (programs focused on “out-of-school” hours); family literacy program organizers and participants; and other individuals and community groups that support children’s literacy development.

SPOTLIGHT ON TUTORING

Why Are Tutoring Programs Needed?

- Four out of 10 children in kindergarten through grade three are at-risk in terms of literacy development. Forty percent of the nation’s fourth graders scored below the basic level on the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress.
- The majority of children who are at-risk respond to tutoring and other interventions.
- While fewer than one out of four children with reading difficulties have learning disabilities, 80 percent of the children who are diagnosed with learning disabilities have a disability that affects their reading skills.
- Interventions typically do not take place before age 9 or 10, after a child has experienced at least two years of failure in reading. By this age the stage is set for failure and it is extremely difficult for children to recover lost ground.

What Do Children Gain from Tutoring?

- Children with average reading skills are encouraged to progress to the next level.
- Children whose reading skills are below those of their peers receive individualized attention to address identified problems and gaps in development.
- Supplementing classroom resources allows teachers to give all children in the class more attention so everyone benefits.
- Children learn at home as well as in tutoring settings because tutors recognize parents as their children’s first and primary teachers and encourage them to support their children’s reading skills and enhance their own literacy development.
- Children can maintain their reading skills during the summer months.
- Children who are out of school for extended periods of time due to illness or other circumstances can maintain and increase their reading skills.

Topics Addressed in the Guide

Every reader has a way of getting to know a new publication. Some readers will skim it front to back; others will turn to topics of interest or those relevant to their role. After this introduction, there are five additional chapters, each of which addresses a specific topic, and four appendices. Readers can use the chart that follows to learn what topics are addressed in *On the Road to Reading*.

On the Road to Reading: A Guide for Community Partners

CHAPTER	KEY TOPICS
1: How to Use This Guide	Readers of this Guide Topics Addressed in the Guide Using the Guide for a Variety of Tasks
2: How Most Children Learn to Read	Child development in the early years The effects of brain development on literacy development Emerging literacy How children become readers and writers
3: How Tutors Can Support Young Readers	What it means to read and write; what readers and writers can do Steps to follow in preparing for the first tutoring session Tutoring strategies appropriate for preschool and primary years Conditions of learning that support literacy development Scaffolding techniques for tutoring sessions Motivating children to read Tutoring strategies for preschool and kindergarten Tutoring strategies for the primary grades
4: Involving Families in Tutoring Programs	Including family involvement in the design of the tutoring program How tutors can establish partnerships with families Family literacy programs for children and parents Reaching families through reading-related events Sponsoring a book discussion series for adult family members
5: Building Community Partnerships	The America Reads Challenge Collaborating with work-study programs Summaries and contact information about a variety of programs that support children's literacy development

On the Road to Reading: A Guide for Community Partners

CHAPTER	KEY TOPICS
6: Developing a Tutoring Program	<p>Eight steps to develop a tutoring program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the need • Define the mission • Set goals and objectives • Create tutoring program partnerships • Design the program • Select or adapt a reading curriculum • Provide support for tutors • Implement the plan <p>Characteristics of effective tutoring programs</p>
Appendix A: Glossary	Definitions of terms related to reading and literacy development
Appendix B: Resources for Tutoring Programs	Publications, web sites, and sources of free or inexpensive children's books
Appendix C: Organizations that Support Literacy	Contact information and descriptions of services offered by organizations that support literacy

Using the Guide for a Variety of Tasks

Readers can use *On the Road to Reading* as a general reference guide for promoting children's reading and as a resource for carrying out a wide range of tasks related to planning and implementing literacy development programs. The following chart offers a few examples of how to use different sections of the *Guide* to address specific needs.

As readers become familiar with the contents of the *Guide*, they will find many ways to use the information, checklists, and examples to carry out a variety of tasks.

Using On the Road to Reading

TASK

Review and select an emerging literacy approach or a reading curriculum

Offer a workshop for tutors on using scaffolding techniques with preschool children

Offer a workshop for families on reading with their children

Write a program handbook for tutors

Develop a new tutoring program

Prepare to serve as a tutor for a child in first grade

RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE GUIDE

Chapter 2: Read Emerging Literacy and How Children Become Readers and Writers.

Chapter 2: Observe children in a child care or Head Start program or elementary school (kindergarten through grade three); compare observation notes to Emerging Literacy Explorations or Becoming Readers and Writers.

Chapter 6: Read Step 6. Select or Adapt a Reading Curriculum.

Chapter 2: Read and discuss the information in the sections on How Young Children Develop, Brain Development, and Emerging Literacy.

Chapter 3: Read and use the information on scaffolding techniques to plan an activity that allows tutors to build this skill.

Chapter 2: Use the chart Emerging Literacy Explorations as a handout and to discuss scaffolding.

Chapter 3: Use the Checklist for Reading Aloud as a planning tool.

Chapter 4: Provide copies of TIPS FOR FAMILIES, Reading Aloud With Your Child, and TIPS FOR FAMILIES, Help Your Child Become a Reader.

Chapter 6: To get started, review the example of the contents of a tutoring handbook, under Step 7, Provide Support for Tutors.

Chapters 3 and 4: Use relevant information about effective tutoring strategies and creating partnerships with families.

Appendix B: Glossary: Include terms tutors need to know.

Read the entire Guide.

Chapter 6: Review the eight steps in the planning process for developing a tutoring program.

Chapter 5: Review Examples of Reading and Tutoring Programs and contact programs with a similar focus to learn about successful strategies.

Appendix B: Resources for Tutoring Programs and Appendix C: Organizations that Support Literacy: Access resources to learn more about literacy-related topics.

Chapter 2: Read the whole chapter, noting sections most relevant to supporting a child in the first-grade.

Chapter 3: Read Setting the Stage for Success. Follow the steps listed in Prepare for the First Tutoring Session.

Chapter 3: Read Tutoring Strategies for the Primary Grades.

Chapter 4: Read Establishing a Partnership with Each Family.

Appendix B: Resources for Tutoring Programs: Visit the web sites.

2

In this chapter:

- How Young Children Develop
- Understanding Brain Development
- Emerging Literacy
- Becoming Readers and Writers

How Most Children Learn to Read

Literacy development programs should be based on an understanding of child development, recent research on brain development, and the natural, ongoing process through which most young children acquire language skills and become readers and writers. Successful programs to promote children's reading and literacy development should build on this foundation.

This chapter covers the following topics:

- how young children develop—an overview of child development;
- understanding brain development—the importance of the early years;
- emerging literacy—how children make their own language discoveries; and
- becoming readers and writers—how children build on their early literacy skills to become readers and writers.

Between the ages of four and nine, your child will have to master some 100 phonics rules, learn to recognize 3,000 words with just a glance, and develop a comfortable reading speed approaching 100 words a minute. He must learn to combine words on the page with a half-dozen squiggles called punctuation into something—a voice or image in his mind—that gives back meaning.

*Paul Kropp,
Raising a Reader, Make Your Child a Reader for Life, 1996*

How Young Children Develop¹

As young children grow, mature, and acquire new skills they go through specific stages of development in four areas: physical, cognitive and language, social, and emotional. *Physical development* includes gaining control over the small muscles used to pick up and hold things and building the large muscles used to walk or throw a ball. *Cognitive and language development* includes the thinking and reasoning skills used to solve problems and the acquisition of language. *Social development* involves learning to develop relationships and get along with other children and adults. *Emotional development* is closely tied to social development and leads to a sense of identity and self-esteem.



Most children follow the same pattern of development.

Children tend to follow the same sequence and pattern of development. For example, most children crawl before they walk, play alone before playing with others, and think all animals with similar features are the same before noticing the differences that make a dog a dog, and a cow a cow. However, each child develops according to an individual time clock that is set at his or her own pace for gaining new skills.



The four areas of development are interrelated—development in one area is affected by the others.

Because child development is dynamic in nature, it is nearly impossible to consider one area of development at a time. For example, when a child paints a picture he uses physical skills to hold the brush and control where the paint goes on the paper. Cognitive skills allow him to solve problems such as how to keep the paint from dripping or how to create a new color. He uses social skills to ask a friend to help him hang the picture. His pride in the finished picture helps him feel competent—a feeling that supports emotional development.

Language skills are central to cognitive development. Children use their thinking skills to make sense of language and use their language skills to talk about their activities. Language skills are also closely tied to social and emotional development. Children use language skills to play, make friends, express feelings, and develop ties to family members and others.



Children use listening and speaking skills as they learn to read and write.

Children first learn to listen and speak, then use these and other skills to explore reading and writing. Like child development in general, language development is interrelated. Children who have many opportunities to listen and speak tend to become skilled readers and writers. Children who can put their ideas in writing become better readers. Children who are read to often, learn to love reading and become better listeners, speakers, and writers.

Understanding Brain Development²

Parents, teachers, and others who closely observe children have long recognized the importance of the early years. They know that talking with and responding to babies is the best way to promote security and encourage healthy development. By taking advantage of new technologies—including brain scans—scientists can now see how and when the brain works. Recent research provides proof that a child's interactions and experiences in the first few years of life have a large impact on social, emotional, intellectual, and language development.

Babies are born with 100 billion brain cells, called neurons, virtually all of the brain cells they will ever have. The neurons are not yet connected into networks as they will be when the brain is mature. As babies respond to experiences in their world of home, family, and caregivers, their brain cells form networks that give them the capacity to think and learn. Connections are made as brain cells send signals to and receive input from each other. A single cell can connect with

as many as 15,000 other cells. The resulting network of connections is called the brain's wiring or circuitry.

Interactions and Experiences That Stimulate Brain Development

Brain development occurs around the clock, when babies are with their parents and when they are cared for by others. Every important caregiver—relative, neighbor, child care provider—has an impact on the baby's brain development. As babies respond to these actions, their brains develop connections. Touch is particularly important to babies' development. Holding and stroking a baby stimulates the brain to release the hormones that allow for growth. Each time the baby experiences new things to look at, hear, taste, smell, touch, and feel, new connections are formed.

Shortly after birth a baby's brain produces trillions more connections between neurons than it can possibly use. By age three, the child's brain has formed 1,000 trillion connections—twice as many as in an adult brain. Beginning at about age 10, the child's brain begins getting rid of the extra connections and gradually creates a more powerful and efficient circuitry. The brain permanently retains the connections that are used repeatedly in the early years and eliminates connections that are seldom or never used. For example, children who are seldom spoken to or read to in the early years tend to have difficulty mastering language skills because their brains eliminate the unused connections used for this type of learning.

How the Brain Creates Learning Windows

Neurons send their signals through axons—the lines that form electrical connections with other cells. Many of the axons are wrapped with cells which form myelin sheaths. The sheaths insulate the axon, allowing it to send a signal 100 times faster than if it did not have the sheath. Newborns have very few myelinated axons, which explains why they don't see well or have good motor coordination. Without the myelin sheath, their neurons don't work fast enough and can't coordinate well.

Myelination is the key to understanding *learning windows*—the times in a child's development when a particular kind of learning is most easily acquired. Different regions of the child's brain become myelinated at different ages. The brain knows which areas to myelinate first—which kind of learning needs to occur before another.

The region in the brain for language production is called Broca's area. When this area becomes myelinated children develop speech and grammar. Wernicke's area—the center of language comprehension—is myelinated six months before



When parents coo, sing, talk, read, and laugh with their babies they are encouraging brain development.



The brain permanently retains the connections that are used repeatedly in the early years and eliminates ones that are seldom or never used.

Broca's area even starts to develop. The brain makes it possible for a child to understand language before he or she produces it.



A child can still learn a language skill after the window has closed, however, it will be more difficult.

Some language learning windows remain open throughout our lives. For example, we continue adding new words to our vocabularies into adulthood. Some language windows close quite early in a child's life. For example, the window for acquiring syntax may close as early as 5 or 6 years of age. Children can still learn the language skill after the window has closed; however, it will be a more difficult process. This reinforces the importance of encouraging children's learning in the early years. Some young children have not received the experiences and interactions that stimulate the natural development of language skills. Effective teaching, coupled with a responsive tutoring program implemented by well-trained tutors, can help these children gain the foundation needed to become readers and writers.

Emerging Literacy



Emerging literacy is the gradual, ongoing process of learning language that begins in infancy.

Emerging literacy describes the gradual, ongoing process of learning to understand and use language that begins at birth and continues through the early childhood years (i.e., through age eight). During this period children first learn to use oral forms of language—listening and speaking—and then begin to explore and make sense of written forms—reading and writing.

Emerging literacy begins in infancy as a parent lifts a baby, looks into her eyes, and speaks softly to her. It's hard to believe that this casual, spontaneous activity is leading to the development of language skills. But, this pleasant interaction helps the baby learn about the give and take of conversation and the pleasures of communicating with other people. Young children continue to develop listening and speaking skills as they communicate their needs and desires through sounds and gestures, babble to themselves and others, say their first words, and rapidly add new words to their spoken vocabularies.



Our brains are designed to attach meanings to sounds, analyze grammar, and produce sentences.

Most children who have been surrounded by language from birth are fluent speakers by age three, regardless of intelligence, and without conscious effort. Each of the 6,000 languages in the world uses a different assortment of phonemes—the distinctive sounds used to form words. When adults hear another language, they may not notice the differences in phonemes not used in their own language. Babies are born with the ability to distinguish these differences. Their babbles include many more sounds than those used in their home language. At about 6 to 10 months, babies begin to ignore the phonemes not used in their home language. They babble only the sounds made by the people who talk with them most often.

During their first year, babies hear speech as a series of distinct, but meaningless words. By age 1, most children begin linking words to meaning. They understand the names used to label familiar objects, body parts, animals, and people. Children at this stage simplify the process of learning these labels by making three basic assumptions:

- 1 Labels (words) refer to a whole object, not parts or qualities (“Flopsy” is a beloved toy, not its head or color).
- 2 Labels refer to classes of things rather than individual items (“Doggie” is the word for all four-legged animals).
- 3 Anything that has a name can only have one name (for now, “Daddy” is “Daddy,” and not a “man” or “Jake”).

As children develop their language skills, they give up these assumptions and learn new words and meanings.

From this point on, children develop language skills rapidly. Here is a typical sequence:

- At about 18 months, children add new words to their vocabulary at the astounding rate of one every 2 hours.
- By age 2, most children have 1 to 2,000 words and combine two words to form simple sentences—“Go out.” “All gone.”
- Between 24 to 30 months, children speak in longer sentences.
- From 30 to 36 months children begin following the rules for expressing tense and number and use words such as “some,” “would,” and “who.”

At the same time as they are gaining listening and speaking skills, young children are learning about reading and writing. At home and in child care, Head Start, or school, they listen to favorite stories and retell them on their own, play with alphabet blocks, point out the logo on a sign for a favorite restaurant, draw pictures, scribble and write letters and words, and watch as adults read and write for pleasure and to get jobs done.

Young children make numerous language discoveries as they play, explore, and interact with others. Language skills are primary avenues for cognitive development because they allow children to talk about their experiences and discoveries. Children learn the words used to describe concepts such as up and down, and words that let them talk about past and future events.



Children learn about reading and writing as they play and learn at home and in child care, Head Start, or school.

Many play experiences support children's emerging literacy skills. Sorting, matching, classifying, and sequencing materials such as beads, a box of buttons, or a set of colored cubes, contribute to children's emerging literacy skills. Rolling playdough and doing fingerplays help children strengthen and improve the coordination of the small muscles in their hands and fingers. They use these muscles to control writing tools such as crayons, markers, and brushes. As their language skills grow, young children tell stories, identify printed words such as their names, write their names on paintings and creations, and incorporate writing in their make-believe play. After listening to a story they talk about the people, feelings, places, things, and events in the book and compare them to their own experiences.



Children learn about writing by seeing how print is used, watching adults write, and doing their own writing.

Reading and writing skills develop together. Children learn about writing by seeing how the print in their homes, classrooms, and communities provides information. They watch and learn as adults write—to make a list, correspond with a friend, or do a crossword puzzle. They also learn from doing their own writing.

Children pass through stages as they develop the physical and thinking skills used in writing. **Early scribbling**, the first stage, takes place when a child first encounters crayons and paper, grasps the crayon in her fist, and makes random marks on paper. She is likely to be more interested in the physical experience of scribbling than in the products of her efforts. At the next stage, **controlled scribbling**, the same child discovers that she can control the marks she makes with a crayon. Increases in her small muscle skills and eye-hand coordination and her ability to think before acting allow her to explore different techniques and colors.



Children pass through several stages as they move from scribbling to writing letters and words.

Children pass through several more writing stages during the preschool years. A child in the **basic forms** stage can look at his scribbles and see rectangles, squares, and circles. His physical skills are developed enough so that he can repeat the actions that led to forming these shapes. At this stage, a child might also engage in **scribble writing**—horizontal, linear scribbles that go across a page as if they were actual words. Scribble writing does not look like actual words, but it does look like the writing system the child has seen adults use. In this stage, the child might also come to understand that drawing and writing are different. He may draw a picture then use scribble writing on a different part of the page. The **pictorial stage** begins when a child can combine marks and basic forms to make pictures and letters that look like real things. In this stage, children understand that pictures and words are symbols.

The following chart, Emerging Literacy Explorations, offers examples of activities preschool and kindergarten children engage in and describes how they are related to reading and writing.

Emerging Literacy Explorations

WHAT CHILDREN MIGHT DO

Make a pattern with objects such as buttons, beads, small colored cubes.

Listen to a story, then talk with their families, teachers, or tutors and each other about the plot, characters, what might happen next, and what they liked about the book.

Play a matching game such as concentration or picture bingo.

Move to music while following directions such as, put your hands up, down, in front, in back, to the left, to the right. Now wiggle all over.

Recite rhyming poems introduced by a parent, teacher or tutor and make up new rhymes on their own.

Make signs for the “grocery store.”

Retell a favorite story to another child or a stuffed animal.

Use invented spelling to write a grocery list at the same time as a parent is writing his or her own list.

Sign their names (with a scribble, a drawing, some of the letters, or “correctly”) on an attendance chart, painting or letter.

HOW IT RELATES TO READING AND WRITING

By putting things in a certain order, children gain an understanding of sequence. This will help them discover that the letters in words must go in a certain order.

Children enjoy read-aloud sessions. They learn that books can introduce people, places, and ideas and describe familiar experiences. Listening and talking helps children build their vocabularies. They have fun while learning basic literacy concepts such as: print is spoken words written down, print carries meaning, and we read from left to right, from the top to the bottom of a page, and from the front to the back of a book.

Seeing that some things are exactly the same, leads children to the understanding that the letters in words must be written in the same order every time to carry meaning.

Children gain an understanding of concepts such as up/down, front/back, left/right and add these words to their vocabularies. Understanding these concepts leads to knowledge of how words are read and written on a page.

Children become aware of phonemes—the smallest units of sounds that make up words. This awareness leads to reading and writing success.

Children practice using print to provide information—in this case the price of different foods.

Children gain confidence in their ability to learn to read. They practice telling the story in the order it was read to them—from the beginning to the middle to the end.

Children use writing to share information with others. By watching an adult write, they are introduced to the conventions of writing. Using invented spelling encourages phonemic awareness.

Children are learning that their names represent them and other words represent objects, emotions, actions, and so on. They see that writing serves a purpose—to let their teacher know they have arrived, to show others their art work, or to tell someone who sent a letter.

KEY FEATURES OF A CHILD CARE OR HEAD START LITERACY ENVIRONMENT

Reading Center

LOCATION

- Near the writing center and listening center
- In an area defined by low shelves and walls
- Away from distractions
- In a spot with good lighting
- In a space large enough to hold four children at a time

FURNISHINGS

- Comfortable seating such as rocking chairs and large pillows
- Carpet or area rug

DECORATIONS

- Posters and displays related to books
- Pictures and signs made by the children
- Photographs of children and adults reading books
- Interesting things to look at and talk about (e.g., a nautilus shell)

DRAMATIC PLAY PROPS

- Puppets
- Stuffed animals
- Felt board and pieces
- Items related to familiar books

BOOKS AND RELATED ITEMS

- Books displayed at eye-level on racks or low, open shelves with covers facing out
- A variety of books (2 per child in the class)
 - different genre (storybooks, concept books, poetry, and so on)
 - books that a teacher or tutor read aloud to the children
 - books that have not been read aloud
- Children's magazines

Writing Center

- Child-sized table and chairs
- Writing tools (crayons, pencils, washable markers) children can use to explore writing
- Paper of different sizes, colors, and shapes

Listening Center

- Tape player with earphones
- Books on tape (purchased or made by staff and families) in resealable plastic bags
- Blank tapes (for children to make their own recordings)

Adapted from Derry Koralek for Aspen Systems Corporation, *Emerging Literacy: Linking Social Competence and Learning* (Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services, Head Start Bureau, in press).

Becoming Readers and Writers

By the time most children leave the preschool years and enter kindergarten, they have learned a lot about language. For five years they have watched, listened to, and interacted with adults and other children. They have played, explored, and made discoveries at home and in child development settings such as Head Start and child care.

Beginning or during *kindergarten*, most children have naturally developed language skills and knowledge. Children³

- **Know print carries meaning by:**
 - turning pages in a storybook to find out what happens next
 - “writing” (scribbling or using invented spelling) to communicate a message
 - using the language and voice of stories when narrating their stories
 - dictating stories.
- **Know what written language looks like by:**
 - recognizing that words are combinations of letters
 - identifying specific letters in unfamiliar words
 - writing with “mock” letters or writing that includes features of real letters.
- **Can identify and name letters of the alphabet by:**
 - saying the alphabet
 - pointing out letters of the alphabet in their own names and in written texts.
- **Know that letters are associated with sounds by:**
 - finger pointing while reading or being read to
 - spelling words phonetically, relating letters to the sounds they hear in the word.
- **Know the sounds that letters make by:**
 - naming all the objects in a room that begin with the same letter
 - pointing to words in a text that begin with the same letter
 - picking out words that rhyme
 - trying to sound out new or unfamiliar words while reading out loud
 - representing words in writing by their first sound (e.g., writing “d” to represent the word “dog”).

- **Know using words can serve various purposes by:**
 - pointing to signs for specific places, such as a play area, a restaurant, or a store
 - writing for different purposes, such as writing a (pretend) grocery list, writing a thank-you letter, or writing a menu for play.
- **Know how books work by:**
 - holding the book right side up
 - turning pages one at a time
 - reading from left to right and top to bottom
 - beginning reading at the front and moving sequentially to the back.



Effective readers and writers can recognize letters and words, follow rules for writing, and use routine skills and thinking to create meaning.

Because children have been learning language since birth, most are ready to move to the next step—***mastering conventional reading and writing***. To become effective readers and writers children need to:

- recognize the written symbols—letters and words—used in reading and writing;
- write letters and form words by following conventional rules;
- use routine skills and thinking and reasoning abilities to create meaning while reading and writing.

The **written symbols** we use to read and write are the 26 upper and lower case letters of the alphabet.

The **conventional rules** governing how to write letters and form words include writing letters so they face in the correct direction, using upper and lower case versions, spelling words correctly, and putting spaces between words.

Routine skills refer to the things readers do automatically, without stopping to think about what to do. We pause when we see a comma or period, recognize high-frequency sight words, and use what we already know to understand what we read.

One of the critical routine skills is ***phonemic awareness***—the ability to associate specific sounds with specific letters and letter combinations. Research has shown that phonemic awareness is the best predictor of early reading skills.⁴ Phonemes, the smallest units of sounds, form syllables and words are made up of syllables. Children who understand that spoken language is made up of discrete sounds—phonemes and syllables—find it easier to learn to read.

Many children develop phonemic awareness naturally, over time. Simple activities such as frequent readings of familiar and favorite stories, poems, and rhymes can help children develop phonemic awareness. Other children may need to take part in activities designed to build this basic skill.

Thinking and reasoning abilities help children figure out how to read and write unfamiliar words. A child might use the meaning of a previous word or phrase, look at a familiar prefix or suffix, or recall how to pronounce a letter combination that appeared in another word.

By the time most children have completed the *first and second grades*, they have naturally developed the following language skills and knowledge. Children:⁵

- **Improve their comprehension** while reading a variety of simple texts by:
 - thinking about what they already know
 - creating and changing mental pictures
 - making, confirming, and revising predictions
 - rereading when confused.
- **Apply word-analysis skills** while reading by:
 - using phonics and simple context clues to figure out unknown words
 - using word parts (e.g., root words, prefixes, suffixes, similar words) to figure out unfamiliar words.
- **Understand elements of literature** (e.g., author, main character, setting) by:
 - coming to a conclusion about events, characters, and settings in stories
 - comparing settings, characters, and events in different stories
 - explaining reasons for characters acting the way they do in stories.
- **Understand the characteristics of various simple genres** (e.g., fables, realistic fiction, folk tales, poetry, and humorous stories) by:
 - explaining the differences among simple genres
 - writing stories that contain the characteristics of a selected genre.
- **Use correct and appropriate conventions of language** when responding to written text by:
 - spelling common high-frequency words correctly
 - using capital letters, commas, and end punctuation correctly
 - writing legibly in print and/or cursive
 - using appropriate and varied word choice
 - using complete sentences.



Children need help to develop phonemic awareness, the best predictor of early reading skills.

The following chart, *Becoming Readers and Writers*, offers examples of activities children engage in and describes how they are related to reading and writing.

Becoming Readers and Writers

WHAT CHILDREN MIGHT DO

Discuss the rules for an upcoming field trip, watch their teacher write them on a large sheet of paper, and join in when she reads the rules aloud.

Look in a book to find the answer to a question.

Read and reread a book independently for several days after the teacher reads it aloud to the class.

Read some words easily without stopping to decode them.

Read words they have never seen before.

Use new words while talking and writing.

Recognize their own spelling mistakes and ask for help to make corrections.

Ask questions about what they read.

Choose to read during free time at home, at school, and in out-of-school programs.

HOW IT RELATES TO READING AND WRITING

Children experience first-hand how different forms of language—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—are connected. They see language used for a purpose, in this case to prepare for their field trip. They see their words written down and hear them read aloud.

Children know that print provides information. They use books as a resource to learn about the world.

Children read and reread the book because it's fun and rewarding. They can recall some of the words the teacher reads aloud and figure out others because they remember the sequence and meaning of the story.

Children gradually build a sight vocabulary that includes a majority of the words used most often in the English language. They can read these words automatically.

Children use what they already know—letter combinations, root words, prefixes, suffixes, and clues in the pictures or story to figure out new words.

Children build their vocabularies by reading and talking, sharing ideas, discussing a question, listening to others talk, and exploring their interests. Using new words helps them fully understand the meaning of the words.

Children understand that spelling is not just matching sounds with letters. They are learning the basic rules that govern spelling and the exceptions to the rules.

Children understand that there is more to reading than pronouncing words correctly. They may ask questions to clarify what they have read or to learn more about the topic.

Children learn to enjoy reading independently, particularly when they can read books of their own choosing. The more children read, the better readers they become.



KEY POINTS *IN THIS CHAPTER*

- Children develop in four, interrelated areas—cognitive and language, physical, social, and emotional.
- Most children follow the same sequence and pattern for development, but do so at their own pace.
- Language skills are closely tied to and affected by cognitive, social, and emotional development.
- Children first learn to listen and speak, then use these and other skills to learn to read and write.
- Children's experiences and interactions in the early years are critical to their brain development and overall learning.
- Emerging literacy is the gradual, ongoing process of learning to understand and use language.
- Children make numerous language discoveries as they play, explore, and interact with others.
- Children build on their language discoveries to become conventional readers and writers.
- Effective readers and writers recognize letters and words, follow writing rules, and create meaning from text.
- Successful programs to promote children's reading and literacy development should be based on an understanding of child development, recent research on brain development, and the natural ongoing process through which most young children acquire language skills and become readers and writers.

