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# *Cliff Valley School Cliff Notes:* *The Development of Literacy in Young Children*

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## **WHAT IS EMERGENT LITERACY?**

Emergent literacy is the process by which children, from infancy on, process the experiences and acquire the skills which become the critical foundation for reading. It includes the development of oral language, an appreciation for the purposefulness of oral and written language, exposure to and enjoyment of literature, and the ability to manipulate the sounds which make up oral and written language (phonemic awareness.)

Emergent literacy is built on the concept that literacy development is ongoing from an early age, as opposed to the traditional concept of reading readiness, which supposes that children reach a certain age or stage when they are suddenly "ready" to begin to learn how to read.

As in other areas of development, children's literacy skills emerge at different rates. Among our preschoolers, ages two- through 5-years old, some children are well on their way to becoming fluent readers and others have not yet cracked the code. Most children are somewhere in between. At all levels of our programs, we facilitate the development of literacy by providing an environment and experiences that are rich in oral language, literature and print.

## **RESEARCH: ON WHAT DO WE BASE OUR PRACTICE?**

Our preschool literacy program at Cliff Valley School is based on research from two primary sources:

Brain research: Technology developed in the last fifteen years has allowed us to actually see how the brain develops and how children learn. Images of the developing brain have shown us:

- The early years are critical for the development of connections and relationships between the domains of learning. It is therefore essential that new learning be based on prior knowledge, and that literacy learning is integrated into the context of other areas of learning rather than being taught in isolation.
- Knowledge and skills are internalized and retained best when the learner is emotionally engaged with the learning. Yes, Cliff Valley School's traditional hallmark of passionate learning is supported by research! This is the basis for the emergent curriculum model, in which the context of learning is guided by the interests and questions of the children.

The National Reading Panel (NRP): In 1997, this panel was commissioned by Congress and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to assess and review all research on teaching reading. Their report on emergent literacy has had significant implications on our preschool literacy program:

## **HOW CAN I SUPPORT MY CHILD'S LITERACY LEARNING AT HOME?**

- Let your child join you and help you when you make shopping lists, write letters, make lists, look at maps and read for pleasure.
- Provide your child with literacy props: paper of different sizes and textures, envelopes, stamps (stickers), recipe cards, notebooks and notepads, a journal, and a variety of writing tools (pens, pencils, markers, etc.)
- Read to your child. Use authentic literature with rich language so your child will learn the different kinds of language that are used in different genres.
- Sing and chant nursery rhymes and songs together. This helps children learn the cadence and rhythms of our language, and will foster fluency in oral language and reading.
- Use those captive moments - - mealtimes, bathtime, bedtime - - to share a book, or write a dictated story.

## **IS THERE ANY WAY TO TELL IF MY CHILD IS AT RISK FOR READING DIFFICULTIES?**

Remember: the strongest predictor of reading ability is oral language. If your preschooler shows any of the following signs consistently by their 4<sup>th</sup> birthday, it may be worth checking into:

- ✓ Slow naming of familiar objects.
- ✓ Difficulty remembering words.
- ✓ Difficulty rhyming, blending, and listening for same and different sounds.
- ✓ Frequently mixes up the order of sounds or syllables in words.
- ✓ Frequent grammatical errors in speaking, especially syntax and the order of words in a sentence.
- ✓ Difficulty remembering directions and other tasks requiring short term memory for verbal information.

- Contrary to prior thought, written language does not develop spontaneously with exposure, as does oral language. Instruction, in the form of modeling and guidance, is necessary for literacy learning.
- A multi-sensory approach stabilizes learning. Doing, seeing and hearing reinforce the association between letters and sounds and promote fluency in rhyming, blending, segmenting and sound substitution, all critical elements of phonemic awareness.
- A child's oral language skills in preschool, measured by richness of vocabulary and fluency, is the strongest predictor of literacy development.
- Phonemic awareness and letter knowledge are the two best school-entry predictors of how well children will learn to read and spell during the first two years of instruction (kindergarten and first grade.)

## **WHAT DOES LITERACY LEARNING LOOK LIKE IN THE PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM?**

- Literacy materials are embedded in learning and activity centers. The housekeeping area may have shopping lists, telephone messages, recipes, books to read to the babies. A science experiment might have a graph on which the children can record their predictions and results. On a cooking day, the children will help write the recipe. Adults guide the children in their understanding and use of these props.
- Authentic and hands-on experiences give the children a concrete foundation for developing a rich vocabulary. Our children use real objects, tools, foods, and other materials. Adults build oral language skills by giving the children descriptive words and labels, and asking appropriate questions to elicit the children's ideas and thoughts.
- As teachers write dictated stories or make lists, they model writing the sounds they hear, and invite the children's participation to supply beginning sounds, rhyming words, etc.
- Teachers involve the children when they write notes, make lists and read for enjoyment. This helps them become aware of the purposefulness of reading and writing.
- In large and small groups, children will engage in "word play," clapping the syllables and phonemes in words, rhyming and blending, and substituting sounds to form new real or nonsense words. Silly words teach serious skills!
- Labels and lists, paired with picture cues, help children learn to associate sounds with symbols and words with ideas. A print-rich environment immerses children in a world of written language.
- Children dictate stories and poems, and are assisted in "reading" their stories in their own words.
- In journals, children are encouraged to write and draw according to their level of writing development. Some children draw pictures, some may write letter-like scribbles; others are writing the letters of the sounds they hear in words. Teachers guide this process.
- When reading to children, teachers will follow the words with a finger or pointer so the children begin to associate oral language and the written word and begin to identify letters and words. When reading to individual children or small groups, the teachers may ask them to find familiar letters or words on the page.
- Teachers reinforce letter names and sounds by using all the senses: hear the sound, see the letter(s), make the sound, make the letter or sound with your body, and perhaps learn a rhyme or chant that helps the children remember.