

# Supporting Early Communication and Literacy Skills in Infants and Toddlers

## After reading this article, caregivers will be able to:

- Understand how early communication supports later literacy development.
- Recognize how everyday interactions build infants' language and learning skills.
- Use simple strategies to support communication and early literacy during daily routines.
- Identify community resources that support early literacy development.

**W**hen you hear the word “literacy,” you might think of learning to read or writing words. Reading and writing are important parts of literacy, but literacy also begins much earlier through children’s experiences with books, stories, songs, pictures, and conversations that help them understand how language, symbols, and print carry meaning.

Researchers often describe this early stage as *emergent literacy*. Emergent literacy refers to the skills, knowledge, and experiences children develop before they can formally read or write. These early experiences with language and communication create the foundation for later reading, writing, and learning

One common misconception is that babies are too young to learn literacy skills. Since infants cannot read or write, some assume that it begins in preschool or kindergarten. However, research shows that early literacy begins at birth and grows through warm, responsive interactions with caregivers and early experiences with language, books, storytelling, music, and play.



As babies listen to voices, respond to facial expressions, look at pictures, hear stories, and participate in back-and-forth interactions, they begin developing the language and communication skills that support later reading and writing. Early literacy is closely connected to children’s earliest communication experiences and their growing understanding that sounds, words, gestures, pictures, and print all carry meaning.

At home, babies are exposed to the language, routines, and communication styles of their family and culture. Caregivers naturally create opportunities for learning during in feeding, diaper changes, playtime, and bedtime routines. For babies who attend child care, providers build on the experiences children bring from home. They talk with infants during daily routines, respond to their sounds and gestures, share books and songs, and create opportunities for back-and-forth interaction. In both home and child care settings, adults play an important role by responding to a baby’s cues and creating meaningful experiences with language, stories, and books.

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Written by

**Daija Reyburn-French**, Undergraduate Research Assistant

**Aida Ismailova**, Graduate Research Assistant

**Aileen Garcia**, Assistant Professor & Extension State Specialist, Human Development and Family Science

**Jessica Trussell**, Field Specialist, Human Development and Family Science

## What We Know About Early Communication and Learning

Even though babies do not start talking clearly or in full sentences until between 9 and 20 months, they communicate from birth in many ways. Early communication begins with crying and cooing, followed by smiling and babbling, gestures such as pointing or wiggling, and eventually first words and short phrases. These early sounds and gestures are not random, in fact they are the foundation of communication that later support talking, understanding, reading, and writing. This is why it's important for parents and caregivers to treat babies as "communication partners."<sup>i</sup> When you smile back at your baby, answer their coo with your own voice, or respond when they reach for something, you are teaching them that communication is a back-and-forth interaction and that all that attempts have a meaningful message.

We now know that encouraging this communication helps infants build not only their communication skills, but also their social skills. You may have heard of the



term "serve-and-return." It was coined by the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, and describes warm, back-and-forth exchanges between a young child and a caring adult who notices and responds to the child's sounds, gestures, facial expressions, or words.

More simply, it means the back-and-forth interaction. A baby "serves" by looking at something, making a sound, or reaching their hand out. An adult "returns" responding verbally, smiling, picking them up, or naming what they see. This everyday "serve-and-return" is a simple way to support their early literacy development.

Research shows that children are not passive listeners. They actively use sounds, facial expressions, gestures, and experiences around them as clues to learn that words and sounds carry meanings. They watch where adults look, notice tone of voice, compare new words to ones they already know, and use patterns in sentences to guess meaning.<sup>ii,iii</sup> All of these behaviors show that children are deeply engaged in learning to communicate, setting the stage for why adult support matters.

## Why it's Important to Support Early Communication

These early interactions may seem small or mundane, but they are building blocks for later reading and learning. These interactions also help shape children's developing brains. For example, research shows that responsive, back-and-forth interactions – such as a caregiver responding to a baby's sounds and the baby responding again - help strengthen the brain connections involved in language, memory, and attention. These early experiences literally build the brain architecture that supports later learning.<sup>vi</sup> When babies babble, they are practicing sounds that will eventually become words.<sup>v</sup> By engaging and labeling items for them, you help them connect sounds to words and the meaning of these words.

Children who experience rich and responsive conversations tend to develop larger vocabularies and process language more efficiently.<sup>vi</sup> Early vocabulary growth is strongly linked to later reading comprehension and academic success.<sup>vii</sup>

At the same time, research suggests that excessive screen time during infancy and toddlerhood may interfere with opportunities for responsive interaction and communication. Young children learn language best through real-life interactions with caring adults rather than passive screen exposure. Talking, reading, singing, and playing together remain some of the most effective ways to support early communication and literacy development.

# Supporting Early Communication and Literacy

There are many ways to support an infant's early communication and literacy development, and most of these strategies are free or easy to include in everyday routines. Here are simple ways to strengthen your baby's communication:

## 1. Practice “serve-and-return”

Notice what your baby is looking at or reaching toward and talk about it. If they stare at a dog, you might say, “Yes, that’s a dog! That’s a cute dog!” When you talk about what interests them, they learn words more easily.

## 2. Narrate your day

Describe what you’re doing as you move through routines. For example, you might say, “I’m washing your hands. The water feels warm.” These short explanations can help build vocabulary and help babies connect words to real experiences.

## 3. Surround children with books and learning materials

Keep books, pictures, toys and printed materials available in the child’s environment. Children also learn by watching adults use books, write notes, read labels, or interact with print in everyday life.

## 4. Make books part of playful interaction

Reading with babies often looks like play, and it does not have to be quiet or serious. You can read at bedtime, on the couch, or for a few minutes while waiting at the doctor’s office. Let your baby explore the book by touching pages, pointing at pictures, sounding out letters, or even chewing on a sturdy board book. Join in by making animal sounds, repeating silly words, clapping out rhythms, or singing together.

## 5. Use community resources

Many communities offer free programs and resources that support early literacy development. Public libraries often provide story times, music activities, and infant programs that help children connect language with joy and social interaction. Other helpful resources may include:

- Early Head Start programs
- Parents as Teachers home visiting programs
- Community recreation centers
- Local parenting groups and playgroups

## Learn More:

- [Zero to Three](http://zerotothree.org) (zerotothree.org)
- [Reading Rockets](http://readingrockets.org) (readingrockets.org)
- [Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library](http://imaginationlibrary.com) (imaginationlibrary.com)
- [Harvard Center on the Developing Child](http://developingchild.harvard.edu) (developingchild.harvard.edu)
- [Parents as Teachers](http://parentsasteachers.org) (parentsasteachers.org)

Much of early literacy begins with parents and caregivers. When you create learning opportunities, encourage curiosity, and share attention in everyday moments, you help build the communication and literacy skills children will use throughout their lives.

## References

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