



# connections

Alberta Home Visitation Network Association



Alberta Home Visitation  
Network Association

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## Reading for Life: A Family Literacy Skill

By Lavonne Roloff

“Oh, the places you will go” as Dr. Seuss said. Being able to go places is partly dependent on the ability to read and succeed. Family literacy contributes to individuals being able to actualize their dreams and doing the things they want in life.

I was fortunate when I was growing up to have a mother who loved to read and she passed on that interest to each of her children. The excitement of imagining a faraway adventure or fantasy in a story brought interest and excitement to our home as we travelled through the pages of a book.

I thought it was important that my children also have that experience and so we incorporated aspects of family literacy into our everyday life. We would talk about the scenery as we travelled in the car, or what was happening in a particular television show and of course we shared a love for books. I remember reading about *Alexander and the Terrible Horrible No Good Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst and *Mortimer* by Robert Munsch. We read these stories until their words and visions were embedded in our memories. I remember my son's love of fantasy books which spurred his own creation of “Middle Earth” complete with maps and adventures (we still have the maps in our crawlspace). This is part of how we developed a strong parent and child relationship in our family.

To this day, both of my children love to read and it has become part of their leisure

activities. It has also become something that we can share as they have become adults as we discuss a book that they have recently read. Reading helps in laying down neural pathways in the brain and developing a strong attachment between parent and child. Family literacy is something that we can incorporate into our everyday lives as it goes beyond reading. Perhaps you have had wonderful opportunities in your own family that have strengthened family literacy—take time to reflect on this or maybe you will find suggestions or ideas within this issue of Connections that you might try with your family and relatives. Enjoy!

*Lavonne Roloff is the Provincial Director  
for the Alberta Home Visitation Network  
Association (AHVNA)*



# Research and the Promise of Family Literacy

By Kimberley Onclin

## Family Literacy

The concept of family literacy is difficult to define. Several disciplines contribute to its understanding: reading psychology, early childhood education, adult education, sociolinguistics, family systems theory, and social science. Family literacy “encompasses the way parents, children, and extended family members use literacy at home and in their community.”

Family literacy also entails those literacy tasks that occur during the routines of daily living. However, Denny Taylor (1997) wrote, “No single narrow definition of family literacy can do justice to the richness and complexity of families, and the multiple literacies, including often unrecognized local literacies that are part of [families] everyday lives.”

Family literacy is not just about children’s literacy. It is also about adult literacy. Adults who participate

in family literacy programs gain an understanding of how their children acquire literacy skills, and how they can support this development. And, more frequent reading with their children also increases their own reading confidence and literacy skills.

## Emergent Literacy

A concept closely connected with family literacy is emergent literacy. Coined in 1966 by New Zealand researcher, Marie Clay, it describes the behaviours seen in not-yet-literate children when they use books and writing materials to mimic reading and writing. Today’s understanding of the term is far broader. Literacy is now known to begin at birth (or perhaps earlier) with first experiences with oral language, and is expanded through exposure to books, music, art, and other media.

Emergent literacy includes vocabulary development, phonological awareness (understanding of the sounds and the meaning of spoken language), early attempts at reading (telling a story based on pictures), and writing (scribbling). It also encompasses the conceptual understanding of the abstract symbolic nature of communications (the squiggles on the page represent sounds, and, put together, they name concepts and concrete things).

Perhaps the most useful contribution of emergent literacy is the understanding that each child’s language and literacy skills will develop differently, and at different times. Emergent literacy replaced the idea of “reading readiness”, which assumed that preliteracy skills should magically appear

in uniform ways when children reached a certain age.

Family literacy is supported by the growing evidence about brain development indicating the period of early childhood from conception through at least age three is critical to a child’s overall language and literacy development. To a large extent, current family literacy programs focus on the zero-to-six age group. However, research suggests parents and their children would also benefit from family literacy supports throughout the children’s school years. In these later years, adults may struggle to adequately help their children do their homework and increasingly complex literacy and learning tasks.

Studies suggest that a child’s ability to learn can increase or decrease by 25% or more depending on whether they grow up in



Crystal Boyd and baby Jaiden enjoying a book at a Books for Babies group.

a stimulating environment (for example, being played with, sung to, read to, and hugged). Further, it is known that optimal brain and language development occurs in the context of warm, loving relationships. Language is learned only through relationships and talking with others. As Dr. Bruce Perry likes to say, “Literacy falls out of a healthy child development process.”

Other relevant research has shown the importance of the parent or other primary caregivers, such as teachers, which has led to the now somewhat clichéd phrase “parents are their children’s first teachers.” Cliché or not, it is a valid and proven concept. Studies show that children who live in families in which adults have limited literacy skills themselves, and where positive reading and writing experiences are not part of everyday life, are often at risk of underachievement when they enter school. However, research also show that levels of education and income do not necessarily determine the amount of literacy activity in the home. The home environments of poor families can be rich and varied in literacy activities, and poor parents often hold strong positive values about literacy support for their children. (Taylor, 1997; Morrow and Paratore, 1993)

# Adult Literacy: Effects on health and daily living

provided by the Centre for Family Literacy in Edmonton

## Advantages of higher literacy levels

Research tells us that higher literacy levels enable people to be

- healthier overall
- less vulnerable to long periods of unemployment
- able to enjoy a higher quality of life
- more efficient learners
- more able to adapt to changing circumstances
- better able to adjust to and adopt technology

## Direct effects of literacy on health

Health Canada states that literacy levels can directly affect health. For example, those with lower literacy skills may

- use medications incorrectly
- have trouble following medical directions
- make errors in mixing infant formula
- encounter safety risks in the workplace, the community, and at home

Literacy levels are also linked to other major determinants of health:

- living and working conditions (including poverty)
- personal health practices (healthy lifestyles)
- coping skills (stress, vulnerability, and control)

***Reading is a ladder out of poverty. It is probably one of the best anti-poverty, anti-crime, anti-vandalism policies you can think of.***

***—Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of United Kingdom***

Reports and information from the Canadian Council on Learning ([www.ccl-cca.ca/cc](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/cc)) indicate that a number of other factors contribute to the ease with which children gain language and emergent literacy skills. These include parenting style (such as methods of discipline), mother-child bond, and a child's interest in literacy. Of particular note, however, is the impact that maternal education levels, maternal age, and socio-economic status have on comprehension and language development, as well as later literacy and academic skills.

There is much research to support family literacy, and those of us using it in our practice see its many results. Seemingly simple activities, such as doing rhymes and finger plays, and telling stories, are key to laying a strong foundation for formal reading instruction and all future literacy and learning. The bonding that occurs when parents and other family members interact positively with their children around literacy activities helps to build resilient and secure children who have a sense of worth and belonging. Weaving family literacy into our practice helps families weave it into their daily life, which is the truest way we can reach the definition and promise of family literacy.

***Kimberley Onclin is Co-director of the Centre for Family Literacy.***

## Adult Literacy Resources

For more information and resources about adult literacy, check out these relevant websites.

**National Adult Literacy Database** is a database of Canadian literacy information and contacts.

[www.nald.ca](http://www.nald.ca)

**Statistics Canada** provides information on the International Adult Literacy Surveys and subsequent break-out reports.

[www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca)

**Centre for Family Literacy** has family literacy tip sheets (downloadable) and links to additional resources.

[www.familit.ca](http://www.familit.ca)

# Supporting Family Literacy During Home Visits

By Rebecca Still

Family literacy happens every day with the families you visit (cooking, shopping). These activities help children learn that reading and writing activities are important in daily life. Having good literacy skills makes it possible for us to 'get things done' every day.

Many parents may not have strong literacy skills, and think they can't help their child learn to read and write. As a home visitor, you can help parents use and build on the skills they already have.

The following ideas can help you build literacy into your home visits.

## Literacy items to include in your Home Visitor Tool Kit

- Writing/construction paper
- Crayons/pens/pencils
- Books (be sure they are appropriate for the stage development and interest of the children you visit)
- Magazines (Sears Wish Book is a good one)
- Flyers
- Simple puzzles
- Foam or magnetic letters

*Rebecca Still is the Family Literacy Coordinator for E4C Early Head Start in Edmonton.*

## Help families be aware of literacy in their home

- Increase understanding of literacy-related activities.
- Look for ways literacy is already happening in the home. For example, Does the family
  - have and use a calendar?
  - cook using recipes? Measure ingredients? Read labels?
  - go shopping? Make lists? Use flyers?
  - talk to their child as they do everyday tasks?
  - sing and share rhymes with their child?
- Point out to the family when they are using their literacy skills and let them know they are doing good things to help their child.

## Include family literacy activities on home visits

- Share new songs and rhymes.
- Model book sharing: hold the book on your lap and let him turn the pages. Point to the pictures and name the objects several times.
- Let the baby hold and play with the book.
- Make your own books using pictures cut from magazines, photos and calendars.
- Provide coloured water in squirt bottles to make snow or sidewalk pictures.
- Pause while reading and let a child fill in the missing word.
- Go on a scavenger hunt to find leaves, pebbles, small sticks or something big, small, smooth or rough.
- Let a child plant something in the garden or in a pot and watch it grow.
- Use magnet letters to spell out words.
- Play "I Spy" for colour or simple shapes.
- Talk to the child and build her vocabulary.
- Make up a story and share it with the child.
- Use your local library.
- While reading to an older child, ask questions such as, "Why do you think he did that?" or, "How did that happen?"
- Encourage parents to read or share books as often as possible with their child.

## Resources

Find an excellent early literacy article for tips on fostering early literacy at [www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/LessonsInLearning/LiL-1Feb2006.htm](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/LessonsInLearning/LiL-1Feb2006.htm).

Find a family literacy coordinator and program in your area by calling the Literacy Help Line (1-800-767-3231).

# Building Literacy Learning Within Family Environments

By Sue Steigmeier

“Family literacy is an approach to literacy development that recognizes and supports the family as a learning unit and builds on strengths and connections within the context of the culture and community in which they live and learn.”<sup>1</sup>

As a home visitor, you can build on activities that already exist within any home by explaining the role daily routines play in developing the parent-child literacy relationship. You can observe the family within their personal environment of physical space and objects, culture, traditions and social relationships, and behaviours.

You can show parents they already are doing many good things. Many of the tools are already in their home and you can observe what is currently important and useful in their life.

## Use what is available in the home

The family might have a large collection of videos and DVDs in their bookcases but few books. This may suggest this is the parents' way of providing information for their child. Discuss with the parent how to use videos to develop literacy. Watch the videos together—interaction is critical to learning from media! Ask questions around the story line to develop comprehension. Go for a walk to look for spiders after watching “Charlotte’s Web!” Validate parents as their child’s teacher. Through positive discussion, parents will move on to identify other daily activities they can build on.

## Use the environment, traditions, and culture of a family

Here are some simple key concepts to develop using the environment, traditions, and culture of a family.

- Talk with and listen to your child (in the bath, cooking, in the car, diapering, eating supper)
- Tell and read stories. Make your own oral or written stories about your family. Use family photographs.
- Sing and learn rhymes so children learn to manipulate and hear the sounds of language. “Research in literacy and child development has found that if children know eight nursery rhymes by heart by the time they are four years old, they are usually among the best readers by the time they are eight”<sup>2</sup>
- Make print a part of daily life: books, grocery lists, recipe books, hockey cards, and directions to build things, back cover of video case, grocery coupons, and newspapers.
- Provide writing and creating tools and make them part of daily life (crayons, paint, scissors, paper, glue, finger paint, play dough, blocks, and Lego bricks). Learning to pick up dry cereal pieces from the high chair tray is a pre-literacy developmental skill for holding a pencil or pen.



## Resources

**Literacy for Life Foundation** – includes nursery rhymes used in our Rhyme program (see Parent Resources tab), list of internet web sites, and evaluation and program forms for in-home family literacy program  
[www.litforlife.com](http://www.litforlife.com)

**Centre for Family Literacy**, Edmonton, Alberta  
[www.familit.ca](http://www.familit.ca)

**Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever**, Mem Fox, 2001. (Book)

**Recipe cards for family literacy activities**  
[www.familyliteracyexpertise.org/Resources/Activity%20Cards/activitycards.htm#Nutrition](http://www.familyliteracyexpertise.org/Resources/Activity%20Cards/activitycards.htm#Nutrition)

**Computer activities for preschoolers**  
[www.kneeouncers.com/kneeouncers.html](http://www.kneeouncers.com/kneeouncers.html)

**Better Brains for Babies** – information about babies and brain development  
[www.fcs.uga.edu/ext/bbb](http://www.fcs.uga.edu/ext/bbb)

**The First Years Last Forever** (video, pamphlets) available through Canadian Institute of Child Health  
[www.cich.ca](http://www.cich.ca)

**Invest in Kids** – downloadable handouts under Parents tab  
[www.investinkids.ca](http://www.investinkids.ca)

*Sue Steigmeier is with Literacy for Life Foundation in High River, Alberta.*

1 *Introduction to Family Literacy, Trainer’s Guide*, Centre for Family Literacy, Maureen Sanders and Ruth Hayden, page 23.

2 *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever*, Mem Fox, 2001.

# Heritage Languages: Why they matter

By Nada Jerkovic

Damir was an early and enthusiastic talker. Until the age of three, he spoke entirely in Bosnian with his parents. Shortly after starting preschool, he rapidly began learning English. By kindergarten, he was so comfortable in English he wanted to use it at home. In their eagerness to ensure Damir's school success, his parents started speaking only English to Damir. They reasoned that the exposure to two languages was confusing to their son. They also believed that their own skills in English might improve from speaking English at home.

His parents read to Damir daily. However, due to their limited English proficiency, they often struggled to explain the meaning of idiomatic phrases in children's books. By the end of grade one, Damir had only passive knowledge of Bosnian. He still understood his heritage language, but was unable to converse with his grandparents on the phone. In grade two, Damir's teacher expressed a concern about his reading progress.

Damir's parents felt devastated and blamed themselves for their son's falling behind in school. Many research studies show that early literacy skills transfer from one language to the other and children with a strong foundation in their heritage language learn to speak, read, and write better than those who do not have that foundation.

Immigrant parents would like their children to grow up bilingual and be able to participate in both Canadian and their heritage culture. Many ESL children thrive at school. Unfortunately, many others struggle. Some families also experience other challenges associated with maintaining cultural identity and healthy family relationships. Research demonstrates some of these issues can contribute to the loss of the heritage languages.

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*Many research studies show that early literacy skills transfer from one language to the other and children with a strong foundation in their heritage language learn to speak, read, and write better than those who do not have that foundation.*

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## Difficulties in retaining a home language

There are several reasons why it is difficult for families with young children to maintain the home language.

- There is limited home language exposure when compared to extended English language exposure while at school.
- Without extended family, parents are often the only language models of the heritage language. They find it hard to provide opportunities for their children to speak their native language with peers in meaningful contexts.
- There are limited resources available in heritage languages. Books in native languages are expensive and hard to find.

We need to help families build literacy in their home language and promote "additive bilingualism" where both languages are maintained and developed.

## Strategies to maintain home language

To help in maintaining the language of the home, we can share the following strategies with parents:

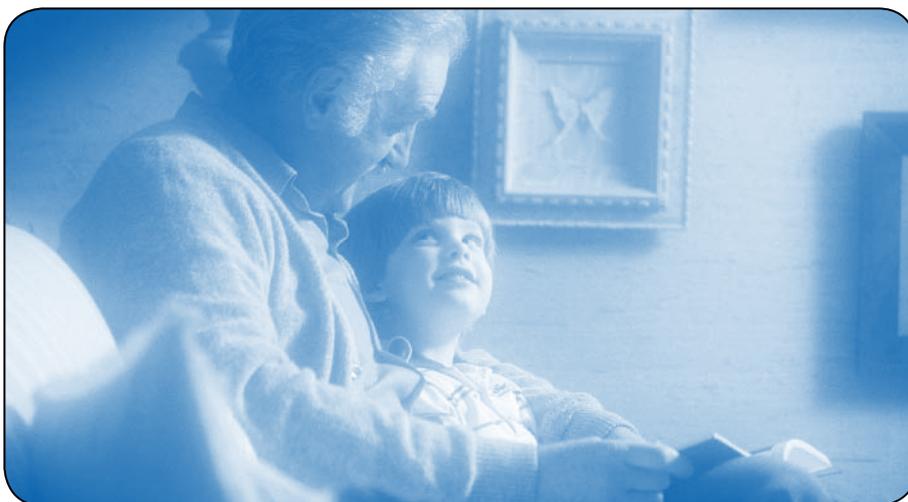
- Encourage parents to engage in daily conversations, family talk, and joint activities using the language they know the best—their home language.
- Encourage parents to read with their children using their strongest language.
- Assist parents to access resources such as dual-language books or books in heritage languages at public libraries.
- Encourage parents to provide play and social opportunities for children to interact with peers with the same language.
- Visit [www.Mylanguage.ca](http://www.Mylanguage.ca), a Ryerson University website intended to help immigrant parents understand and foster their children's dual language learning.

## International Mother Language Day

February 21 is the International Mother Language Day, which was proclaimed by UNESCO in 1999 to "promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism." Through our work with immigrant families with young children, we have opportunities to show our appreciation for diversity and celebrate the importance of the maintenance of home languages every day.

# Reading With Your Grandchildren

By Sandy Lai



## Reading is important

Reading is important to everyone, and is not just for school. We read all the time: supermarket flyers, bus stop information, medicine directions, recipes, and online chats.

## Reading is learned

Reading isn't something we do naturally (like walking)—we have to *learn* how to read. This is why children spend most of their early school years on learning and mastering this skill. The more you practise, the better you get.

## Reading is fun

Books and stories are a good way to be creative. There are books on almost every subject, so you can always choose something that you and your grandchildren are interested in. Reading also gives you an opportunity to snuggle up with your beloved grandchildren.

## What Can I Do?

### ***Read with your grandchildren***

Reading is for all ages and is a good quiet activity for children. If grandchildren are too young to read, you can read “with” them while they enjoy the pictures. We like to say *read with* instead of *read to* because it's a shared activity, and you can “read” a book without actually reading. For early readers who only know a few words, you can ask them to read those words. If you use a finger to follow the words, they will know when to jump in. For those who can read all or almost all the words, you can take turns reading. As your grandchildren become better readers, you can ask them to read to you. But never stop reading to and with your grandchildren. It will be a special time for both of you, and later, a special memory of something you did together.

### ***Give books***

Children can enjoy books even before they can read, so books make great gifts from the time of a child's birth. Bookstores and libraries have great suggestions on what books are popular with children. Get to know your grandchildren's likes and dislikes so you can choose books they will be interested in. As they get older, they can pick their own book gift.

### ***Take book-related outings***

Libraries and bookstores are great places to visit with your grandchildren. They often have special sections where children can

browse through books and play with other children. Many also have storytelling times where expert storytellers share books with children just like their teachers at school.

### ***Read along the way***

Point out words on the street and around the home. Make it a game. For example, see who can find the most words beginning with a certain letter. Your grandchildren will realize that reading happens outside of school, and is part of everyday living.

### ***Write letters or emails***

Everyone likes getting a letter or email. Writing to your grandchildren is a quick and fun way of being updated, especially if you can't see each other often. Parents or older siblings can help younger children read what you send and help write something back. These messages will allow you to see how they've grown up over the years.

### ***Read yourself***

Books are a great way to pass time. If your grandchildren see you reading, they will know that many people read simply because they enjoy reading. If asked why you read “when you don't have to”, you can take the opportunity to explain how reading is fun, and will help them throughout life.

*Sandy Lai is a Doctoral Student, Educational Psychology, University of Alberta*

## Coming up

The next issue of Connections will focus on parent-child interactions. If you would like to submit an article or resource for this topic, please contact the AHVNA office.

## Hearing from you

Connections is published three times per year by the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association. We welcome comments, questions and feedback on this newsletter. Please direct any correspondence to: Lavonne Roloff, AHVNA Provincial Director, at 780-429-4787 or email: info@ahvna.org.

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Alberta Home Visitation  
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If you would like additional copies of the publication check the AHVNA website  
www.ahvna.org under Resources/newsletter/vol. 4 issue 1

# Meet our board!

We continue to introduce you to some of the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association board members.



**Deb Josuttis** is the program manager for South Region Parents as Teachers. She has been working for the agency for the last nine years. She spent the first five years as a Parent Educator conducting home visits and facilitating groups, and the last four managing the program. Deb has a background in Educational Psychology as well as Human Resources. Since joining AHVNA, Deb has found it to be a great resource and a place to go for support. Deb has been enjoying life in Lethbridge with her husband and two children for the last 10 years.

## International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALS) (2003)



These selected statistics from the 2003 IALS survey indicate a level of concern regarding the literacy and numeracy level of Albertans and Canadians, in general.

- 29.5% of Albertans (ages 16 – 65) may have developed coping skills to manage everyday literacy demands but their low level of proficiency makes it difficult for them to face novel demands, such as learning new job skills.
- 19.5% of working age Albertans are unable to determine the correct amount of medicine to give a child from information on the package.
- 27% of Albertans do not have the minimum skills level needed for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex society.
- 40% of Canadians can work with print information but not well.
- 55% of Canadians do not have the minimum numeracy skills needed in today's world.