

# Early Literacy Foundations for Virtual Storytimes

## 6 Early Literacy Skills

These six skills were identified through research as being important for setting kids up for reading success. They are outlined in the first edition of Every Child Ready to Read. Under each skill are recommendations for how both a storytime presenter or a caregiver can help a child develop the skill.

### Print Motivation

Being interested in and enjoying books and stories.

- Read books you like.
- Make book-sharing time a special time for closeness between you and the child.
- Let children see you reading.
- Have fun!
- Stop (or shift gears) when it is no longer fun. Length of time is not important; enjoyment is.

### Print Awareness

Noticing print everywhere, knowing how to handle a book, and knowing how to follow the written word on the page.

- Read books that the child can handle on their own; let them turn the pages as you read together.
- Sometimes point to the words as you read.
- Talk about print even when you are not reading together. Look for letters and words on signs, labels, and lists.
- Hold the book upside down. See if the child turns the book around.

### Letter Knowledge

Knowing that letters are different from each other, knowing letter names and sounds, and recognizing letters everywhere.

- Look at and talk about different shapes.
- Play “same and different” type games.
- Look at “I Spy” type books.
- Notice different types of letters (“a” or “A”) on signs and in books.
- Read ABC books.
- Talk about and draw the letters of a child's name.
- Make letters from clay or use magnetic letters.

## Phonological Awareness

Hearing and playing with the smaller sounds of words.

- Sing songs; most break words up into one syllable per note.
- Recite rhymes; rhymes depend upon ending sounds.
- Play with tongue twisters.
- Pick a sound for the day. Notice it at the beginning of words and at the end of words.
- Say rhymes and sing songs in the language that is most comfortable for you.

## Vocabulary

Knowing all kinds of words.

- Encourage home language first; this makes learning another language easier later.
- Talk with children in positive and conversational ways.
- When a child talks with you, add more detail to what they say.
- Explain the meanings of new words.
- Read books! Picture books use a different vocabulary than casual spoken conversation.

## Narrative Skills

Describing things and events, telling stories, knowing the order of events, and making predictions.

- Ask open-ended questions that encourage conversations rather than yes/no or right/wrong answers.
- Talk about your day and its series of events.
- Reread stories – you be the listener this time and let the child take a turn telling the story.
- Read stories without words.
- Tell oral stories.

## 5 Early Literacy Practices

Parents, caregivers, and librarians can reinforce and help grow brain connections through five practices that will help a child develop the foundation for reading. Practiced regularly, these activities will help a child develop the six early literacy skills and be prepared to learn to read.

### Talking

Give children lots of opportunities to talk and respond to their ideas. Share new words about topics that interest them.

- Speak to the child in their home language. Learning the language will help them build a strong foundation which is needed to learn other languages, including English.
- Speak slowly, vary your pitch and use lots of expression to help children hear the small sounds that make up words.
- When a child makes a statement, expand on what they say to include new words and concepts. When a child says “There is a dog,” respond with “Yes, that is a dog, that is a big, brown dog.”

## Singing

Not only is singing a soothing way to help children throughout the day, but it helps them hear the smaller sounds in language.

- Songs help children develop listening skills and pay attention to the rhythms and rhymes of spoken language.
- Singing slows down language so children can hear different parts of the words and notice how they are alike and different.
- Use songs to capture children's attention or calm them down.
- To children, your voice is beautiful (even if you don't think it is!).

## Reading

Shared reading is the single most effective way to help children become proficient readers. Also, it is fun!

- Read daily, at least once a day.
- Read for any duration. Short, positive interactions are more important than long ones.
- Read favourite books over and over again. Repetition deepens understanding.
- Read together and talk about what you read.

## Writing

Children explore shapes with their mouths, eyes, and hands before they even learn to pick up crayon. Create and draw together!

- Talk to children about what they draw, ask questions and respond to what they say.
- Once a child can grasp a thick crayon or marker, give them unlined paper and plenty of opportunities to draw and write.
- Make shapes and letters with ketchup on a plate, soap on the bathtub wall, sand at the park or water on the sidewalk—playing with shapes helps a child become more motivated to experiment and create their own “words.”

## Playing

Play is one of the primary ways children learn how to express themselves, navigate the world and understand the meaning of words.

- Play helps children think symbolically; it helps them understand that written words stand for real objects and experiences.
- Play helps children develop oral language skills and lets them practice putting thoughts into words.
- Play also gives children a chance to act out real-life situations, work through worries and fears and use their imagination to solve problems.

## Supercharge Your Storytimes

The supercharged approach comes from Kathleen Campana, Saroj Nadkarni Ghoting, and J. Elizabeth Mills. In their book *Supercharged Storytimes: An Early Literacy Planning and Assessment Guide* they define a supercharged storytimes as one where you:

- Intentionally support early literacy
- Fill it with interactive moments that allow children to interact with the storytime content
- Find creative and fun ways to insert early literacy into all storytime content
- Flexible in adapting to children’s needs
- Articulate early literacy connections to parents/caregivers

## 5 Tips for Creating Early Literacy Rich Virtual Environments

Treat your space as part of the early literacy experience.

- Think about ways to incorporate environmental print – show a letter of the day, hang up a simple banner, show things like cereal boxes, labels, or street signs.
- Your background is part of storytime: keep things uncluttered but add elements you can interact with like puppets.
- Play with distance – move up close and far away from the camera as you sing a song.
- You are part of the space; they need to be able to see and hear you clearly. Think about creative ways to use facial expressions and vocal intonations to bring early literacy to life.

Plan ways to share early literacy tips with caregivers.

- During the first five minutes of storytime ask the caregivers to stay and participate with their child.
- Messaging sounds natural when your listeners don’t know it is happening. When it is a part of your flow and general presence (not when it is forced, strained, overbearing or random) your audience will better absorb the content.
- Messaging in a virtual environment needs to be concise and well-planned, otherwise it could take over the short time you have with families. Consider following a formula, such as Melissa Depper’s 4-Part Literacy Message Template or Saroj Ghoting’s Example and Empower Literacy Tips Worksheet.
- Send early literacy information in follow-up emails or enter it into the chat during storytime.

Weave in Time for Group Sharing and Commenting

- As much as possible confirm that you “see” the little ones and their caregivers.
- Use the renaming feature in Zoom to name participants with both the caregiver and child’s name so you remember each person.
- Comment on ways caregivers interact with little ones, things little ones do in response to a song or story, or something a little one is sharing on screen.
- Some presenters choose to comment on every participant while other presenters focus their commenting on one or two participants per storytime.

- Provide time for toddlers and preschoolers to share during storytime – maybe they hold up a show-and-tell item, maybe they unmute to answer questions.
- In virtual babytimes, set aside time for caregivers to talk to each other. Come prepared with leading topics such as recent surprises, recent challenges, the story of a baby’s name, or baby “life hack.”

### Choose interactive songs and stories.

- When reading a book, plan ahead and think about places you can pause to ask a question.
- Interactive books that encourage kids to touch the screen or sing along are good choices.
- Use household items like a knife and fork and tell a short oral story.
- Share the lyrics with participants. You can send them ahead in an email or share them in the chat feature during the program.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat. Sing many of the same songs and rhymes each week to support early literacy development.
- Make songs little stories. For example, before singing “The Wheels on the Bus” pretend to get on a bus, put on a seatbelt, and grab the steering wheel. You can also use a virtual background to match the setting of the song to make it more realistic.
- Choose songs that allow kids to contribute. Use the spotlight feature to focus the attention on each child so they can either unmute and share or simply hold up an item such as a stuffed animal.

### Offer At-Home Extension Activities

- At-home extension activities that focus on playing and writing capitalize on the early literacy practices that are hardest to implement in a virtual environment.
- Think about things families likely already have at home; choose common household items.
- If possible, offer make-and-take kits families can pick up before or after storytime.
- See [the document](#) on the library toolshed for example activities.

## Resources

### [Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library](#)

A research-based program for libraries wanting to teach parents and other caregivers how to support the early literacy development of their children.

### [Virtual Storytime Services Guide by ALSC](#)

A comprehensive guide to creating early literacy rich virtual storytimes.

### [Saroj Ghoting: Early Literacy Website](#)

Ghoting, an early childhood literacy consultant, has gathered a plethora of resources, handouts, trainings, and more to help staff understand early literacy and share its benefits with families. Check out her extensive list of sample early literacy messages: What Can I Say? [Word](#) document.

### [Now Hear This! Incorporating Early Literacy Messages Into Storytimes](#)

Written by Melissa Depper, this article covers the template she created for developing early literacy tips. Also see: [Anatomy of a Storytime Literacy Message](#)

### [National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#)

Find research-based resources, tips and ideas for families—from child development to reading, writing, music, math, and more.

### [Zero to Three](#)

Explore early developmental stages and advice to parents on raising happy, healthy kids.

### [CLEL Storyblocks](#) and [Early Literacy Tips](#)

Includes information about early literacy skills, practices, and tips for finding books, plus a collection of 30-60 second videos designed to model to parents, caregivers, and library staff some songs, rhymes, and fingerplays appropriate for early childhood.

## Webinars and Courses

### [Supercharged Storytimes for All](#)

Free self-paced online course that provides training in how to intentionally apply research-based practices to boost early literacy in young children attending library storytime.

### [Encouraging Early Literacy](#)

Free 1-hour webinar which includes an overview of early literacy and ways library staff can interact with children to encourage singing, talking, reading, writing and playing.

### [Enriching Early Literacy Storytimes: Small Steps, Big Results](#)

Free 1-hour webinar that will give you insights on children's literacy and how to encourage parental involvement.

### [Raising the Bar:](#)

Integrating Early Childhood Education into Library Professional Development by New York Public Library. Includes 4 modules: Foundations of Early Literacy, In Storytimes, Early Literacy Workshops and Family Engagement, and Partnerships; free but must sign up.

### [Foundations of Early Literacy](#)

Paid online course from Library Juice Academy focusing on the early literacy skills (phonological awareness, print awareness, letter knowledge, vocabulary, and background knowledge) and practices (talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing and ways to apply them to your work, including ways to make library environments supportive of staff sharing early literacy information and activities with parents and caregivers.