

THE NATIONAL CHILDREN’S BOOK AND LITERACY ALLIANCE

An Early Educator’s Guide to Family Literacy for Early Childhood Educators and Parents of Young Children

This guide serves as a companion to the Family Literacy Power Point Presentation.

WHY DO YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES NEED TO READ QUALITY BOOKS?

- **Books create warm emotional bonds between adults and kids when they read books together.**

The best way to encourage children to become lifelong readers is to build on the loving relationship between young children and adult family members. If a young child associates reading and books with familial attention and love then those positive associations will stay with that child as he or she grows, extending those positive feelings to reading and books.

- **Books help kids develop basic language skills and profoundly expand their vocabularies—much more than any other media.**

Picture books often contain an expanded vocabulary beyond vernacular language. For example, the Mother Goose rhyme “Jack and Jill went up the hill to *fetch* a pail of water.” The more children are read books, like the wide variety of quality books available in their neighborhood library, the children’s vocabulary will substantially broaden and deepen, the more their language skills will grow and expand.

- **Books are interactive; they demand that kids think. Fiction and nonfiction books widen our consciousness. They give us new ways to think and new ideas. They expand our universe beyond time and place and inspire our own original thoughts.**

Books exercise children’s brains, like outdoor activity and sports exercise their muscles.

Books can transport children forward and backward in history and time, expanding our children’s knowledge base by introducing and exposing young children to new and ancient worlds.

- **Books let kids try on the world before they have to go out into it. Books give kids an opportunity to experience something in their imaginations before it happens to them in real life. Books help prepare kids for their next stage of maturity, vicariously preparing them for the “grown-up” world.**

Books prepare young children for new encounters and experiences. They can “visit” a city or farm, store or ocean in a book when they have yet to visit those places in person. They can meet bears and lions and whales in books. They can fly to the moon in a book. They can see deep into the ocean in a book. They can discover people from all over the world in a book. They can go to the dentist, or a birthday party, or find out what it is like when a new baby joins the family in a book. They can “try on” all kinds of situations and events; meet different kinds of people and families; imagine themselves older out in the world—all by reading great books.

- **Books develop and nourish kids' imaginations, expanding their worlds. Picture books introduce young children to the world of art and literature. They stimulate kids' sensory awareness, helping kids to see, hear, taste, feel, and smell on an imagined level. Books inform our imaginations, inspiring creativity.**

Many young children, for a variety of reasons, have limited interaction with the arts and culture. Many young children do not have an opportunity to visit museums and view live theater. Picture books introduce young children to a wide variety of artistic styles, as well as graphic design. Good picture book texts and stories expose children to the music and rhythm of language. Good picture books introduce young children to story and drama. Good picture books celebrate sensory awareness and help young children notice both the small details and the big pictures of life.

- **Books help children and adults to open up and connect to other people. Books show us the inner workings of multiple perspectives and let us know there is more than one way to view the world. Books build connections and broaden our capacity to empathize; they help us to understand others. Books help us to become more compassionate.**

Some adults have a difficult time talking to children. Books can be a natural springboard to conversations between adult family members and young children. Books, because they offer a wide variety of characters and stories, invite us into the thoughts and outlooks of others, allowing us—children and adults—to “walk around in someone else's shoes.” When we understand “the other” we are more likely to be less judgmental; to be more sympathetic and compassionate.

- **Books develop critical thinking skills.**

A book is read by an individual. It has no laugh track or musical score that emotionally primes a reader's reaction. You alone decide what you think about a book and its contents with no one leaning over your shoulder telling you how to think.

- **Traditional print books, read by a parent or guardian, are the best format choice for young readers.**

Television and the movies give you everything—setting, costumes, characters, action. They leave nothing to your imagination. Some e-books, TV shows, movies, and electronic media have sound tracks and musical scores that prime human reactions. Children's books leave spaces in the stories and illustrations for young children to flesh out the details. Books include children as active participants and challenge them to react as individuals, to come to their own conclusions.

- **Books offer a wide breadth and depth of information, experience, and knowledge. Books inform us about other people, other countries, other customs and cultures. Books help us to teach ourselves about history, the arts, science, religion, nature, mathematics, and technology — anything and everything in our universe and beyond.**

Books make us all armchair travelers, especially young children whose opportunities to explore the wider world are limited. Books can expand children's personal and educational worlds complementing an introduction to science, geography, history, local ethnic cultures, and world cultures.

- **Books provide the opportunity to share cultural experiences. When kids read the same book, enjoying a common reading experience, peer bonds are built within a generation. When children, parents, and grandparents share classic books, extended familial and community bonds are formed creating a shared frame of reference.**

For older children, the most recent example of kids sharing a world-wide book experience is, of course the Harry Potter novels. For younger children in our country, books like *The Hungry Caterpillar* and *Make Way for Ducklings* not only provide a shared experience generationally, they provide a shared intergenerational cultural experience. In previous generations cultural touchstones for young children reached back several generations, even centuries, because Mother Goose rhymes and fairy tales were more universally known and shared, even if individual ethnic groups' versions of the stories differed. Are children losing something valuable with that evolution?

- **Books entertain and offer a great escape. They make us laugh and giggle. They make us cry. Books — unlike many other entertainments — are free for everyone. You can find the book you need, for free, at your neighborhood public library.**

Many books are as entertaining as they are informative. How many times have you seen a movie, after reading a book, and feel the book was so much better?! Young children often have the same experience.

Some parents look on reading to their child as a task, a drudge, rather than a pleasure.

Quality children's book writers and illustrators know that young children are dependent on an adult reading to them and so create their stories keeping that in mind; there is often a story line, or humor, in a book that only the parent will comprehend and understand. If you work with parents who do think of reading aloud as a task rather than a pleasure, take the time to find out if 1.) the parent has his or her own literacy challenges, and perhaps you can help them become more confident readers; or 2.) the parent or parents need to be introduced to their neighborhood library and the children's librarian who can help them find better quality entertaining and informative books to share with their child, books that will interest both parent and child.

A great recommendation to young parents and guardians who may have a limited budget with few dollars for new book purchases—tell them to use the library as their experimental laboratory and suggest they borrow a wide variety of books from the library. Then, the books their child asks to read over and over again—those are the books they need to buy for their child's home library.

- **Books are great companions. You are never lonely when you have a book to read.**
- **Books comfort us. Books help us understand that no matter who we are, or what our experiences may be, we are not alone in the world.**
- **Books inspire us to dream.**
- **Books give us the tools to achieve our dreams.**

HELPING PARENTS AND GUARDIANS CREATE A LANGUAGE-ENRICHED ENVIRONMENT AT HOME!

- **Read to your child every day. Read newspapers, comics, magazines, street signs, billboards, directions on packages and in cookbooks. Read books—lots and lots of great books! Children become “readers” before they learn to read. Enjoying books together now will help them enjoy books later.**

One of the most asked questions from parents related to literacy is, “When should I start reading to my child?” The answer—begin as soon as they are born and never stop, not even when your child becomes an independent reader.

If you care deeply about someone or something, you spend time with that person or activity. Ask any adult what their favorite activity, hobby, or pastime is. Then ask that person how they became knowledgeable about that pastime or hobby, how they became interested in it. Nine times out of ten, they will share that they were introduced to that activity or pastime by a person they loved and/or respected, a person who took the time to share a passion or interest with them. That is why it is so important for a parent or guardian to spend time reading to their children. When a parent or family member spends time reading with a child it sends the powerful double message—you are the most important thing in the world to me, and this activity, reading is really important, too!

- **When reading to your child: make books a part of the daily routine. Special reading time might be before bed, during a meal, or while you are riding the bus.**

Parents’ and guardians’ lives can be hectic, especially single-parent households and families where both parents work outside and inside the home. If you work with parents who are overwhelmed and feel guilty because they cannot read to a child every day, use a food analogy with them to help them move forward. Sometimes it is impossible to make sure that a child is read to every day, just like it is difficult for a child to have every food nutrient every day. Suggest that parents think of their children’s mind and body health in terms of a week rather than everyday. In a week’s time do their children get dairy, fruit, vegetables, meat, and an occasional snack? Probably, yes. Then in a week’s time they can have food for their children’s brains, too—book reading a few days a week; an audio-book in the car during car pooling with older siblings; Grandpa or Grandma can read a book on a cell phone or tablet using FaceTime or Skype one night; an older sibling can read a book while younger brother or sister is taking a bath, or play a verbal game of “I Spy” while waiting for dinner. The goal is for young children to have a variety of language enriching experiences, including reading books aloud, within a week’s time.

- **When reading together, encourage your child to talk. Have him “pretend read” the parts he has memorized. Ask him questions and encourage him to say more. Eventually, he might tell more of the story than you do!**

Encourage parents to have conversations with their young children by asking them “open ended.” Close-ended questions are those which can be answered by a simple “yes” or “no,” while open-ended questions are those which require more thought and more than a simple one-word answer.

Examples:

- ~ Close-ended question: Did you have fun at preschool today?
- ~ Open-ended questions: What fun things did you do at school today? What made you laugh today?

- **Families can have great fun telling stories and reading together!**
- **When reading to your child: link the books you read to people, places, and things your child knows or sees when you're out.**
- **Share Mother Goose, poetry, and rhymed text books with your child. Identifying and using rhyming words helps her develop letter sound recognition, important to reading readiness.**

Some parents and guardians are not natural communicators or may not have a lot of experience with young children. Suggest that they use the content of a book as a springboard for a conversation with their child. For example, when reading a book about dogs they may want to bring up the dog that lives next door and the child can contrast and compare the dog in the book to their neighbor's dog.

Many parents know that rhymed words share similar sounding vowel and consonant endings, but they may not make the connection to the teaching of phonics. Help them to understand that reading aloud different kinds of books, especially word play books like books with rhymed text, helps lay the foundation for their child understanding that letters have different sounds and when put together the sounds combine to make words.

- **In our country boys lag behind girls in reading skills. It is important that Dads, Step-Dads, Grandpas, Uncles, and big brothers read aloud to younger family members.**

Fathers and kids reading together—makes a lifetime of memories. Men are great reading role models!

Many young girls develop language skills faster than boys—so reading books aloud to boys, especially books on topics that interest them, will help them fine tune their language skills. Many parents have little, if any, knowledge of the wide variety of children's books available, especially nonfiction books which many boys love. Encourage parents to tap into your knowledge, the knowledge of their local neighborhood librarian, and to find parent children's book references that will help them find books that will meet and expand their children's interests, especially their sons' interests.

Children's book author Jon Scieszka has created a website that has book suggestions for boys of all ages. Explore the *Guys Read* website at: GuysRead.com

The best way to get and keep boys reading is for a loved and respected male role model, like a dad, stepdad, uncle, grandfather, neighbor, or friend be their "reading buddy."

- **Make your neighborhood public library your child's second home.**

Some of your parents may not feel comfortable in libraries because of negative experiences there when they were young, or because they have limited literacy skills themselves.

Immigrant families may come from countries where they did not trust their government or may even have been afraid of their government. If that is the case, they may be afraid of libraries as extensions of government—some downtown library edifices can be a little intimidating in their grandness. Or they may be shy because their English language skills may be limited.

If any of your parents have the above challenges, you may want to invite your local librarian to your school to meet with parents and family members in informal circumstances and welcome your families to the library.

Other families may have no negative feelings about the library but may think they are too busy to make regular visits to the library. Encourage them to visit the library regularly because very few families these days can afford to have a wide variety of quality books in their homes. Explain to them that one of the biggest predictions of a child's future success in school is how often a child is exposed to a wide variety of quality books before kindergarten.

Parents can ask their local librarian to show them around the library, especially the children's room, so that both parents and children feel comfortable and secure at the library.

- **Parents, kids love having their own library cards! And you get one, too!**

Make sure you know your libraries requirements related to residency, and proof of residency, age, etc., so that you can share that information when you encourage parents and guardians to get library cards for themselves and their children.

- **Your Neighborhood Library Is There for You and Your Family!**

Benefits of library membership—free books; free story hour, children's shows and events; free videos; free music DVDs; free passes to local museums and attractions; free parenting books; access to state-wide libraries; literacy assistance; free access to Internet.

- **Have a Family Date Night at Your Neighborhood Library!**

Meet your children's librarian.

Get library cards for each family member.

Take a tour of the library and find the children's room, the video and music collections.

Find out how to get passes to local museums.

Make sure the kids know where the rest rooms are and what they have to do to use them.

- **Build a Home Library. Kids love having their own books.**

Give your child books for birthday and holiday gifts. Take the time to write a loving, personal message in each book. Start a collection of "now and later" books. Give one book that they can enjoy now, and one book they can grow into. That way there is always a book on the shelf waiting for them.

The "tooth fairy might bring a paperback book instead, or with, coins for a tooth.

- **Building a Home Library on a Budget**

Neighborhood, school, and main branch libraries often hold used book sales, as do colleges and universities. Call your local library or check the events column in your newspaper to find out book sale locations and times. At used book sales, books can often be purchased for as little as 50 cents

Paperback books are an inexpensive way of building a home library.

Supplement purchased books with books and magazines borrowed from the library. The library provides fresh choices for your children. Reading library books can also help you decide which books you should own.

- **Ideas and Activities that Help Your Child Become a Reader!**

When you are with your child, limit distractions like phone calls and television. Instead, talk, read, and play together.

When talking to your child, use the language(s) that are most comfortable for you, so that she hears lots of different words and ideas.

- **Take advantage of everyday moments.**

Talk about the world around you. Tell stories throughout the day while engaged in everyday activities.

Listen to your child talk and encourage him to say more. Ask him questions, show interest in what he says, and help him learn new words and ideas.

- **Take a walk in your city or town.**

Point out words on signs and talk about the letters and sounds. Ask your child to find the letters she knows on street and store signs.

- **Take a walk in the woods or a park.**

Discuss what you see, hear, and smell with your child. Listen to your child talk and encourage him to say more.

Ask him questions, show interest in what he says, and help him learn new words and ideas.

- **When you have time on weekends, include your child in meal preparations.**

Read cookbook directions aloud as you cook, and have your child help you measure ingredients.

- **The Grocery Store – a sensory learning experience!**

At low traffic times, take your child with you to the grocery store and share the experience aloud with him. Talk about the textures and colors of the fruits and vegetables. Talk about the smells and the flavors of food.

- **Construction sites, garbage removal, airports, train stations—fascinate young children and offer endless possibilities for conversations.**

Educators, you know your families and your area—share ideas based on your town and neighborhood that can act as conversation and storytelling springboards for the families and children you love and work with.

- **Sing! Share the Songs and Music You Love with Your Children!**

Sing together—rock songs, old songs, Broadway music, hip-hop, traditional children's songs. Have family sing-along nights at your pre-school.

Some parents will have limited exposure to traditional children's songs and music from our country's rich musical heritage. You may want to introduce parents to CDs, records, and television programs that will expand their knowledge and experience base. You may

also want to encourage parents and families to share their own rich ethnic musical heritage with their children and the other families in your preschool.

- **Children become “writers” long before they learn to write.**

Children’s scribbles, pictures, and attempts at writing alphabet letters are all important beginnings to strong literacy skills.

Give your child paper and crayons so she can “write.” Ask her to explain what is happening in her picture or story. Help her think of more ideas to add.

Have your child tell you stories, and write down what he says. Ask questions that will help him complete the story. Then read the story you wrote together.

When parents encourage their young children to draw and “write” stories, and dictate stories for parents to write out, not only do the children experience positive outcomes, but parents then gain invaluable, tangible keepsakes that they can revisit and share with their children when they are older.

- **Continue home reading activities during vacations!**

Libraries have summer reading programs, storytelling, events, and activities for kids of all ages.

Have read-aloud picnics with favorite books outdoors on porches, patios, decks, in yards, and parks.

- **Is this your family car trip?**

Have more fun traveling with books and audio-books. Share stories, songs, and word play games in the car.

Some parents may not know alphabet and story games to play in the car. Teach them how to play the “I’m Going on a Picnic” memory game with their children. Or share with them how children like to play the “Alphabet Letter” game, spying the alphabet letters on car license plates and billboards. Many websites offer a wide variety of car games for younger and older children. Just have parents conduct an Internet search for “games for kids to play in cars,” and a slew of sites appear. Also suggest they ask their children’s librarian for books recommendations on the same topic.

- **Share stories about your neighborhood.**

Some people may call stories about the neighborhood—gossip. But aren’t those sometimes the best stories! (As long as they do not embarrass or humiliate a neighbor!)

- **Share family stories.**

Invite grandparents and family members to share stories from their childhoods. Share the story of how your family came to America—even Native American families originally emigrated from other continents. Share stories of the day your child was born or adopted.

Children love to hear stories about adult family members especially if the story is: funny; reveals a childhood embarrassing moment; reveals a childhood mistake and learning moment; shares a childhood adventure; shares a childhood “ghost story” or scary event; shares a childhood memory of family love and warmth.

- **The time you spend with your children is the most special time of their—and your—lives.**

Young parents may not yet realize how fast time passes, especially once you have children. Help them to cherish these fleeting moments now!

- **The best way to end the day . . .read to your child at bedtime!**

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