

Pointers For Parents

The Simple Tools For Early Literacy

By Dr. Virginia Mann

(NAPSA)—While many recognize that early literacy is critical to success in life, few know what the latest research tells us: Literacy development starts at birth. An innovative program in Southern California shows how to put this research into action.

Almost 30 years of research shows that two strategies work best from birth to age 5 to encourage early literacy skills: exposing children to spoken language and helping them to become aware of the patterns, rhymes and sounds of words.

Fortunately, the complex skills necessary for early literacy can be developed through simple actions: Talk with your children, read to them, and engage them in conversation and language play.

Unfortunately, children in low-income families do not have the same exposure to language as those in affluent families.

Researchers Betty Hart and Paul Riseley show that affluent children receive more spoken language input—an average of more than 300 words an hour, or 500,000 words a year. Homes of the disadvantaged often rely too much on short or curtailed communication because of busy work schedules.

Children build much of their language mastery on simply hearing words. While “Hickory Dickory Dock” may seem to be no more than a silly poem, to children it is a toy box full of words—a set of playful sounds that can be shuf-



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fled and combined like Lego blocks to create new words and sounds.

Nursery rhymes, poems, word games, letter names and sounds, and exposure to more complicated stories, vocabulary and songs build language skills and cause children to “hunger” for language learning—the more they hear, the more they want to know.

Using these tools with preschool children draws their attention to the sounds of words and how they can be manipulated. The small sound segments within spoken words—called “phonemes”—are segments that the alphabet represents. The successes of phonics-based curricula and decades of research show us that cultivating an awareness of these segments is a necessary part of early literacy.

The latest data show that any spoken language—English, Spanish or any other—builds the skills that a child needs to learn English. This means that parents who come to this country and want their children to learn English don’t have to first learn English themselves.

The most effective strategy these parents can follow is to engage their children in conversation in the native tongue. The sound of words in any language is enough for the brain to prepare for continued learning of English.

The Children and Families Commission of Orange County, California provides the tools and information that adults need to promote their child’s learning and language skills. Through the University of California at Irvine’s HABLE program—Home-Based Activities Building Language Acquisition—the commission supports increased verbal interaction in the homes of economically disadvantaged Latino children, between 2 and 4 years old. Using culturally appropriate mentors who serve as coaches and role models, the program teaches fun, straightforward methods through books and toys used in the home.

Not only does HABLE help build learning environments for low-income families, it saves taxpayers money. A year of HABLE costs \$2000, while a year of preschool or special education costs three times that. The human potential of these children that is preserved is, of course, priceless.