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If asked when children learn to read and write, the average person would probably say, “in first grade.” Although this is indeed true for most children, success in first grade relies on more than just the instruction provided then; it also depends heavily on the knowledge and skills acquired long before. In fact, the experiences that build a foundation for learning to read and write have a history stretching all the way back to infancy.

Children who struggle in learning to read often enter first grade without the foundational knowledge they need. This situation is not easily overcome. Only about 25 percent of children who struggle in learning to read in first grade ever read within the typical range for their grade level! The other children in this group continue to experience major reading difficulties throughout all of their years of schooling (Juel 1988; Spira, Bracken, & Fischel 2005).

Some children succeed in learning to read in first grade but then begin to experience difficulties starting in the middle grades (“the fourth grade slump”), due to insufficient content knowledge, vocabulary, and overall language, and to difficulty in drawing inferences (Chall & Jacobs 2003; Lesaux & Kieffer 2010; Sweet & Snow 2002). Unfortunately, they struggle to comprehend the content in their subject area.
material, such as a biology or history book. This problem is found often among children from families with low incomes who attend urban schools, and is especially prevalent in children from families with lower incomes who are learning English as a second language (Crosson & Lesaux 2010).

It is essential to help children build strong foundations for both learning to read and reading to learn in the years before formal schooling. By engaging infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in experiences that foster oral language and content knowledge, literacy skills, and thinking, early childhood professionals help secure children’s later academic success (NELP 2008; Sénéchal, Ouellette, & Rodney 2006; Storch & Whitehurst 2002). Maintaining children’s interest and motivation is also crucial, as this also accounts for a significant portion of later reading achievement (Gambrell 2011).

We wrote this book to help early childhood professionals and families support young children in acquiring the understandings, knowledge, and skills needed for later success in learning to read and write. This book addresses four main points:

1. What children need to learn in these early years
2. The strategies that teachers can use to help children acquire these foundations
3. The features of emergent literacy and language understandings and skills
4. How to design materials and the physical environment in early childhood classrooms to support language and literacy learning

We stress throughout that a wide variety of interconnected factors are at play in each child’s emergent literacy. One size does not fit all—appropriate teaching varies for each individual child’s circumstance (Copple & Bredekamp 2009).

This book is for early childhood professionals and families who want to know what current research indicates young children should learn and what kinds of experiences best help them acquire these understandings and skills. We think seasoned teachers and caregivers will find information that both updates their current knowledge and validates much that they already do to support children’s early language, literacy, and content knowledge acquisition. We also address a wide range of basics useful to preservice teachers and other students of early childhood education, as well as teachers and caregivers early in their careers. Families will also find this an informative resource for learning about the range of early literacy experiences provided by early childhood programs and ideas for literacy experiences at home.

Although this book is based on a great deal of research, we also drew on our own experiences with young children and early childhood professionals, as research has not yet addressed all important questions or provided sufficient information on all topics (Duke & Carlisle 2011). Throughout the book, we offer many samples of children’s work and examples of their thinking. The names of children who are featured in the writing samples and other examples are a mixture of pseudonyms and actual names (used with permission).
Topics and their organization

This book is organized into two parts, discussing the following key topics.

Part I: Building a Foundation for Reading

- Chapter 1 provides an overview of two reading processes and two phases of reading development following the emergent literacy period. This overview offers a framework for understanding how experiences in the early years contribute to later success in conventional reading.
- Chapter 2 links motor, cognitive, language, and social development milestones from birth to 30 months to children’s book interests and interactions.
- Chapter 3 discusses selecting picture storybooks, and goals and strategies for reading stories to preschoolers.
- Chapter 4 focuses on selecting informational books, and on goals and strategies for using these books with preschoolers.
- Chapter 5 details the literacy skills comprising early foundations for learning to read and write, and how to support their acquisition.

Part II: Building a Foundation for Writing

- Chapter 6 outlines phases of emergent writing and discusses conventional writing that follows after the emergent writing phase.
- Chapter 7 considers mark-making between 12 and 30 months, and toddlers’ attributions of meaning to marks, and infant and toddler knowledge acquisition.
- Chapter 8 focuses on drawing and writing in children from about 30 months to 5 years and 9 months of age, specifically on the different organization used for picture and writing marks, and on word and picture creation, literacy skills, and language and content knowledge involved in drawing and writing.

Using this book

A reader interested in the entire span of the emergent literacy years will want to start at the beginning and read the book’s chapters in order. But the book’s layered organization by topic and age also makes it easy to find information of most interest without reading chapters in order. For example, if interested primarily in infants and toddlers, a reader might start with Chapters 1, 2, 6, and 7, and then turn to the other chapters to build an understanding of literacy development during the preschool years. A reader primarily interested in preschoolers might take a different path, reading Chapters 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 before examining the infant and toddler chapters.

In addition, lists of both children’s books cited in the text and references for all other text citations are provided at the end of the book. Readers interested in learning more about the many topics we introduce are encouraged to read some of these studies, books, reports, and position statements.
This book’s goals

It is not our goal to encourage early childhood professionals or families to teach children to read and write conventionally before kindergarten or first grade. Of course, some children will develop enough skill early on to do so. Most, however, will follow the more typical course, progressing to conventional reading and writing after the emergent literacy period on which this book focuses.

We also focus on more than just the understandings and skills that ensure success in learning to read. Instead, we take a long view: the early years are a launching pad for both learning to read and reading to learn (Paratore, Cassano, & Schickedanz 2011). We also stress learning from books right from the beginning, when adults read to children.

A stance on both of these issues is important, because these two phases of reading development depend on different factors (see Chapter 1). If teachers and family members emphasize one set of understandings and skills over the other, children’s early literacy experiences will not help them reach their full potential in the long run.

Our goals also include keeping motivation to learn at the forefront. As a consequence of concern over insufficient early learning, early childhood professionals and family members sometimes rely on narrow and tedious lessons with little appeal and too few here-and-now applications. We encourage instructional approaches that support robust early language, literacy, and content knowledge learning, and are also playful, interesting, and useful.

With such a long road of school and learning stretching out before them, a primary goal of early literacy experiences is to build children’s interest in reading- and writing-related activities and learning in general. Without interest, children will not be motivated to read or write; without motivation, children will read and write relatively little and only what and when they must. Children who read little are unlikely to become good readers. Children who write little are unlikely to become good writers. Therefore, promoting children’s desire to read and write is as important as helping children develop the necessary understandings and skills essential for learning how to read and write (Gambrell 2011).

Teachers at all levels today recognize the importance of meaningful literacy experiences during early childhood. However, many children entering the early primary grades have not had the benefit of a full range of enriching literacy experiences at home, in preschool, or in other early childhood settings that foster not only knowledge about reading and writing, but love for them.

We have both the opportunity and the privilege to shape the progress young children make in acquiring the literacy skills, oral language, and background knowledge that are vital to their later success in learning to read and write. It is also an opportunity to shape children’s basic emotional and social attachments to reading and writing. This book focuses on the range of considerations that help teachers and caregivers achieve these dual and complementary goals.