Our ability to interact with others is one of the key skills developed throughout the early years. An individual’s ability to understand and use language determines largely how successful he or she will be not only in school, but also in life. Over the past decade, the conversation on the growth of language has evolved to an understanding that early literacy skills can be seen as one facet of language. Many of the conditions that support the growth of language skills that allow a child to interact on a meaningful level with others are also those needed to support growth in literacy skills. In addition, without doubt, the conditions required for the growth of literacy skills support language development.

This brief examines four aspects of communication development—spoken and heard oral language, and written and read print language—and how universally designed early childhood education supports the child’s development of these critical communication skills in anticipation of entry into school.

“Reading, writing, listening and speaking are streams that flow into the same pool: they are constantly refreshing each other.”
(Braunger & Lewis, 1997)
By the time children enter kindergarten, they should be demonstrating several important language and literacy skills. Figure 1 identifies six key skills children should have.

This is not where we start, however. Even babies are observing the world around them. The early interactions between caregiver and child lay the foundation for later social communication interactions and language growth. Everything a child does during the day, whether at home or in child care, has the potential for communication interactions. From the first cooing hugs between an infant and caregiver, we are shaping knowledge not only of how the social dance of communication happens, but also of how sounds work, how words are formed, how sentences are put together, and how we get information from all of these symbols. Babies are beginning to make connections between sounds and events, words and people, and this early awareness of the sounds in the environment is, in a way, the beginning of learning to read.

| Figure 1 |
| Language and Literacy: Important Learning Outcomes |
| By the time children enter kindergarten, they should be: |
| 1. Using language to get information, give information, and explore ideas. |
| 2. Telling and retelling familiar stories (both favorite fictional stories and narratives about their own lives). |
| 3. Understanding that pictures and print represent objects or ideas. |
| 4. Matching spoken words with familiar written ones, such as their name or signs in their environment. |
| 5. Identifying some letters and making some letter-sound matches for familiar words. |
| 6. Engaging in writing attempts that demonstrate understanding of the use of writing to share information, and that approximate known letters in written language. |

What We Know: Effective Early Education Practices

- Engage children in conversations that encourage them to use language to get information, give information, and explore ideas.

Research tells us that children who grow up in environments where the adults engage in meaningful conversations with them develop knowledge of how language works. Extensive research on mother-child interactions, and nonparental child care providers, has demonstrated how well linguistic responsiveness supports children’s language development.

- Children whose communication interactions are encouraged and expanded by adults have advantages in school over children who have more limited access to meaningful conversation. Since language proficiency is a strong predictor of reading success, it is important to recognize that our language-based interactions play a critical role in our children’s development of both sets of skills.

- Children who hear more words develop knowledge about their world, and have a larger vocabulary by age 3. Research tells us that vocabulary size is another indicator of later reading success.

- Children who play with sounds (nursery rhymes, finger plays, songs) have an increased understanding of the sounds and letters that make words. Another important factor research has identified in successful reading is phonemic awareness, or the ability to hear and manipulate separate sounds in words. The early sound play, rhymes, finger plays, and songs all prepare a child’s brain for the eventual task of learning that those sounds translate to the letters on the page. Research further shows that instruction in phonemic awareness helps all types of children improve their reading.

- Plan activities to help children develop story-telling skills.

Story-telling is an activity that meets many language and literacy needs. Through telling stories about daily activities, we provide vocabulary and language experiences, and we introduce the child to constructing narratives that have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Conversations about what you are currently doing together, at home or in child care, set the stage, followed by conversations about what you have done in the past, and will be doing in the future. Story-telling can be as simple as talking about daily events, but clearly has parallel opportunities using books. By reading and re-reading favorite books, children are learning about how words work, how language works, and how print works.

- Design environments in which books and other print and writing materials are available to children throughout the day.

Research has found that print awareness is another critical factor influencing literacy development. Children who have had early experience with books enter school having knowledge and skills that are important for learning to read:

- They know how books work;
- They know that the words on the page have meaning;
They know that words are made up of sounds which fit together to make meaningful units; and
They have experience with the types of behaviors expected when reading.
**Integrate writing instruction into routines and play, and across learning areas.**

Another way children can see and use print in functional ways is through writing. Researchers have shown that children who have repeated exposure to writing as an activity have an increased understanding of the way print works. Research further shows that teaching reading and writing together improves children’s skills in both areas. Writing encourages children to break down the components of the words, furthering their phonemic awareness, understanding of the letters, and word recognition. Reading improves children’s writing, and teaching both together improves both areas.

Provide families with opportunities, information, and materials that help them facilitate their child’s language, literacy, and writing skills at home.

One of the most important things adults can do to enhance a child’s language and literacy skills is to talk with children, and this includes reading with them. One of the most important things early educators can do is to promote a continuity of experiences between home and the early care and education setting.

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**Figure 2**

**Application of Universal Design Principles to Early Education**

1. The design of the *physical environment* enables all children to have access and equitable opportunities for full participation in all program activities. This includes structures, permanent and movable equipment and furnishings, storage, and materials.
2. The design of *health and safety program components* minimizes risks and hazards for all children. It ensures all children, regardless of health status or condition, have ongoing access to early care and education by minimizing interruptions to their learning due to illness and injury.
3. The design of the *social-emotional environment* offers all children equitable access and full membership to the social-emotional life of the group, and supports their social-emotional development.
4. The design of the *instructional environment* enables all children equitable access to learning opportunities and multiple means for engagement and learning. This includes the curriculum, instructional practices, materials, and activities.
5. The design of *individual assessment and program evaluation practices* provides multiple approaches to finding out what children know and can do in order to equitably assess individual learning, development, and educational progress.
6. The design of *family involvement practices* supports the equitable access and engagement of all families in the full range of experiences. This includes ongoing communication, learning opportunities, and program involvement activities.

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**Summary & Implications**

From the moment a baby is born, the chain of events that creates a child who is ready to enter kindergarten begins. The many relationships in which the child engages are the first and most critical support in learning the language which will enable the child to explore ideas and interact with the world. Early educators and families provide experiences with sound play, words, print, and activities that expand the child’s understanding of the world around him or her, and the meaningful symbol system that is our spoken and print means of communicating.

Through exploration and experience with sounds and words, through conversations that provide a significant source of new ideas and vocabulary, and through exposure to the variety of print media that informs our lives, our children can enter kindergarten with the language and literacy tools necessary for success. By ensuring that our practices are universally designed, we can ensure that all children and families can not only access and engage in the experiences, but also benefit from them.
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<tr>
<th>Evidence-Based Practices</th>
<th>Universal Design Considerations for the Early Educator</th>
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| 1. Engage children in conversations that encourage them to use language to get information, give information, and explore ideas. | ■ Demonstrate social and communication interactions that respect all children’s abilities, health status, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and social and educational experiences.  
■ Immerse children in multiple ways of representing and interpreting information around them.  
■ Utilize different modes (speech, pictures, gestures, sign language) for presenting information.  
■ Provide information and ask questions at varied levels of language comprehension.  
■ Positively reinforce all communication attempts, then expand or restate attempts to use new vocabulary or language.  
■ Ask open-ended questions, allowing exploration of ideas at varied levels as well as multiple means of responding. |
| 2. Plan activities to help children develop story-telling skills which give them experience with narrative styles, with vocabulary and language, with phonological awareness, and with story structures. | ■ Embed story-telling opportunities into multiple routines or activities throughout the day.  
■ Adjust language, pace, content, and repetition.  
■ Integrate the use of varied formats in the construction and sharing of stories.  
■ Repeat the story multiple times over time.  
■ Use pictures, props, etc. to prompt children’s recall based on individual learning styles.  
■ Record children’s stories via written language, audio, or video. |
| 3. Design environments in which books and other print and writing materials are available to children throughout the day for children to use for pleasure and as resources. | ■ Provide books and other print materials that represent varied ability levels and health status, and reflect economic, academic, social, cultural, and linguistic diversity.  
■ Design contexts in which the many uses of print materials are embedded, encouraging their use for a wide variety or purposes.  
■ Illustrate written instructions or labels with photos or pictures.  
■ Present multiple examples of differences in ability levels, health status, economic, academic, social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds over time.  
■ Schedule time for direct instruction in reading skills. |
| 4. Integrate writing instruction into routines, into play, and across learning areas. | ■ Plan writing experiences that engage children on multiple levels of difficulty.  
■ Include time for both exploration and explicitly taught skills in writing letters.  
■ Take into account varied physical needs (e.g., materials are available for writing that are thick and thin, large and small, have grips to assist with proper grasp, etc.). |
| 5. Provide families with opportunities, information, and materials that help them facilitate their child’s language, literacy and writing skills at home. | ■ Strive to provide opportunities, information, and materials that are responsive to the wide range of families’ ability levels and health status, and reflect economic, academic, social, cultural, and linguistic diversity. |

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