

Early Literacy: Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is early literacy? Is it the same as emergent literacy?

Early literacy refers to “what children know about reading and writing before they actually learn to read and write” (Ghoting & Martin-Diaz, 2006) and it is used interchangeably with emergent literacy. Both terms imply that literacy development begins at birth, gradually develops over time, and must be nurtured.

2. I understand that children develop at different rates, but what literacy related tasks should I expect my child to accomplish as she develops?

Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children’s Reading (Burns, Griffin, Snow, 1999) has highlighted a number of different milestones children are likely to accomplish across three age bands-**Birth to Three**, **Three to Four** and **Kindergarten**. These accomplishments are listed below but are by no means meant to be exhaustive.

Birth to Three-Year-Old Accomplishments

- Recognizes specific books by cover
- Pretends to read books.
- Understands that books are handled in particular ways.
- Vocalization play in crib gives way to enjoyment of rhyming language, nonsense word play, etc.
- Labels objects in books.
- Comments on characters in books.
- Looks at picture in book and realizes it is a symbol of a real object.
- May begin attending to specific print, such as letters in names.
- Uses increasingly purposeful scribbling.
- Occasionally seems to distinguish between drawing and writing.
- Produces some letter-like forms and scribbles with some features of English writing.

Three- to Four-Year-Old Accomplishments

- Knows that alphabet letters are a special category of visual graphics that can be individually named.
- Recognizes print in the local environment.
- Knows that it is the print that is read in stories.
- Understands that different text forms are used for different functions of print (e.g., a list for groceries is different than the list on a menu).
- Pays attention to separable and repeating sounds in language (e.g., in Peter, Peter, pumpkin Eater: Peter Eater).
- Understands and follows oral directions.

- Is sensitive to some sequences of events in stories.
- When being read a story, connects information and events to real-life experiences.
- Questions and comments demonstrate understanding of literal meaning of story being told.
- Displays reading and writing attempts, calling attention to self: “Look at my story.”
- Can identify about 10 alphabet letters, especially those from own name.
- Writes (scribbles) message as part of playful activity.

Kindergarten Accomplishments

- Knows the parts of a book and their functions.
- Begins to track print when listening to a familiar text being read or when reading own writing.
- “Reads” familiar texts emergently, i.e., not necessarily verbatim from the print alone.
- Recognizes and can name all uppercase and lower letters.
- Recognizes some words by sight, including a few very common ones (“the,” “I,” “my,” “you,” “is,” “are”).
- Connects information and events in texts to life and life experiences to text.
- Retells, reenacts, or dramatizes stories or parts of stories.
- Demonstrates familiarity with a number of types or genres of text (e.g., storybooks, expository texts, poems, newspapers, and everyday print such as signs, notices, labels).
- Makes predictions based on illustrations or portions of stories.
- Given spoken sets like “dan, dan, den,” can identify the first two as the same and the thirds as different.
- Given a spoken word, can produce another word that rhymes with it.
- Independently writes many uppercase and lowercase letters.
- Uses phonemic awareness and letter knowledge to spell independently (invented or creative spelling).
- Writes (unconventionally) to express own meaning.
- Writes own name (first and last) and the first names of some friends or classmates.
- Can write most letters and some words when they are dictated.

3. When should my child start talking?

Please keep in mind that the rate at which children develop vary from child to child. If you have concerns about your child’s language development, you should talk with your child’s doctor or a speech-language pathologist.

The [National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders](#) (NIDCD) suggests the following language development milestones for children birth to 5 months, 6-11 months, 12-17 months, 18-23 months, 2-3 years, 3-4 years, 4-5 years, and 5 years. They recommend speaking to a doctor if your child has not yet achieved one of the milestones listed for his/her age span.

Language Development Birth to 5 months

- Reacts to loud sounds.
- Turns head toward a sound source.
- Watches your face when you speak.
- Vocalizes pleasure and displeasure sounds (laughs, giggles, cries or fusses).
- Makes noise when talked to.

Language Development 6-11 months

- Understands "no-no".
- Babbles (says "ba-ba-ba" or "ma-ma-ma").
- Tries to communicate by actions or gestures.
- Tries to repeat your sounds.

Language Development 12-17 months

- Attends to a book or toy for about two minutes.
- Follows simple directions accompanied by gestures.
- Answers simple questions nonverbally.
- Points to objects, pictures, and family members.
- Says two to three words to label a person or object (pronunciation may not be clear).
- Tries to imitate simple words.

Language Development 18-23 months

- Enjoys having someone reading to him/her.
- Follows simple commands without gestures.
- Points to simple body parts such as "nose."
- Understands simple verbs such as "eat," "sleep."
- Correctly pronounces most vowels and *n*, *m*, *p*, *h*, especially in the beginning of syllables and short words. Also begins to use other speech sounds.
- Says 8 to 10 words (pronunciation may still be unclear).
- Asks for common foods by name.
- Makes animal sounds such as "moo."
- Starting to combine words such as "more milk."

- Begins to use pronouns such as "mine."

Language Development 2-3 years

- Knows about 50 words at 24 months.
- Knows some spatial concepts such as "in," "on."
- Knows pronouns such as "you," "me," "her."
- Knows descriptive words such as "big," "happy."
- Says around 40 words at 24 months.
- Speech is becoming more accurate but may still leave off ending sounds. Strangers may not be able to understand much of what is said.
- Answers simple questions.
- Begins to use more pronouns such as "you," "I."
- Speaks in two to three word phrases.
- Uses question inflection to ask for something (e.g., "My ball?").
- Begins to use plurals such as "shoes" or "socks" and regular past tense verbs such as "jumped."

Language Development 3-4 years

- Groups objects such as foods, clothes, etc.
- Identifies colors.
- Uses most speech sounds but may distort some of the more difficult sounds such as *l, r, s, sh, ch, y, v, z, th*. These sounds may not be fully mastered until age 7 or 8.
- Uses consonants in the beginning, middle, and ends of words. Some of the more difficult consonants may be distorted, but attempts to say them.
- Strangers are able to understand much of what is said.
- Able to describe the use of objects such as "fork," "car," etc.
- Has fun with language. Enjoys poems and recognizes language absurdities such as, "Is that an elephant on your head?"
- Expresses ideas and feelings rather than just talking about the world around him or her.
- Uses verbs that end in "ing," such as "walking," "talking."
- Answers simple questions such as "What do you do when you are hungry?"
- Repeats sentences.

Language Development 4-5 years

- Understands spatial concepts such as "behind," "next to."
- Understands complex questions.

- Speech is understandable but makes mistakes pronouncing long, difficult, or complex words such as "hippopotamus."
- Says about 200 - 300 different words.
- Uses some irregular past tense verbs such as "ran," "fell."
- Describes how to do things such as painting a picture.
- Defines words.
- Lists items that belong in a category such as animals, vehicles, etc.
- Answers "why" questions.

Language Development 5 years

- Understands more than 2,000 words.
- Understands time sequences (what happened first, second, third, etc.).
- Carries out a series of three directions.
- Understands rhyming.
- Engages in conversation.
- Sentences can be 8 or more words in length.
- Uses compound and complex sentences.
- Describes objects.
- Uses imagination to create stories.

4. My 3 year old points to and identifies letters on a page from right to left instead of left to right. Should I be concerned?

Your child is demonstrating age-appropriate behaviors as he is still in the process of developing *print awareness* which involves noticing print and how to handle a book. Your child is exploring a particular concept referred to as *directionality*-knowing that we read and write from left to right in the English language. You can help your child develop this skill by giving him multiple opportunities to read and write with you and by pointing out how it is done.

5. I fear my child may have a developmental disability and I'm not sure what steps to take. Is there an agency that can help me?

Children vary a great deal in their development, but if you believe your child is experiencing a delay you can contact [First Steps](#) in Kentucky at 877-41-STEPS or 877-417-8377. First Steps is a statewide intervention program serving children birth to age 3 and their families regardless of income.

6. What should I do if my child won't sit still for a book?

If your child won't sit still for a book she may not be in the mood. You can make reading a positive and enjoyable experience by sharing a book when both you and your child feel good. The last thing you want to do is force a child to sit and pay attention to a book when

she does not feel up to it. If your child experiences negative interactions around books and reading she will like it less and less.

7. I see other children participate with the activities and songs in storytime but my child never does. At home, however, he does all of the things done in storytime. Why?

Your child may not be used to the storytime routine yet and may not be comfortable participating when multiple children are present. He may just need some time to adjust, or it could be that he would rather watch others participate than join in himself.

8. What's the difference between a picture book and a beginning reader?

Picture books are meant to be enjoyed by all readers and range in difficulty. Some picture books consist of a few words per page and simple sentences, while others contain many words and complex sentence structures. Beginning readers, like picture books, range in difficulty, but are constructed around a core set of sight words-words that frequently appear in print and are often used in speech. The beginning readers in the Boone County Public Library system are separated into four different levels and are organized by color:

Red: Just-getting started; beginning readers have few words, large print, and large pictures.

Blue: Words are simple; sentences are short. Words and phrases are often repeated. Illustrations continue to be predominant.

Green: Words and sentence structure become more challenging and print is smaller. Some books are divided into short chapters.

Black: Plots become slightly complex; many are divided into short chapters.

9. How can I help my child develop early literacy skills if my first language is not English?

If you are not a fluent English speaker the best thing you can do for your child is to speak and read to her in your native language. Research has shown us that if your child has a strong understanding of her first language she will have an easier time learning to read English (Tabors, 1997). The [Boone County Adult Education Program](#) offers English language classes if you are interested in improving your skills.

10. I need help finding a child care facility. Is there an agency that can help me with this?

The agency you want to contact is [4C](#). They can be reached via telephone at 859-781-3511, x1330 or 800-256-1296 x1330. The agency serves Southwestern Ohio and Northern Kentucky and operates the only Child Care Resource and Referral Service in the area. Their website provides tips and checklists for selecting a [Quality Family Child Care Home](#), a [Quality Program and Infant/Toddler Checklist](#), a [Quality Program and Preschool Checklist](#), and a [Quality Program and School-age Care Checklist](#).

11. I've heard that some daycare facilities in Kentucky can be judged by the number of stars they have. Can you tell me more about this program?

STARS for KIDS NOW is a voluntary child care quality rating system. The STARS program rates participating home and center based childcare providers, once a year, on a 1 to 4 scale. [View the brochure](#) or [visit the website](#).

12. Does preschool make a difference?

Decades of research suggests that *quality* preschool programs do benefit young children's development (Barnett, 1995; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Children attending preschool have been known to have greater math and reading achievement than non-participants (Magnuson, Ruhm & Waldfogel, 2007) as well as improved social skills (Adams, Edie, Riley, Roach & Ittig, 2004; Calman & Tarr-Whelan), reduced grade retention, and increased graduation rates (Temple & Reynolds, 2007; Adams et al., 2004). The [4C website](#), the [National Institute for Early Education Research](#) (NIEER), and the [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#) (NAEYC) all provide information about what parents need to know when choosing a preschool.

13. What should I look for in a preschool?

The 4C website provides [a checklist of characteristics to look for in a preschool program](#). The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) also provides [a list of things parents need to know](#) about choosing a high quality preschool [as does the National Association for the Education of Young Children](#) (NAEYC).

14. How do I know if my child is ready for kindergarten?

A team of individuals from the Northern Kentucky Council of Partners in Education, Northern Kentucky University, and United Way Success By 6™ have created the following kindergarten readiness definition for children in Northern Kentucky:

Skills and behaviors to expect from most children at the beginning of kindergarten

Emotional Development

- To be away from parents/family without being upset
- To follow simple rules and routine
- To express his/her own wants and needs
- To express concern for other's feelings

Social Development

- To get along with others
- To share with others
- To participate in large and small group activities
- To listen to adults/others and follow simple instructions
- To work with others reasonably well

Physical Development and Care

- To have visited a doctor and dentist
- To dress and meet toileting needs independently
- To run, jump, hop, and climb
- To use pencils, crayons, and scissors in some fashion

Language/Vocabulary

- To try to write first name
- Tell the difference between print and pictures
- Write or scribble notes, letters and stories
- Recognize own name in print
- Hold a book correctly
- Recognize letters of the alphabet
- Listen to stories read to them
- Tell that print/words and not pictures are being read
- To use 5-6 word sentences
- To recognize and say simple rhymes
- To sing simple songs

Math

- Count to 10
- Sort objects by color, size or shape
- Understand simple concepts of time (example: day, night, today, tomorrow, yesterday)

Visit the [Northern Kentucky Council of Partners in Education website](#) to learn more about kindergarten readiness and what you can do to prepare your child for kindergarten.