Early Literacy Development

Stages of Early Literacy Development: Emergent - Early - Early Fluent - Fluent

The terms beginning reading and writing or early literacy development actually include several phases of learning through which children progress in different ways and tempos. It is an exciting and complex process that usually occurs between the ages 5 through 8. As in most other areas of development, all children do not follow one clear sequential path in lock-step. Rather, individual children may take a variety of routes to reading and writing mastery. Literacy learning is circular or “recursive”; learners may move forward in some areas and seem to step back as they consolidate understanding in others. Thus, reading and writing may not develop evenly. A child may be fluent in one area and emergent in another. Ultimately however, whatever the timetable or path, the goals are the same for all:

- to become fluent and efficient readers and writers who can make sense of and convey meaning in written language;
- to become thinkers and communicators who are actively reviewing and analyzing information;
- to enjoy reading and writing; and,
- to feel successful as users of literacy for a variety of purposes.

NOTE: Keep in mind that the grade levels associated with each phase described below are only approximate. In each grade there are likely to be children in all phases of literacy acquisition. Also, remember that within each phase there may be a range of learners who are developing in different ways.

Emergent Readers and Writers

Pre-kindergarten through first grade:

- understand that written language conveys messages
- pretend read and write: they turn pages of books, invent the story using pictures and their memory of a story
- begin to match spoken words with print (see Concepts about Print in the Glossary of Terms in the Helpful Features document)
- may know some letter names and some letter sound associations
- may recognize some words and letters in their environment or in texts; but not again in a different context; they may still be unsure of the concept of “word” or “letter”
- can write some letters, usually those in their own names
- in writing may reverse some letters, and may use mostly upper case letters
• may make scribbles or strings of random letters with no spaces; one letter may represent a whole word
• may read or attribute meaning to his or her marks; may not be able to “re-read” these marks at a later time.

**Children in this phase benefit from:**

• seeing reading and writing modeled through listening to good stories and seeing others write meaningful messages
• supported practice while reading engaging, predictable books with pictures that clearly relate to and illustrate the story line
• encouragement to experiment with writing
• experience with sorting words and pictures to build letter and sound recognition (see phonemic awareness in the Glossary of Terms in the Helpful Features document)
• experience with rhyming and other word play
• activities that engage students in using oral and written language

**Early Readers**

**First grade through second grade:**

• know that reading needs to make sense
• are more attentive to print and know more print conventions
• understand that books have exact and unchanging messages carried by print as well as pictures
• can identify most letters by name, and can use some letter/sound knowledge (i.e.: the sound of the first letter) to help figure out words
• know the meaning of some punctuation (capitals and periods), but may not use consistently in writing and reading
• can recognize, by sight, a small but growing store of words in different contexts
• use pictures, story patterns, context and memory of some words as well as some phonics to make sense of print

**Early Writers:**

• use spaces between words, but not consistently
• include more sound/letter associations in spelling, especially initial or final consonants; may write some whole words or word parts (like “ing”) from memory
• can usually re-read his or her own writing
• have variable handwriting: may use more lower case letters, but still could be mixed with caps, may reverse some letters (writing b instead of d)
**Children in this phase benefit from:**

- continued exposure to shared and guided reading of pattern stories and other predictable books, with clear print and pictures
- modeling and explicit teaching of and practice with using three cuing systems and strategies to figure out words and make sense of print
- games, activities to consolidate voice/print match and build sight word recognition
- games and activities to build phonemic awareness
- encouragement to write using invented spelling
- language experience activities
- hearing, discussing, retelling a variety of stories read aloud

**Background Knowledge**

**Making Connections Between New and Known Information**

All readers bring to the reading/writing process their own growing knowledge of language, the world and their understandings of how print is used to convey meaning. A child who is often read to, or who regularly sees adults reading and writing for personal tasks and pleasure will expect that reading and writing play useful roles in life and are valued activities. A child who has limited exposure to reading and writing will have very different expectations and understandings. Each of these situations, however, provides some of the background knowledge that children bring to the act of reading and writing.

Effective teaching fosters these expectations of reading and writing as purposeful and meaningful acts, and honors and builds on learners’ diverse areas of knowledge through thoughtful selection of reading materials and activities. For example, a child interested in and knowledgeable about dinosaurs will be well equipped to explore a new book about these prehistoric creatures. Another child who is less familiar with dinosaurs may be equally intrigued by the same book, but will benefit from some preliminary introduction to the content. For example, before reading, the child might spend time looking at a variety of pictures of dinosaurs—skeletons as well as “life-like” images, or talking about when they existed, or what they ate.

Activating background knowledge before reading is an important step that is often overlooked in teaching young readers. As an experienced reader, you use your background knowledge automatically, without realizing it. If you are about to read a novel about World War II, subconsciously you summon up whatever images you have about that period both before and as you read. While reading a love poem or an article about baseball, you use your background knowledge about the topics, and also about the literary styles of each. You know that a poem is very different from a novel or news article, in the way it is crafted, in the choice of language, even in its format and length. In each case, you expect the text to make sense because it builds on what you know. At
the same time, it may extend or deepen your knowledge and understanding as it adds new ideas or information.

Beginning readers, too, need to learn to use their own background knowledge. Helping them activate and extend this knowledge and selecting texts that build on what they already know or understand about their world support their attempts to make sense of what they are reading. If students do not have any background knowledge on the topic of the reading material that is to be used, then every effort should be made to build that knowledge through prior discussion, looking at pictures or objects, or through other means before introducing the new text. That will lead to much greater success with the reading experience.