

Emergent Literacy: Helping Young Children's Development Through Reading

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Children become readers and writers through a continuous developmental process called emergent literacy. Emergent literacy builds knowledge and skills that lead to standard forms of reading and writing. Learning to read is a process fundamentally driven by a more experienced person (someone who already knows how to read, usually an adult), with a less experienced individual (usually a child). While each person learns to read differently, research shows that building emergent literacy skills can be done intentionally and provides great fun for both the adult and child. To do this, think of learning to read differently, and then apply specific strategies to help your child learn to read. The most important aspect of this process is to remember to read **with** your child, as opposed to reading **to** your child. Reading with your child is a collaborative process that engages you and your child in navigating the book's story, characters, and your own ideas about what is happening.

Thinking About a Child's Thinking

Adults are commonly faced with the task of meeting children's needs, expending lots of energy on feeding, clothing, bathing, and other basic duties of raising children. When adults are consumed by these tasks, they may forget that children are also developing their own minds and thinking. Children are constantly learning about the world, and as adults in their lives perform these fundamental tasks, children's minds are working to make sense of what they experience.

Adults are usually interested in the things that not everyone knows, but children are striving to learn what



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everyone already knows. The first step in how to make learning to read more fun, engaging, and productive is to think about your child's thinking. This approach to child development is called being "mind-minded." It sets the stage for building the child's reading through a process called scaffolding.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is best conceptualized as a process of being able to draw new distinctions, examine information from new perspectives, and being aware of the time of day, location, and other factors affecting an activity. It is a way of thinking about things not as they are, but as they could be, and recognizes the potential for many different outcomes. Essentially, mindfulness is an active and intentional way of being in the moment. This framework encourages you to deliberately think about what is happening and respond with practices to extend thinking and learning.

Mind-mindedness

Mind-mindedness involves treating your child as an individual with a mind, as opposed to just an individual with needs (for example, food, clothing, shelter). Adults know they need to meet children's needs. But they can do so in a mind-minded fashion by thinking about a child's thinking. This helps extend learning in everyday need-meeting interactions. For example, when cooking, an adult can think about what a child might be thinking about the way food is prepared, and use a technique known as scaffolding to build a child's mental capacity, while still meeting basic needs.

Mind-mindedness emphasizes listening to what the child says to better anticipate and intentionally respond. For example, if you are making soup, you can talk about the vegetables you're cutting up and why you do that. You can even let your child taste some of those that can be eaten raw.

Scaffolding

In the construction world, scaffolds are intentional, temporary, and flexible structures used in building. In a similar way, mental and language scaffolding is built to match a child's development. The building, constructing, and positioning of resources to create scaffolds involves active processes, which allow the building to be built with supporting structures that eventually are no longer necessary. There are many ways to think about scaffolding, but here are six approaches



that have proven effective in building cognitive and social-emotional skills in children.

Questioning

Asking questions in a mindful and mind-minded manner is one of the easiest and most productive ways for adults to interact with children. Begin by assessing what the child already knows about the current topic.

Ask questions that help you assess the child's thinking. For example, "Do you know what color that is?" or, "Do you know what this is called?" Answers to these questions help adults assess the child's understanding of the world. Often these questions can be answered with either a "yes" or "no," or a single word response. While the aim of scaffolding is to provide assistance to children in learning, you must first know where they are to then apply developmentally appropriate practices to help them learn. If a child does not know the color red, asking him to hand you the red pencil would be a useless request, as he could not possibly comply.

Assistance questions help you assist a child. These are the questions that an adult asks that make a child really

think about something, and therefore helps them in thinking about what they are experiencing. Assistance questions are always open-ended, which requires the child to think about something she might not have ever considered before. One of the most important questions to ask a child, especially in response to a question is, “Well what do you think the answer is?”

Assistance questions are who, what, why, and how questions. For example, “What do you think is going to happen next in this story?” or “What do you think that character is thinking about?” Such questions provide opportunities for the child to extend his thinking and learning and also help him think about another’s thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions. They establish the foundation for understanding another perspective, which is crucial in social-emotional development. This skill helps children get along better with peers, siblings, and adults, and has been shown to be beneficial in other ways, such as academic achievement.

Explaining and Instructing

Just as adults can tire of being peppered with questions, children can easily tire of being quizzed. Additionally, while questioning is a useful strategy, providing explanation or instruction can also encourage a child’s development through contributing new information to build upon. Sometimes children (and adults) need just a single piece of information that helps them make the leap to full understanding. At other times, children just want to know more. Adults should assess what a child knows through questioning, and then follow up with some mix of scaffolding strategies. Explanation and instruction scaffolding strategies usually serve as the default for adults, who may be inclined to answer a question or explain what is happening. But you can easily over-rely on explaining as a strategy, so use it in moderation.

Modeling

Adults are constantly modeling human behavior and interaction for children. Remember, children are constantly trying to learn what almost every adult already knows. Learning through observation is one of the easiest strategies for children, as it requires very little effort, and produces benefits for children in figuring out how the social and physical world works. Adults serve as models for how people interact, how to behave in a particular situation, and how to treat others. When interacting with children, adults can be mindful of the effect their modeling has and model

the desired behavior for a child. For example, when reading with a child, sounding out words models for children how to look at the print and determine how a word sounds. Being mindful and mind-minded in these instances helps you remember to demonstrate positive ways of navigating the world.

There is also a richer type of modeling — imitating what you see. For example, you can flap your arms to mimic a bird’s flight. When you physically model things you see in books, you maintain and enhance the child’s interest in your behavior. Additionally, you can teach children about the world through modeling with your body and voice. Using the tone, inflection, and pitch of your voices to enhance your portrayal of the world raises the child’s interest, which is always effective when teaching a child.

Feedback

Feedback alone can lead a child to considerable improvement. Providing feedback can be the single most effective means of assistance. Feedback should be relative to a standard because providing performance information is not feedback unless it is relative to this standard. For example, commenting on a child’s performance by saying, “good job” is not actually feedback. Saying, “You did a good job. You used to struggle with that” or “That’s better than you did last time” are different. This way, the child learns about performing well relative to previous experience or an established standard. The difference between, “You did a good job” and “You did a good job, because” cannot be understated. When you are mindful of the child’s need to know why, when you provide the because, the importance of doing so becomes clear.

Maintaining Focus

When reading with a child, maintaining the child’s focus can be difficult. Children are still developing the skills necessary to maintain their attention and follow the story of a book. You can manage these distractions in multiple ways, including using your authority as an adult to force compliance. “Because I said so” is one of the most common reasons adults give children who ask why they need to do something. Adults should only use such commands when a child’s safety is at stake. When reading, offering choices such as finishing a page and then doing something else, stopping now, or skipping ahead, can give a child options. This helps build a sense of agency, which is the ability to act on your own. Throughout this process, being mindful and

mind-minded helps you strengthen the child's ability to maintain focus. There is always a delicate balance between following the child's line of thinking, which often leaves the context of the book, and maintaining focus. Try to follow the child's thinking when he appears to be off-track, because some of the most fun, hilarious, insightful, and heartwarming stories are told when you let your child tell you what he is thinking.

Structuring

The act of structuring an activity, such as reading a book, provides a child with much-needed information about what to expect. For example, when reading a book with a child, you can structure the activity by saying you are going to read and think about the story together. This gives the child an understanding of the activity, as well as a shared focus on the story. Adults can structure more specifically, such as explaining that a book has characters, settings, and actions. Framing books in this way helps children learn what to expect, as well as providing some of the answers to the "why" questions children ask so frequently.

Summary

Truly reading with a child involves thoughtful and active listening to assess and assist the child's knowledge. The six strategies highlighted should be used together rather than relying on a single approach. When adults use a variety of scaffolding techniques, children learn both socially and mentally much more rapidly.

The greatest benefits of reading in this way are that adults learn more about their children and children become more interested in reading. The adult-child social interactions resulting from these shared reading sessions set the stage for future development. By making reading more fun and using books as a jumping off point for teaching and learning about each other and the world, adults and children can have the time of their lives without ever leaving the house.



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