



Position Statement on Literacy and Young Children

Learning to read is the most important academic skill children acquire. Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children (MiAEYC) believes that appropriate early literacy experiences are critical for children's reading success.

Quality early literacy experiences, including both formal and informal instruction, develop speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. Early literacy experiences are different depending on each child's needs and stage of development. Appropriate literacy activities used in a first grade classroom are different than those used with younger children.

We believe that:

- Literacy development begins at birth.
- Oral language is a critical early literacy skill.
- Children need many informal language, reading and writing experiences prior to the beginning of formal literacy instruction.
- Children need a variety of literacy activities provided in a planned and progressive approach by knowledgeable adults.
- Children develop at different rates and therefore learn to read at different rates.
- The purpose of reading is obtaining meaning from print.
- Reading is a complex process
- There is no single teaching method or combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read.
- When ready for formal reading instruction, children need programs that include instruction in both the mechanics of reading and comprehension strategies.
- Children must learn to read and write competently so they can participate and achieve in all academic activities.
- Instruction decisions must be made by teachers based upon their knowledge of current research, child development, and individual children's strengths and needs.
- Schools, early childhood programs, families and communities share responsibility for children's success in learning to read and write.

Key Points:

- Literacy begins at birth.
- It's never too early to read to a child.
- Literacy activities are different for children depending on their age.
- The foundation for reading is laid before kindergarten.
- There is no one "right" way to teach reading.
- School success depends on reading success.
- Reading to children produces children who read.

Frequently Asked Questions:

What does "literacy" mean?

Literacy is the ability to read and write. Before children exhibit reading and writing skills, however, they are engaged in the process of learning language and learning concepts about print and sound. Oral language experiences – speaking and listening to a child – are the basis for the development of literacy skills.

What does literacy development look like at each stage of development?

These lists are some suggested milestones:

Infants and Toddlers:

- hear adults talk and sing and make sounds of their own
- read gestures and facial expressions
- expand their comprehensive and speaking vocabulary
- discover some sounds stand for a person, thing or activity
- hold, look at, and sometimes chew, good books
- play patty-cake and learn other nursery rhymes
- delight in hearing books read to them over and over on a daily basis
- scribble with pencils, crayons, and paints

Preschoolers:

- continue to talk, sing, repeat nursery rhymes, and read
- phrases become sentences
- begin to recognize letters and letter names
- begin to recognize sounds and associate them to letter symbols and letter names.
- understand concepts about books and print
- begin to predict what will happen next
- write letters and marks for sounds and words

Early Elementary Children:

- develop a sight vocabulary
- learn to decode words using phonemic awareness
- use sentence structure and meaning to determine new words
- discover reading is comprehension, not just pronouncing words correctly
- writing moves from accurate letter formation to varied sentence structures

How are phonics and other reading skills taught?

Today, children entering elementary schools come with increasing diversity in their backgrounds, experiences, and abilities. Within one kindergarten room some children will be in a group setting for the first time while others have been in group programs for five years; some will come with disabilities and some with exceptional abilities. A two year range in their development is typical. Research indicates no one method will be appropriate for all children within a classroom.¹ In addition, good reading instruction will differ from age group to age group.

Reading skills in the years before kindergarten should be informal, but intentional. Adults and children will interact by: talking to each other, singing songs and nursery rhymes, learning finger plays, and reading daily.² Reading is informal, with books children love read over and over again. Children begin to develop an understanding about books and reading.

In kindergarten and the primary grades listening to stories and independent reading are the basis of instruction. Systematic instruction on decoding words by identifying letters and the sounds they make is a critical part of learning to read. Children will practice the decoding skills they learn in meaningful connected reading for best progress in reading.

¹ Snow, C., M.S. Burns, and P. Griffin. (1998) *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

² Hart, B. and T. Risley. (1995) *Meaningful differences*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Learning to read can be compared to learning to ride a bike. Children are told to push the pedals, put hands on the handlebars, and look straight ahead – and they just do it! They get better at each part (pedaling, steering, and stopping) as they do the whole – bike riding. And they get better because it's fun and they do it often. Imagine how many bike riders there would be if children were allowed only to sit on a non-moving bike and practice steering without really riding!

Michigan Stories

These are stories about people in early childhood care and education known to MiAEYC members. The names have been changed.

From the mothers of two kindergarteners: Brenda was a low-income working parent of three children. Her oldest child, Karen, was five. Brenda did not have extra money or time. When she wasn't at work, she was taking care of the household. Brenda's mother, Eunice, cared for all six of her grandchildren including Brenda's three children. Just feeding, napping and keeping track of their whereabouts kept Eunice busy. She didn't read to them, and only talked to them to issue directives. When Karen started kindergarten, she did not know her letters or any nursery rhymes, her vocabulary was limited, and she couldn't sit still for a short story. At the end of the year, it was recommended that Karen repeat kindergarten.

Vicky was a low-income working parent of three children. Her oldest child, Brian, was five. Vicky did not have extra money or much time. However, as she prepared meals, she would talk to the children about what she was doing and asked them questions, listening to their responses as she cooked. Each weekend, she and the children would go to the library and check out books. Each night, they would read at least one book together as a family. Vicky's mother, Theresa, cared for six of her grandchildren including Vicky's three children. She made time every morning to sit on the floor and engage the children in their play. They read books before nap time and while they waited for mom to pick them up. When Brian started kindergarten, he knew his letters and many of their sounds, his vocabulary was large, and he enjoyed hearing the stories. He learned to read and write easily.

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