

Childcare and children's health

Health care information for childcare staff and families from the Centre for Community Child Health

Vol 8 No 5 November 2005

Literacy experiences in the 21st century

Literacy involves the exchange of meanings with others. It includes the processes of encoding and decoding print, creating and interpreting images, oral communication and critical thinking. Positive attitudes and values towards literacy are also important. Children are more likely to develop positive attitudes regarding literacy when they see that literacy is meaningful and relevant to their daily lives. Children are exposed to many forms of the written and spoken word, as well as still and moving images, in the activities they are involved in each day and these can contribute to an understanding and enjoyment of literacy.

There are a broad range of technologies that families and children interact with in their everyday lives. Each of these provides texts. Texts may be oral (that is spoken), wholly print, a combination of print and images, or totally visual. Today many texts integrate print, images and sound. The range of texts that we interact with may include books, television, CD-ROMs, videos, DVDs and computer games. Digital texts such as emails, internet sites and SMS play a growing role in the creation and exchange of meanings. Different children will experience and be attracted to different forms of texts. Texts are increasingly:

- ◆ Visual
- ◆ Interactive
- ◆ Multimodal as they integrate visuals, sound and print

With the exposure to such a wide range of texts children are likely to need the ability to critically analyse and to make and create meanings.

Literacy as part of everyday life

Literacy is part of everyday life of families. We use literacy as we communicate with friends and family members, do the shopping, cook dinner and participate in leisure activities. Children today experience a range of literacy practices as they take part in social activities and economic transactions in their homes and communities. Many of these experiences are different to the ones that we may have had as children, and to the ones that are often valued in early childhood settings and schools.

Shared book experiences should be encouraged as a major activity contributing to development of emergent literacy skills in children, and particularly in developing phonological sensitivity. There are many other literacy experiences that children are involved in as part of everyday life, that also support emerging understandings of literacy.

Other experiences may include:



- Reading and viewing signs, labels and logos- for example street signs, advertisements, food packaging and symbols on clothing
- Listening to told stories, rhymes and jokes
- Interacting with 'talking books'
- Viewing television programs, videos and DVDs
- Reading and sending letters, greeting cards, postcards, SMS messages and emails
- Playing computer games
- Looking up information on the internet
- Reading and viewing magazines, newspapers, comics and store catalogues
- Playing card games and board games
- Drawing and writing using paper and pencils and computer software

This list of experiences indicates that children interact with a range of texts, and these interactions contribute to literacy learning.

Environmental print

Most children growing up in Australia are immersed in print and images as well as spoken language. Words, print, images, signs, symbols and sounds surround children as they observe their environment and interact with others. Catching a train, for example, involves checking the timetable, reading the computer screen or board to check the destination of the next train and buying a ticket from the ticket machine. On the platform there are billboards and maybe an electronic screen with news and advertisements. On the train there may be a digital display as well as announcements indicating the train's stopping patterns.

In many communities there are texts in community languages as well as English. These include shop signs, billboards, newspapers, books and food packaging. Many children are therefore developing understandings of print and how print works with languages other than English.

Technologies

Information and communication technologies are an important part of many children's lives. Children interact with and manipulate a range of technologies including television, videos, DVDs, computers, MP3s and portable computers such as Gameboys and PSPs. Rather than replacing books, media such as television, DVDs and computers exist alongside more traditional print media.

Most children growing up in Australia in the 21st century have access to computers. Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicate that 66% of Australian homes have a computer and 53% of homes have access to the Internet. While there are no data collected for under fives, 82% of

school-age children in 2003 used a computer at home and 51% also used the Internet at home. Children also used computers and the Internet at other peoples' homes and in community settings such as the public library.

Technologies provide new sites of learning. Children learn about the ways that stories are constructed through repeated viewings of DVDs in the same way that they learn about narrative structure through hearing the same book read many times. Children learn about print through family experiences such as looking for information on the internet, reading text messages on mobile phones and shopping online as well as through shared book experiences. The interactive and multimodal nature of computer-based texts means that even quite young children are able to independently access, manipulate and create texts.

Popular media culture

Many children are highly interested in texts of popular culture such as Winnie the Pooh, the Saddle Club and Pokémon. Popular culture characters and narratives are part of many children's social worlds. Children often have similar interests in popular media so that it creates a shared frame of reference that they draw on in their play and learning. Children will often talk, draw and write about their favourite characters and stories. They also innovate on familiar stories in their play, changing characters and plots to suit their own purposes.

Importantly, research has demonstrated that children who do not usually show an interest in traditional reading and writing experiences can respond enthusiastically to literacy experiences that incorporate their popular culture interests. Several studies have shown that children who generally did not choose to look at books, or to write or participate in creative arts experiences (often the four year old boys) would spend extended periods of time involved in literacy experiences when they were connected to their popular culture interests. They poured over books, magazines and catalogues that included popular culture icons, they drew and talked about their favourite characters, they copied the names of their favourite characters from books and magazines, and they made up their own games using collectable cards (Marsh, 2000; Arthur, 2005).

Popular culture can be a way to get children interested in literacy. Educators can then broaden children's experience to include different types of texts. Bringing popular media culture into the early childhood setting also provides educators with opportunities to work with children to explore many of the big ideas that they are interested in (such as heroes) and to challenge children to think about different views, thus providing alternative approaches to problem solving.

What do new views of literacy mean for early childhood programs?

Educators need to provide a curriculum that connects to and builds on children's family and community experiences in order to extend all children's literacy learning. Respect for children's diverse experiences with literacy within the contexts of their families and communities is essential in the provision of literacy programs that strengthen children's expertise and confidence as literacy users.

Effective literacy programs require carers to:

- ◆ Establish and maintain partnerships between children, families, communities and the early childhood setting. Strong partnerships are of paramount importance in supporting children's early literacy learning. When there is regular communication between families and carers, carers are able to find out about children's experiences at home. Two-way communication also enables families to be well-informed about the early childhood setting's approaches to literacy and their own child's literacy.
- ◆ Provide literacy resources that incorporate the diversity of children's family and community experiences in ways that value diversity and are not tokenistic. This may mean including environmental print in languages other than English, incorporating books and magazines that reflect children's popular culture interests and providing opportunities for children to create texts using computer software. Curriculum that is inclusive of children's experiences and interests provides many opportunities for children to display their literacy understandings and to extend their existing knowledge to new contexts.
- ◆ Plan meaningful experiences that reflect everyday literacy practices. When early childhood settings integrate environmental print, such as magazines, food packaging and store catalogues, children are able to see the ways in which literacy is part of everyday social practices. Inclusion of these sorts of texts in the program enables children who do not have traditional book-based literacy experiences to display their understandings and extend their repertoire of literacy practices.
- ◆ Incorporate a range of literacy materials into children's play environments. For example include menus, notepads and pencils, a computer or keyboard, food packaging and signs in the restaurant dramatic play area. The block construction area could include road maps, signs, architects' plans and posters as well as paper and pencils and a computer with appropriate software to encourage children to plan and record their constructions. Literacy-enriched play

environments such as these provide children with many opportunities to explore the functions and features of print and to try out and extend understandings.

- ◆ Join in children's play and support their literacy experiences. At appropriate times the carer may join in the play to demonstrate reading, model writing, sound out words, talk about letter-sound relationships and discuss concepts of print in meaningful contexts. In this way carers are able to provide appropriate levels of challenge and support without disrupting the play or taking control away from the children.
- ◆ Engage children in critical thinking about a range of texts, including popular media culture. Issues that can be explored with children through the use of texts of popular culture include:
 - Who are heroes? Why are they heroes? Who else is a hero? (exploring heroes from different countries, sporting heroes, heroes in traditional stories, issues of power and so on)
 - How can we resolve conflicts in peaceful ways?
 - What roles do boys and girls have in popular media stories? Can we create new roles?
 - Are the people in these stories like us? Who is missing?
 - What is a family?
 - How does popular media culture make us want to buy things? How can we resist these messages?

These sorts of discussions enable children to express their enjoyment of popular media culture while also discussing alternate perspectives.

The inclusion in early childhood settings of everyday texts such as environmental print, technologies and popular media culture provides many opportunities for carers and children to find a common ground to explore and extend literacy experiences.

QIAS Principles: 2.2, 3.1, 6.1, 6.3

Note in the QIAS (Quality Practices Guide 2005) Principles 1.4, 2.1, 4.1, 4.3

FDCQA Principles 1.3, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.6

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References: Arthur, L. (2005). Popular culture: Views of parents and educators, in J. Marsh (Ed.). *Popular culture, new media and digital literacy in early childhood*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

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Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 1(2), 1190133.

Case Study

The children at Paddington Children's Centre (UnitingCare) live in a 'café society', many have breakfast at local cafés prior to coming to the centre. This is part of their everyday life.

The children's conversations and play were increasingly featuring café life. The staff supported this interest through provisions within the early childhood environment eg dramatic play props, books and discussion. The children's interest was further extended with an excursion to a local café (as suggested by the children).

The staff provided opportunities for the children to be 'in control' of the questioning. The children's knowledge was the starting point with the excursion providing the opportunity to extend old and develop new understandings. Within most discussions there are opportunities for the early childhood professionals to promote critical thinking and challenge stereotypes.

Socially, the children were able to delegate who asked the questions. On return to the centre, the children revisited their learning by drawing their experience.

Sun Room's trip to the cafe

As our interest in the cafe develops, so does our interest in writing of orders, the taking of money, and the extremely serious job of role playing.

On deciding that we would visit the café, we drew up a list of items that we would see at the cafe. We did this with the intention of checking off our list and adding extra things that we had not identified but observed at the cafe.

The general statement was

At the cafe we would see...

some chairs and tables, (later adding that they will be indoors and outdoors)

people and children sitting at the tables

waitresses (with the discussion that men do the same job and are usually called waiters)

<i>kitchen</i>	<i>cups and plates</i>	<i>a notepad</i>	<i>food and drinks</i>
<i>money</i>	<i>tea and coffee</i>	<i>cash register</i>	<i>spoons, knives and forks</i>

When we were at the cafe, we discovered that we hadn't realized we would see the pepper and salt, the napkins, water bottles, ice cream, cakes, bread and sugar. We immediately added those to our list.

We also had questions that we wanted to ask the staff at the cafe:

Q1) What happens if the people eat all the food?

A1) The boss will quickly go to the shop and buy some more food to cook

Q2) What do you write your orders on?

A2) A notebook, and the waitress took it out and showed us.

Q3) Do people bring their dogs?

A3) Yes, people bring their dogs and they sit outside.

Q4) Do you feed the dogs?

A4) Sometimes when they are thirsty we give them water in a plastic bowl.

After writing the interview questions, the children decided that some children in particular were in charge of asking the questions.

This was a simple experience that inspired critical thinking and literacy. It involved recalling, predicting, recording and revisiting. The documentation allows the children to revisit the experience. As early childhood professionals, this experience may also challenge our personal views on child rearing – again a positive opportunity if we choose to explore it!

With thanks to Rebecca, Emily and Giselle EC professionals working with the Sun Room at Paddington Children's Centre (UnitingCare) 2005.

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SUPPORTED BY AN
EDUCATIONAL GRANT FROM



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