

Promoting Language, Literacy, and a Love of Learning Makes a Difference

Six month old Katrina gurgles and coos as she sits on Amy's lap. Amy coos back. Katrina looks up and laughs. Amy laughs back and starts to sing softly.

Three year old Brian draws a picture and talks about the giant bird flying in the sky, claiming it lives next door to his grandmother. His child care teacher writes the words "giant bird" on his picture and puts it up on the wall near his locker.

Nine year old Carmen enters her after-school program. After putting her coat away, she joins a small group sitting on the couch listening to another chapter of a mystery book they started the day before.

These everyday scenes demonstrate the important ways that quality child care contributes to the education of children. With millions of children spending part of each day in child care, everyone from parents to principals, from pediatricians to policy makers, is beginning to make the link between good child care and improved educational outcomes. Given the current interest in reading, we have a unique opportunity to shine a spotlight on the critical role that child care can play in promoting language, literacy, and a love of learning.

What Does Research Tell Us?

Learning to read and write is a critical element in success in school and throughout life. The National

by Joan Lombardi

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Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering asked a panel of experts to review the existing research and make recommendations to prevent reading difficulties among young children. Their groundbreaking report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), states that the primary prevention of reading difficulties during the preschool years involves ensuring that families and group settings for young children offer the experiences and support that make language and literacy accomplishments possible (p. 17).

According to the joint position statement of the International Reading Association and the NAEYC (1998), although reading and writing ability continues to develop throughout the life span, the early childhood years — from birth through age eight — are the most important for literacy development. Success in reading depends on the language and literacy experiences that start during the first few months and years of life. The NAS report found that too often preschools and other group settings for young children provide a "relatively impoverished language and literacy environment," in particular those programs available to families with limited economic resources.

Fortunately, we also know that with adequate resources and well trained staff, child care programs can provide a rich literacy environment for children. For example, the *Books Allowed* program funded by the William Penn Foundation provided some 330 centers in the Delaware Valley with high quality children's books and ten hours of training to child care staff. Bookcases and storage racks were also provided, resulting in the reorganization of the child care facilities to include reading activity areas and library corners. Researchers from Temple University conducted a pre- and post-test study on 400 three- and four-year-old children who participated in the program, along with 100 children from child care centers not in the project. The assessments revealed significant changes in early literacy abilities of the *Books Allowed* children (Neuman, in press).

Furthermore, a number of studies continue to document the importance of the quality of care to later learning. According to recent findings from the NICHD

Study of Early Child Care, quality care effects school readiness. For example, children in higher quality care scored higher in their ability to express and comprehend language (NICHD ECRN, 1999). Similarly, the *Executive Summary of the Children of the Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study Go to School* (Peisner-Feinberg, et al., 1999) found that children who attended child care with higher quality classroom practices had better language and math skills from the preschool years into elementary school. In addition, children with closer teacher-child relationships in child care had better classroom social and thinking skills, language ability, and math skills from preschool to elementary.

Recommended Practice

At least two important works provide critical guidance to promote children's reading success. The National Research Council report, *Starting Out Right*, provides specific recommendations for parents, teachers, and child care providers on how to help children become successful readers (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999). The IRA and NAEYC position statement, *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Young Children*, includes a set of principles and recommendations for teaching practices and public policy (IRA & NAEYC, 1998).

There is no simple answer to helping children to read and write. As the authors point out in *Starting Out Right*, reading is a complex and multifaceted process, and children need an approach to learning that integrates many elements (p. 6). Young children need lots of exposure to oral language and print material. They need to have the self-confidence to explore new ideas and feel the pleasure and excitement of listening and telling stories, the intimacy of sharing, the joy of learning.

During the infant and toddler years, children need relationships with caring adults who engage in many one-on-one, face-to-face interactions with them to support their oral language development and lay the foundation for later literacy. During the preschool years, young children need a wide range of developmentally appropriate experiences to support literacy, including — but not limited to — positive, nurturing relationships with adults who engage in responsive conversations with individual children. Child care providers need to model reading and writing behavior and foster children's interest in and enjoyment of reading and writing through exposure to a print-rich environment and daily adult reading of high-quality books (IRA & NAEYC, 1998).

The same good practices should continue throughout the early school years. For school-age child care programs, children need quality programs with a consistent adult to talk to and to listen. They need environments that can stimulate their curiosity and promote physical activity as well as provide ample opportunities to enjoy reading and writing, to express their creativity and to receive individual assistance with homework and skill building activities that go on during the regular school day.

The America Reads Challenge and Child Care

Too many children today are not able to read at grade level. In 1994, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 40 percent of the nation's fourth graders failed to read at the basic level. In 1997, President Clinton issued a challenge to every American to help all children become good readers. Child care providers in homes and in centers need to be supported in their efforts to expand literacy activities for children of all ages. The *America Reads Challenge* provides an opportunity for all of us to rally our communities to provide this support.

All across the country, parents, providers, libraries, businesses, and public officials are stepping up efforts to link child care and literacy. For example:

- In Nevada, the Children's Cabinet held an Early Education and Care summit to explore and to promote literacy and young children. Sessions included information on such topics as literacy and links to the media, the business community, and the quality of care.
- In Johnson County, Kansas, the public library created the *Books to Grow* program to reach home providers with books. Providers can check out bags which contain picture books, an audio tape and a videotape, and a folder of ideas for the provider. More than 100 kits representing more than 40 themes are in circulation in the community.
- In Seattle, the *Reading Is Cool* project offers training to out-of-school providers in the form of workshops on such topics as developmental stages of reading, learning styles, journal writing, and creating a print-rich environment. The project also provides reading kits with information and materials for providers, parents, and children.
- In Maine, the Humanities Council, with support from the Corporation for National Service and in

partnership with the Maine Office of Child Care and Head Start, is sending Americorp members to provide direct family literacy training to the staff of a number of community agencies including Head Start and child care centers and home child care providers as part of the *Born to Read* program.

- In Boston, WGBH is working on a new daily children's television series to promote literacy called *Between the Lions*, coming to PBS next year. Through the PBS *Ready to Learn* effort, affiliate stations across the country are promoting literacy and young children.

Hundreds of other examples of linkages between child care and literacy are emerging. In 1999, the *Reading Excellence Act* passed and was signed into law. This new competitive grants-to-states program includes a focus on providing children with the readiness skills and support they need in early childhood. It encourages school districts to form partnerships with early childhood organizations, libraries, and a number of other community-based organizations. In addition, as part of the *America Reads Challenge*, federal work-study students can help increase time spent reading to children in child care programs. Finally, the Department of Education, in collaboration with the Department of Health and Human Services and the Corporation for National Service, has developed a set of materials called *Ready-Set-Read* which includes a guide for caregivers and families.

Child Care READS! A Call to Action

These and other new opportunities serve as a call to action to increase language and literacy for all children in child care from infancy through school age. It is time for all of us to expand our efforts to provide language-rich and stimulating environments for children in care. With this in mind, the *Child Care READS!* goals were drafted to provide programs and communities with a starting point for action. Regardless of what role you play in the child care community, you can use these goals to help decide what steps you will take to link child care and literacy. For example:

- If you are a teacher or director, you can discuss the goals as part of a staff or parent meeting. Ask the group what you can do together to increase literacy and how this may be different for babies, toddlers, preschoolers, school-age children?
- If you are a family child care provider, you can

bring a copy of the goals to the next meeting of your organization or network and help plan a literacy training session for your annual conference.

- If you are a trainer, you can share the goals, along with the IRA and NAEYC position statement, during a session on language and literacy.
- If you work in a child care resource and referral agency, you can call a *Child Care READS!* meeting to discuss launching a child care literacy campaign in your community. Invite providers, parents, trainers, libraries, local businesses, and television stations.

The possibilities are endless. Whatever you decide to do to promote literacy, make sure you have fun, share your accomplishments and ideas with others, and let your enthusiasm for children's language, literacy, and love of learning shine through!

References

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Resources

To find out more about the *America Reads Challenge*, contact the Department of Education at (800) USA-LEARN or www.ed.gov.

The following publications are available through NAEYC (www.naeyc.org):

- *Starting out right: A guide to promoting children's reading success*.

■ The joint position statement of the International Reading Association and NAEYC: *Learning to read and write: Developmentally appropriate practice for young children.*

■ *Raising a reader, raising a writer* (a brochure for parents).

To share your ideas on Child Care READS!, contact Laurie Miller at the Child Care Action Campaign at (212) 239-0138 or at www.usakids.org/sites/ccac.html.