



Oregon's Early Learning Hubs: Case Studies of Birth-to-Three Early Literacy Innovations

Prepared by

Portland State University
Center for Improvement of Child and Family
Services

Submitted to

Department of Early Learning and Care
September 2025

Table of Contents

Introduction.....3

Oregon’s Early Learning Hubs 3

The History of KPI..... 3

The Purpose and Organization of this Report..... 4

The Importance of Early Literacy Supports..... 5

KPI Early Literacy Strategies 5

 READY! for Kindergarten (RFK).....5

 Play and Learn Groups.....6

 Bookshare.....6

Case Studies6

Southern Oregon Early Learning Hub (SOELH)..... 6

Marion and Polk Early Learning Hub (MPELH)..... 6

Early Learning Washington County 16

Early Literacy Literature and Additional Resources 23

 Early Literacy in Academic Success 23

 Early Literacy in the Home Environment..... 23

 Early Literacy for Dual Language Learners 24

 Best Practices and High-Impact Program Strategies (HIPS) 24

 Evidence-Based Programs for Ages 0–3 25

Conclusion 26

References 28

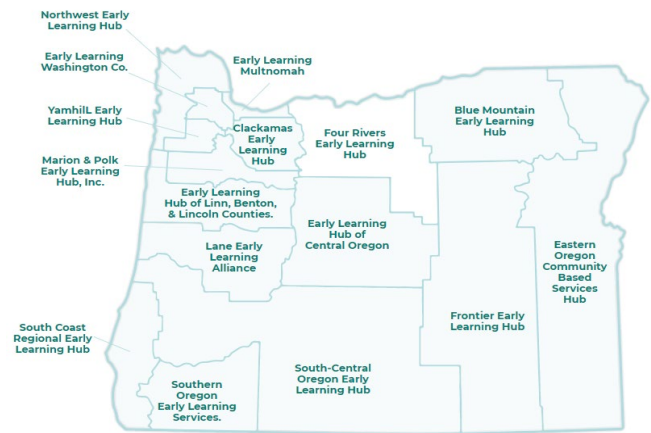
Introduction

Oregon's Early Learning Hubs

Oregon has a goal to build an early childhood system that includes the full set of supports that young children and their families need to grow and thrive. In 2013, the Early Learning Hubs were founded to play a critical role in advancing Oregon's early childhood system by centering the voices of families and communities more fully as designers of the regional early childhood system. The Early Learning Hubs share the same vision as Raise Up Oregon (2024-2028):

"Oregon's young children, prenatal to age five, experience an early start that results in positive health, education, and life outcomes regardless of zip code, race, and family income." The primary purpose of the Early Learning Hubs is to advance the regional early childhood system through their three core functions as convening, connecting, and building the capacity with: families, cross-sector partners, community partners, and private partners. The Early Learning Hubs' secondary purpose is to work with the Department of Early Learning and Care (DELIC) and support the development and progress of regional early learning and care services and programs that meet the needs of families.

Figure 1. Oregon Early Learning Hub Map



The History of KPI

Established through legislation in 2014, Oregon's Kindergarten Readiness Partnership and Innovation Fund (DELIC, Hubs and partners use the acronym KPI)) was created to foster community-led, creative strategies that enhance school-related skills and address achievement disparities among children and families facing significant systemic and structural challenges.

KPI uses the Prenatal-to-Grade 3 (P3) framework, which emphasizes a comprehensive, aligned approach to early learning.¹ This model recognizes that while individual programs are important, they

alone are not enough to ensure long-term success. Instead, it promotes a

connected system of support beginning at birth and extending through third grade, with families playing a central role in the process. Third grade is a critical milestone, as research shows that children who meet reading and math benchmarks at this stage are more likely to thrive academically and graduate from high school.²

To support this work, DELIC provides funding to the state's 16 Early Learning Hubs. Early Learning Hubs have the flexibility to design and implement locally driven, innovative solutions, often combining

¹ Kauerz, K., & Coffman, J. (2019). Framework for planning, implementing, and evaluating p-3 approaches. Downloaded from <https://nationalp-3center.org/resources/framework-for-planning-implementing-and-evaluating-p-3-approaches/>.

² Ensinger, M. E., & Slusarcick, A. L. (1992). Paths to high school graduation or dropout: A longitudinal study of a first-grade cohort. *Sociology of education*, 95-113.

multiple funding streams, to strengthen outcomes in one or more key focus areas:

- **Supporting kindergarten** skills and smooth transitions to kindergarten;
- **Increasing family engagement** in children’s learning and connecting families and schools as well as families with each other;
- **Providing professional development** to early learning and/or elementary school professionals to improve knowledge and skills; and/or
- **Increasing alignment, connection, and collaboration** in the overall prenatal to Grade 3 (P3) system.

The Purpose and Organization of this Report

In 2023, the Oregon legislature passed a bill that created the Early Literacy Success Initiative, which established the Birth Through Five Literacy Plan (BT5), a grant program administered by the Department of Early Learning and Care. While it is now anticipated that funding will continue, BT5 grants were initially considered a one-time funding opportunity. In 2024, Hubs were provided with one-time BT5 grants to support early literacy. This sparked discussion around early literacy best practices and relevant data, prompting the need and interest for this report. The Portland State University KPI evaluation team worked closely with DELC and the Southern Oregon Early Learning Hub (SOELH), Marion and Polk Early Learning Hub (MPELH), and Early Learning Washington County (ELWC) to conduct three case studies to learn about the KPI investments that have a focus on supporting early literacy for children 0-3 years old. The PSU KPI evaluation team had individual conversations with each Early Learning Hub and administered a survey to gauge interest and capacity for participating in a case study. SOELH, MPELH, and ELWC indicated interest and were

chosen, in part, because they were three of the many hubs who have worked intentionally to go beyond a light touch early literacy strategy (i.e., “provide books for families with young children”) by implementing more ongoing, sustained programming.

Throughout this report we describe the projects and their contexts, using qualitative data and existing research to answer the following questions:

1. What are the early literacy benefits for families?
2. What are the elements of success that support these benefits?
3. What challenges have been encountered and what are the lessons learned?

The purpose of this report is to show examples of key programs and strategies that take various approaches to supporting early literacy from birth to age three. Based on case studies of three approaches across the state, we highlight key lessons learned from these models: Play and Learn Groups, READY! for Kindergarten, and Bookshare. These concepts take somewhat different approaches to working with families to foster early literacy. We highlight key elements of success that could be used in other early learning programming to expand and strengthen how programs ultimately help families thrive and succeed. A secondary purpose of this report is to provide literature and resources that reflect additional best practices, models, and approaches to supporting early literacy from ages 0-3. This report includes the following sections:

1. The Importance of Early Literacy Supports
2. Early Literacy Strategies in KPI
3. Case Studies
 - a. Southern Oregon Play & Learn Groups Case Study
 - b. Marion & Polk Early Learning Hub READY! for Kindergarten Case Study

- c. Early Learning Washington County Bookshare Case Study

4. Early Literacy literature and resource guide

The Importance of Early Literacy Supports

Research underscores the importance of the early years in shaping a child's long-term development and overall success. These formative years lay the foundation not only for school but also for lifelong learning and well-being. During these early years, children begin developing essential language and literacy skills that support their ability to communicate, connect, and thrive. Parents, primary caregivers, and early childhood educators, play a vital role in creating nurturing, language-rich environments that support children's growth and future opportunities. Interactive reading, verbal play, and the modeling of literacy behaviors are foundational practices that can significantly enhance children's emergent literacy skills (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Research highlights that early exposure to books, storytelling, and responsive communication helps develop foundational skills, such as vocabulary, listening comprehension, and narrative understanding, which are all predictive of later academic achievement (Hart & Risley, 1995). Moreover, quality early childhood education settings that prioritize language development often incorporate culturally relevant materials and practices, ensuring that children from diverse backgrounds have access to literacy experiences that are meaningful and engaging (National Institute for Early Education Research [NIEER], 2020). By the time children reach kindergarten, significant brain development has already occurred, laying the foundation for language acquisition, reading skills, and cognitive functioning (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The early development of language and pre-literacy skills such as vocabulary, phonological

awareness, and print knowledge can significantly enhance children's reading abilities (Baker et al., 2017). Thus, programs aimed at children 0-3 that prioritize language development and early literacy are essential to ensuring that children have the skills they need to support their success.

Understanding that the variety of social-emotional, cognitive, language, and other skills that help children succeed begin at birth or before, there has been an increased focus on how to support families as children's first teachers, starting in infancy. Increasingly, funders and programs are framing this as a part of a developmental trajectory that begins prenatally. Providing support in the earliest years of a child's life can have a profound effect on child and family success.

KPI Early Literacy Strategies

In line with this research, Oregon Early Learning Hubs have launched several targeted initiatives to ensure that systems are ready to support families and help children thrive in school and everyday life. These initiatives are designed to engage young children and their families in literacy-promoting activities. This report will focus on three initiatives, described below.

READY! for Kindergarten (RFK)

The *READY! for Kindergarten* (RFK) program is a well-established initiative aimed at improving kindergarten skills, particularly for children aged 0-5. While the program primarily targets preschool-aged children, it incorporates strategies that support children younger than three by engaging families in early learning practices that nurture literacy development. RFK focuses on helping families support their children in developing key skills such as letter recognition, vocabulary, and phonological awareness. The program also emphasizes parent education, equipping families

with tools to foster literacy through daily activities such as reading aloud, storytelling, and play.

Play and Learn Groups

Another innovative initiative in Oregon is the *Play and Learn Groups* program, which has been adapted locally from the evidence-based Kaleidoscope model. These groups provide services to children aged 0-5 by helping parents and caregivers gain skills and learn tools that support early childhood development through play. These groups are often hosted by community partners, such as public libraries, faith-based organizations, community centers, and early childhood education organizations. Play and Learn Groups are designed to engage children in play-based learning while simultaneously fostering early literacy development in a natural, interactive setting.

Bookshare

The Bookshare program is an early literacy initiative in Washington County designed to support children from birth to age three by expanding access to library resources for home-based and center-based childcare providers. The program addresses barriers to library access, by delivering curated materials directly to childcare sites. Bookshare promotes early literacy development through monthly book boxes, which include age-appropriate board books, picture books, and teacher resources tailored to infants and toddlers. The program also offers Play and Learn kits that encourage early literacy and social-emotional growth through hands-on learning and play.

Case Studies

The following sections offer a closer look at each initiative, drawing on data collected by the PSU KPI evaluation team in 2024-2025, including document review, interviews, and focus groups.

Southern Oregon Early Learning Hub (SOELH)

What are Play and Learn Groups?

Play and Learn groups³ are free weekly 90-minute sessions designed to promote early childhood development and caregiver engagement through a play-based, relationship-centered approach. Caregivers often hear about the program through word of mouth, personal referrals, and connections with local schools, health providers, and other community organizations. Each session includes:

- **Structured, developmentally appropriate group activities** that support early learning.

- **Intentional caregiver learning opportunities** focused on fostering school skills.
- **Child-led play**, which honors the developmental needs and curiosity of young children.

Play and Learn groups are held several times a week at varying times and locations mainly due to space and facilitator availability. Families can attend as many sessions as they would like. They can also switch between locations based on their

³ Historically, these gatherings operated under the Kaleidoscope Play and Learn model, an evidence-based model. However, due to rising overhead costs, Southern Oregon has transitioned away from that affiliation. The

groups now run under a locally developed model called Read, Play, Talk groups, which places a stronger emphasis on early literacy, making it unique to the Southern Oregon region.

preferences. Attendance at each session can range from 0 to 60 participants, and facilitators are well-prepared to adapt to any group size. Because of the popularity of the Play and Learn groups, the Southern Oregon Early Learning Hub (SOELH) has paused formal advertising until additional facilitators and space can be secured. Facilitators are responsible for securing their own spaces; however, they receive support from the Early Learning Hub and other facilitators in identifying suitable venues. Many sessions take place in free community spaces, such as local churches.

These groups are led by trained facilitators, often including those who participated in previous Play and Learn Groups themselves. They receive a small stipend to help cover planning and facilitation time. While all groups follow a consistent format, facilitators are encouraged to incorporate their own strengths and creativity to tailor sessions to the needs and interests of attending families. The flexible, family-driven structure allows facilitators to plan activities for a range of child ages and stages. Similarly, the availability of language options depends on the facilitators and the languages in which they are able to conduct their sessions. Facilitators are integral to this process, as they are trusted members of the community who serve as natural bridges to families in their communities.

A key role within the Play and Learn groups is that of the coordinator. Typically taken on by one of the facilitators, the coordinator serves as the primary point of contact, offering vital support to fellow facilitators and helping to ease the workload of the Early Learning Hub staff. They assist with answering questions, offering ideas for activities, and helping to source materials and supplies. Facilitators are also provided with ongoing professional development opportunities.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

PSU worked closely with DELC and the SOELH to create a data collection plan. In the fall of 2024, we held a semi-structured listening session with Play & Learn facilitators (3 participants) and another listening session for caregivers (6 participants). Caregivers and facilitators were provided with a \$50 electronic gift card as compensation for participating. In addition to documenting information about the program model itself, we performed a thematic qualitative analysis of facilitator and caregiver experiences. The main themes and illustrative quotes are outlined below as they relate to early literacy benefits, parent and child benefits, elements of success, challenges, and lessons learned.

Why Play and Learn Groups as a Strategy?

Play and Learn group models have been recognized as a highly effective strategy for early childhood development and family engagement. The key strength of models such as these is the focus on building relationships between facilitators and families and among the families themselves. The relationship-based foundation of Play and Learn groups creates a supportive and trusting environment where parents feel confident and empowered and children are encouraged to thrive. In our listening session with facilitators, a few key themes emerged. Facilitators believe that the groups are especially valuable because they:

- **Engage parents:** The groups provide parents with the tools and confidence to support their children's development.
- **Promote child literacy and development through play:** The activities are designed to be child-led, developmentally appropriate, and grounded in the belief that play is critical to learning.

- **Foster community connections:** These groups create social networks, offering parents a space to connect with others and build relationships that can last beyond the group sessions.

"It's not just us connecting with families, but families connecting with each other. That's our job."

– Play and Learn Group Facilitator

The success of these groups lies in the facilitator's ability to go beyond the activities and truly build community.

Early Literacy Benefits

One of the primary goals of the Play and Learn groups is to enhance early literacy. Each session incorporates intentional early literacy practices known to support the language and brain development of infants and toddlers, such as:

- **Interactive storytime:** Facilitators model effective and developmentally appropriate reading practices for parents and engage children in interactive, fun ways.
- **Songs and rhymes:** Repetitive language patterns build phonological awareness, a key early literacy skill.
- **Sign language and gestures:** Visual modes of communication support early vocabulary development and memory.
- **Take-home resources:** Families are given books, crafts, and literacy-based activities to reinforce learning at home.

These activities help introduce young children to language skills, listening comprehension, and early vocabulary. Caregivers valued the ideas and

resources for supporting children's early literacy skills that they could take home, such as craft projects, books, and songs that they could integrate into daily life.

"Reading the story as a group, that part of it has been valuable to show families that your child doesn't have to sit down to read to them. Sometimes you summarize the pictures, and you're having a conversation with them and showing them that a book is a great place to start talking to your kids."

– Play and Learn Group Facilitator

Play and Learn groups also work to build home libraries for families, ensuring that every family has access to books. As families can attend as many sessions as they would like, a family may receive upwards of fifty books over the course of participation. These books help build a solid foundation for literacy development at home and support the evidence that children with access to books in the home show significantly stronger literacy outcomes.⁴

"We're building early literacy, one book at a time."

– SOELH Staff

Additional Benefits

The adaptable structure of Play and Learn groups is well positioned to support children of all ages, providing them the **freedom to explore a variety of activities at their own pace**. The use of different learning modalities such as arts and crafts, sensory play, and other-skill-building activities helps children remain engaged regardless of age or developmental stage. This safe space encourages

⁴ Manu A, Ewerling F, Barros AJ, Victora CG. Association between availability of children's book and the literacy-numeracy skills of children aged 36 to 59 months: secondary

analysis of the UNICEF Multiple-Indicator Cluster Surveys covering 35 countries. J Glob Health. 2019 Jun;9(1):010403. doi: 10.7189/jogh.09.010403. PMID: 30410746; PMCID: PMC6204005.

children to express themselves and build their confidence, supporting their emotional and cognitive development.

Caregivers reported that their children benefited from **learning important social skills such as sharing, taking turns, and interacting with peers of varying ages**. Play and Learn groups provided opportunities for socialization that might not otherwise be available, especially in small or rural communities.

One of the greatest advantages of Play and Learn groups is the **opportunity for caregiver education**. Several caregivers noted that the program is not just for the children but also provides them with valuable support and guidance in navigating early parenting challenges. Facilitators provide parents with practical tools and strategies, such as those from *Conscious Discipline*, which focus on nurturing emotional intelligence and building positive discipline techniques. Both are important for supporting early literacy skills, and overall success. Many caregivers found that these resources helped them feel more confident in their parenting.

The program also **fosters a sense of community**, where caregivers can meet other families and share experiences, fostering connections that are often helpful for both social support and learning. Many families develop strong bonds within the group, with some forming lasting friendships that extend beyond the weekly sessions. For example, one caregiver invited another family they met in their session to Thanksgiving dinner when they found out the family had no one to spend the holiday with.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Some of the main challenges and lessons learned identified directly by facilitators, caregivers, and in our analysis are as follows:

- **Finding the best space possible for the groups:** A few caregivers shared that they felt that some of the locations felt cramped and less conducive to the flow of the group, especially with the growing number of families attending. It was suggested that the program consider expanding to larger spaces if possible. In previous years, Play and Learn groups were held at local schools, which provided more space and allowed children and families to become familiar with the school environment before officially starting. However, this was discontinued due to a lack of available space within schools. The need for larger, more functional spaces was echoed by facilitators and Early Learning Hub staff, who emphasized the added benefits of returning to school-based settings when possible.
- **Recruiting the right facilitators:** The role of a facilitator in Play and Learn groups is not simply a job; it requires a deep investment in the families and community. Facilitators must possess not only technical skills but also the empathy, flexibility, and passion needed to build trust and connect with families over time. This combination of skills is rare, making recruitment a challenging task.
- **Geographic gaps in service delivery:** For Southern Oregon, communities such as Eagle Point, White City, and Ashland are currently underserved, and expanding to these areas is a priority. However, logistical challenges, including the lack of accessible community spaces and finding facilitators for that area, make this difficult.
- **Play and Learn group schedules:** Caregivers expressed a desire for more session options in the schedule. Several noted a particular

need for Friday and weekend session options, especially for families with working parents or those whose schedules don't align with the current weekday offerings or school holidays.

- **Lack of a centralized information center:** Caregivers suggested creating a central website or updated list of available sessions, so parents can easily see which groups are happening each week. This would reduce confusion and help parents plan better, especially if they want to attend one in at a different time or location.
- **Need to clarify (lack of) religious affiliation of groups:** A few caregivers shared that it might be helpful to clearly state that there is no religious curriculum associated with the Play and Learn groups, particularly for those who may feel uncertain about attending sessions at religiously affiliated locations. Making this information more visible could help alleviate any concerns for families before they attend.

Essential Elements of Success

In reviewing the benefits of early literacy, along with the challenges and lessons learned from our analysis, we identified several key elements critical to the success of Play and Learn groups that can be replicated across any type of early learning programming:

- **Simple activities:** Facilitators emphasized keeping activities simple and manageable for both children and caregivers. Complex crafts or projects often do not work, as they can be too challenging for young children or overwhelming for parents. Many caregivers loved the easy-to-replicate craft ideas that they could use with their children at home. In addition, songs, especially those with sign

language, were shared as favorites by caregivers.

- **Facilitator flexibility and creative freedom:** Facilitators are encouraged to tailor activities to the needs of their group, with ongoing professional development from the Early Learning Hub to ensure they remain well-equipped to support families.
- **Relationship building:** The core of the Play and Learn groups lies in the relationships built between facilitators, caregivers, and children. These connections are crucial for fostering trust, engagement, and community cohesion.
- **Recruiting the right facilitators:** Facilitators shared that trust and community relationships are fundamental to the success of their outreach efforts. The connections that facilitators already have in the community make the outreach process smoother and more personal. Facilitators are seen as trusted individuals within their communities, and their ability to build relationships is critical for sustaining participation.

"You don't just throw people into this... these girls are unicorns. This isn't just a job. It's something that you're really invested in."

– Play and Learn Group Facilitator

- **Support from the Early Learning Hub:** The SOELH provides logistical and financial support, allowing facilitators to innovate and create meaningful experiences for the families they serve.
- **Coordinator role:** This role is critical because it ensures all facilitators are supported, especially when Early Learning Hub staff are not available to attend to immediate needs and questions. This role helps ensure shared

activity kits, toys, and resources are readily accessible.

- **Community engagement:** Facilitators work hard to ensure that families feel welcome and part of a larger community. They also encourage families to support one another, which builds a strong sense of belonging and continued support.
- **Consistency:** Many caregivers mentioned that having a regular, weekly event helped them structure their schedules. Even if they were not able to make it one week, they knew they could attend a future week.
- **Snack time:** Although a seemingly simple component of the program, caregivers appreciated the added benefit of snack time.

Play and Learn groups support early literacy development for children aged 0 to 3 by creating a rich, interactive environment where language skills can flourish naturally through play. By using developmentally appropriate activities like interactive storytime, crafts, and singing, these groups foster foundational early literacy skills such as vocabulary building, phonological awareness, and communication. They empower caregivers with practical tools and take-home resources, which supports families to continue nurturing language and literacy at home. The relationship-centered, flexible structure makes sure that even the youngest learners benefit from stimulating, child-led experiences that promote cognitive growth, confidence, and lay a strong groundwork for child and family success.

Marion and Polk Early Learning Hub (MPELH)

What is READY! for Kindergarten?

The READY! for Kindergarten (RFK)⁵ program supports families with children ages 0 to 5 in building the foundational skills needed for school. Operating on the understanding that caregivers are a child's first and most important teachers, RFK offers a structured, accessible series of sessions that blend early learning strategies with caregiver support. The program is offered at no cost to families and includes free onsite childcare to support participation. Sessions are delivered weekly in a three-part series. Each series focuses on a different domain of school-related skills: early literacy, math, and social-emotional development. Families attend three interactive sessions, each structured to deliver practical, developmentally appropriate information to caregivers, while providing parallel play and learning opportunities

for children. Caregivers receive hands-on tools and take-home activities that extend learning into the home environment. These sessions are facilitated by trained individuals, many of whom have participated in RFK themselves, and are held in trusted community settings such as libraries, museums, and family centers.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

As RFK serves a range of children aged 0-5 years, PSU worked closely with DELC and the Marion and Polk Early Learning Hub (MPELH) to develop a data collection plan and select sessions serving children aged 0-3 years that would be best suited for data collection. In the winter of 2024 and spring of 2025, we conducted interviews with Hub staff (2 participants), RFK facilitators (2 participants) and caregivers (5 participants). Caregivers and

⁵<https://www.readingfoundation.org/readyforkindergarten/about-the-program>

facilitators were provided with a \$50 electronic gift card as compensation for participating. In addition to documenting information about the program model itself, we performed a thematic qualitative analysis of facilitator and caregiver experiences.

The main themes and illustrative quotes are outlined below as they relate to early literacy benefits, parent and child benefits, elements of success, challenges, and lessons learned.

Why RFK as a Strategy?

What sets RFK apart is its dual-focus approach: sessions are designed not just for children's engagement but also for adult learning. Facilitators model strategies, share research-based guidance, and encourage dialogue among caregivers. This creates a learning environment for both adults and children. By offering free programming, onsite childcare, and simple registration processes, RFK reduces logistical hurdles that often limit access for families.

Early Literacy Benefits

As one of the three RFK sessions is focused on early literacy, early literacy is naturally at the forefront of the program. Facilitators described how they encouraged caregivers to read aloud, sing, and involve children in simple, everyday learning activities:

"We talk about the importance of them talking to their children, of singing songs, of telling stories, of making a story, and including their child."

– RFK Facilitator

In addition, **letter recognition** was highlighted as a key RFK benefit, as children began to associate letters with names and objects, building phonemic awareness and early reading skills. One caregiver shared how RFK helped their child begin to recognize the letters in their own name:

"The letter blocks have really helped them start to recognize. 'Oh, this letter is in my name'. They may not necessarily know how to spell their name quite yet, but at least recognizing that these letters are in their name. He knows that his name starts with X. And so, anytime he sees an X he's like, 'Mama, it's my letter.'"

– Caregiver

Similarly, art activities and sorting games helped children develop cognitive skills foundational to **color and shape recognition**.

"The way that the kiddos understand the letters is by noticing the shape of them from 0 to 3. That's sort of how they start to learn by noticing curves and circles or lines and different things like that... So, when the kiddo is scribbling at age 1 and at age 2, and they're just noticing how a writing utensil makes marks on paper, we can verbally give them that vocabulary. If they're doing this sort of motion, then they're going to end up having circles. So, we can say, 'Oh, circle', and then just connect 'that looks like the letter O'. So, we give the parents the tools to verbalize what the kiddos are doing and give the parents the confidence."

– RFK facilitator

The use of **songs, storybooks, and interactive reading activities** helped expose children early on to language.

"Sing the song. They are listening. Your child will pay attention to you. It doesn't matter that you are not an expert at singing, dancing, reading, telling a story. The time that you have to give is quality time."

– RFK facilitator

Hands-on literacy tools like labels, letter blocks, alphabet puzzles, and pattern games encouraged

hands-on exploration of words, letters and numbers.

"I give them cardstock for labeling things at home. If you write on that card, you put 'desk' and then you stick it to the desk. Then that way they'll connect the word 'desk' with the object. It is very hands on, because it's things that they touch all the time like the refrigerator or the door, different things like that. During our workshops we explain what each of the tools that we give them are used for."

– RFK facilitator

Additional Benefits

Feedback from caregivers and facilitators pointed to a range of positive outcomes for both caregivers and children. For caregivers, the most significant benefits centered around **increased confidence and knowledge**. Caregivers reported feeling more equipped to support their child's learning and development at home:

"Just learning how to apply all the different things that you learn to teach your kids at certain ages. It's hard to find things on the Internet. There's just so much that it's hard to narrow it down to what exactly you should be doing with your kid at that time in their development. And so, them explaining that and learning the importance of adding music and doing different things with games."

– Caregiver

The program's practical focus on offering clear strategies and tools that caregivers could apply right away was a key reason for caregivers feeling more equipped to support learning at home.

Weekly take-home materials including games, activities, and worksheets reinforced session

content and made it easier for families to continue learning at home.

"I'm trying to give a good example, so I appreciate that they print out the list of like, 'Go home and apply this and here's some ideas'. One of the things we learned was about nursery rhymes, and how kids learn nursery rhymes and how much better readers they are. Then they gave us a list of like 10 nursery rhymes for us to go home and read to our kids, which I appreciated."

– Caregiver

In addition, children had **opportunities to engage with peers, practice routines that mirror kindergarten settings, and naturally gain a love for learning**.

"It's just his curiosity for games and putting puzzles together and then adding those things together. I have noticed he's loving it more, like learning more, and paying attention more because of the activities. So, he is learning that way. He's jumped a lot."

– Caregiver

Challenges and Lessons Learned

A few challenges and areas for improvement were identified by both facilitators and caregivers:

- **Participant retention:** One consistent challenge was participant retention. Some families attended one session but did not return. Facilitators noted that more personalized follow-up, such as reminder texts or phone calls, could help address this issue. Offering additional incentives or flexible session times may also improve completion rates.
- **RFK content coverage:** Another area of feedback centered on content coverage. Some caregivers felt that not all parts of the

RFK booklet were addressed during sessions. A more structured walkthrough could ensure that all essential topics are covered and better prepare caregivers for continued application of the tools at home.

- **Caregiver connections:** Caregivers also expressed a desire for stronger connections with peers. While some community-building occurred naturally, caregivers requested more structured discussion time, optional meetups, or continued engagement beyond the final session.
- **Logistics:** Facilitators shared that some locations lacked reliable projectors or internet, requiring facilitators to supply their own.

Essential Elements of Success

As seen through our analysis or directly stated by participants, several elements emerged as particularly effective in fostering success and could be replicated across other early learning programs:

- **Personal and community connections:** Personal networks and word-of-mouth proved to be the most successful form of outreach. Caregivers reported learning about RFK through friends, family, and trusted professionals in their communities. This was further reinforced by the program's delivery at well-known local community locations such as public libraries and children's museums.
- **Strategic partnerships:** Collaborating with local community service centers helps with outreach, logistics, and credibility.
- **Community-based delivery:** Hosting sessions in trusted spaces increases comfort and trust. Similarly, outreach through community events played an important role in program awareness. MPELH events like

"Fun Fridays" offered casual, low-pressure opportunities for families to learn about RFK and connect with facilitators. These events functioned as entry points, allowing families to become familiar with the program before formally enrolling.

- **Free, accessible, and easy to enroll:** Ease of enrollment made a difference. Caregivers appreciated the use of direct sign-up links in emails that allowed them to sign up right then and there without needing to navigate multiple steps or websites. In addition, removing financial barriers was key.
- **Incentives:** Tangible incentives helped drive participation. In particular, the partnership with the Gilbert House Children's Museum was brought up by both facilitators and caregivers. Caregivers who attended all RFK sessions were eligible for a one-year museum membership. This not only incentivized attendance but also extended learning into a fun, educational environment beyond RFK.
- **Childcare:** This allowed caregivers to focus fully on the session content. This also gave children the opportunity to interact with other children and participate in their own developmentally appropriate activities.

"There was a lot of things I appreciated that are different. Just that you could bring your kids, and they had a little class for them so you could kind of have them right there, and you didn't have to find a babysitter or anything."

– Caregiver

- **Knowledgeable, supportive, and approachable facilitators:** Facilitators with these qualities help build trust and engagement.

- **Manageable group sizes:** Group size is important. Caregivers expressed that the smaller group sizes made it easier for participants to ask questions and build connections with one another.
- **Structured curriculum with room for adaptation:** Facilitators need a clear framework, but also flexibility to meet participant needs as they cater to a range of ages and diverse families.
- **High-quality take-home materials:** Quality books, activity kits, and materials extend learning into the home in tangible ways. Caregivers appreciated the creative and replicable activities at home, paired with facilitators emphasizing how to use common household materials.
- **Sessions grounded in current research:** Caregivers appreciated being able to understand why certain strategies worked.

“My favorite thing for sure was the research that they provided. There were things I had learned in school when I was in college, but having my own kid and learning these statistics about like how much to read your kid, how much better they do, and new research that I haven’t heard in a couple of years. It changes so quickly. I was floored and I was like, ‘I got to go read to you like 10x more.’”

– Caregiver

In conclusion, RFK fosters early literacy development in children ages 0–3 by empowering caregivers with practical, age-appropriate strategies they can use in everyday life. Key elements of success include the use of high-quality take-home materials, approachable and knowledgeable facilitators, and a supportive, community-based setting that encourages both caregiver learning and child engagement.

Early Learning Washington County

What is Bookshare?

The Early Learning Hub of Washington County utilized KPI funds to provide mini grants to support local community initiatives. One of the recipients, Cedar Mill Library, used the additional funding to further expand its Bookshare program, enhancing access to books and literacy resources for families in the area. The Bookshare program was launched to promote early childhood literacy and better support home-based childcare providers by increasing access to library resources in Washington County. The program was inspired by a library staff member who recognized a gap: many children in home-based childcare, especially in rural or underserved communities, had limited or no access to public libraries. As a result, these children were missing out on critical early literacy

experiences, such as exposure to books, storytelling, and other language-rich activities. Childcare providers, too, often faced barriers to accessing the library due to scheduling constraints, transportation challenges, or geographic isolation.

In response, Cedar Mill Library developed the Bookshare program to bring curated library materials directly to home-based childcare settings. By delivering books and literacy resources where children are already spending their days, the program aims to reduce access barriers and support both providers and families in creating language-rich environments. Bookshare ensures that children in these settings have greater opportunities to develop early literacy skills.

The program’s offerings are diverse, including monthly book box deliveries, play and learn kits,

and professional development resources for childcare providers.

- **Book boxes** are curated to meet the diverse needs of childcare environments and come in three primary categories: regular, toddler, and world language book boxes. Regular book boxes include a mix of picture books, board books, and a teacher resource book. These boxes are suitable for childcare centers serving children from infancy to preschool-age. Toddler book boxes are tailored specifically for toddlers and contain board books and a teacher resource book, offering materials that align with the developmental needs of younger children. World language book boxes are designed for multilingual communities and contain books in up to 23 different languages. Providers can request books in specific languages, ensuring that children from diverse linguistic backgrounds have access to reading materials that resonate with them. Each box is rotated monthly, ensuring variety and new content for childcare providers. The program's flexible system allows for sites to receive multiple boxes, ensuring that large centers are equally supported.
- **Play and Learn kits** are designed to support early literacy, kindergarten skills, and social-emotional development. These kits contain toys and educational materials such as puzzles, play items, and small motor development tools. Some kits are paired with books to create an interactive learning experience, offering a deeper connection between play and literacy. These kits were introduced based on feedback from childcare providers who expressed the need for a “library of things,” allowing them to

borrow educational toys and materials. The kits have become a popular feature of the program, with each participating site receiving access to one kit per month. Larger centers can request multiple kits, allowing them to serve more classrooms simultaneously.

- **Childcare provider professional development** is provided through professional development books in the monthly book boxes and free online childcare provider training in areas such as child development, literacy promotion, and effective engagement strategies. These training sessions are available to all providers in the Bookshare network and are designed to enhance caregivers’ skills while making professional development accessible. The training sessions are offered through the regional Child Care Resource and Referral agency (CCR&R), and providers earn credits for completing them.

The program currently serves 68 active childcare sites and can support up to 72. Although no waitlist is currently in place, the demand, especially for storytimes, is growing. Future expansion may require additional funding and coordination.

Cedar Mill Library staff work directly with childcare sites to share information about Bookshare and available resources. New providers can learn about the program through an online request form, flyers in libraries, and word-of-mouth referrals. In addition, the CCR&R promotes Bookshare services through its website, newsletters, and social media. This partnership is central to the program’s success

and plays a key role in connecting Bookshare with providers across Washington County.⁶

Interested sites can visit the program's website to apply and request resources like book boxes, storytimes, or materials in specific languages or themes (i.e., holiday books). Resource requests vary by site size. For example, home-based providers often request 1–2 book boxes, while larger centers may need 10 or more. Bookshare programs are implemented with the help of dedicated volunteers who deliver materials, lead storytimes, and manage logistics. Volunteers pick up and drop off items twice weekly and help maintain inventory to keep materials in excellent condition. A logistics team consisting of a librarian and coordinator housed at Cedar Mill Library oversees scheduling and ensures smooth delivery of book boxes and Play and Learn kits.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

PSU connected with the Bookshare staff at Cedar Mill Library to coordinate a listening session with childcare providers who they support. Program staff identified participating childcare sites that served mostly infants and young toddlers and represented a variety of learning settings and linguistic populations so that we could learn how the program is utilized in a variety of settings. PSU researchers spoke with five childcare providers receiving services from the Bookshare program. The childcare providers involved in the Bookshare program have been participating for varying lengths of time, with some having been engaged for over 15 years. Three of the childcare providers were home-based two were center based.

⁶ The CCR&R's insights into the childcare landscape help shape program offerings and ensure they meet the real-world needs of providers. The CCR&R's support has been especially valuable

Why Bookshare as a Strategy?

Bookshare's strategy supports early literacy by bringing high-quality, curated library materials directly into childcare settings. By delivering diverse book boxes, interactive Play and Learn kits, and professional development resources to providers, the program creates consistent opportunities for children to engage with books, stories, and language-rich activities in their daily environment. Early and repeated exposure to print materials and storytelling lays a strong foundation for early literacy development. At the same time, Bookshare empowers providers with the tools and training needed to foster a culture of literacy, ensuring children receive the support they need during their most critical years of language development.

Early Literacy Benefits

For children, having access to a **rotating set of books each month was seen as a way to foster excitement and anticipation around reading.** Facilitators shared that many children developed favorites and eagerly awaited new books and activities each month. One of the strengths of the book boxes is that they provide books designed to meet children's diverse developmental stages. Board books featuring bright, simple images are provided for infants. For older toddlers and preschoolers, books that allow them to explore more complex narratives and themes is beneficial to early literacy development.

The program also provides resources that help caregivers foster early literacy development at

during challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, making the partnership essential to Bookshare's continued growth and impact.

home. One provider shared they let families borrow books from the center to read before bed, allowing them to extend the literacy experience beyond the classroom:

“There are some families who like to borrow our books and take it home for a night to read to their kids before bed. I explain to them like, ‘Oh, this is from the library. So, I just make sure like, take care of it.’”

– Childcare Provider

Another provider described how parents expressed gratitude for the program and shared that their kids were always so excited about the books and storytime:

[Parents will share] “Oh, that’s all she talked about at dinner time was story time.”

– Childcare Provider

The Play and Learn activities provided by Bookshare extend beyond reading, integrating **hands-on, interactive experiences that foster creativity and cognitive development.** For example, one popular activity mentioned by two separate childcare providers involved using crayon markers to color a large cutout of a body, which was tied to a book about emotions. This open-ended activity allowed children to express themselves creatively while reinforcing the lessons from the book, such as identifying and naming their feelings. Another provider shared an example of veterinary and dental kits where children could read an associated book and practice the care on a stuffed animal. These experiences not only deepen children’s understanding of story content but also promote early literacy by connecting words, concepts, and actions in meaningful ways.

Storytime is a core and highly appreciated component of the Bookshare program, offering

children the chance to develop early literacy skills in a fun and engaging way. These storytime visits from the library are held regularly on a rotating basis, creating a consistent routine that children look forward to. One of the unique aspects of these storytime sessions is the opportunity for children to build a personal connection with the Cedar Mill librarian. This familiarity allows children to understand the library as a welcoming space for learning and exploration.

Additional Benefits

The Bookshare program not only directly benefits the children and families it serves but also has a broader impact on the larger community by **strengthening connections between childcare centers, families, libraries, and educational resources.** Through regular visits from library staff, rotating materials, and expansive reach, Bookshare fosters a sense of community engagement that enhances the overall early literacy landscape. The storytime visits create a tangible connection between the local library and the centers, building a bridge between two important community resources. Children begin to associate the library with their educational journey, strengthening the library’s role as a community hub for learning. Additionally, Bookshare helps elevate literacy awareness within the broader community by ensuring that all children, regardless of their background, have access to books that reflect diverse cultures, experiences, and languages.

This level of engagement also reflects how deeply integrated Bookshare has become in supporting early literacy not just through reading activities, but by inspiring providers and families to actively seek out and participate in literacy-rich experiences. Bookshare coordinators shared an instance in which a provider visited the library in person to ensure they would be included in the

upcoming rotation for storytime sessions. They noted that it was amazing that a provider took the time and effort to visit the library, with this gesture highlighting the value of the Bookshare initiative in the community.

Another example of appreciation was when one provider, responding to the children's excitement and appreciation for the library, created a way for the children to provide a thank you gift for the librarian:

"The kids just loved her so much. She was with us for a long time, and we came up with the idea of doing a chore at home and earning a dollar so that we could buy Miss Kathy a gift card. Well, some kids took it and ran with it. One girl was like, 'Well, I'm going to do 2 chores. So, Mom, give me \$2'. Some parents volunteered with more than just a dollar and we ended up raising \$60 and got her a gift card to Powells. That's how much they enjoyed and talked about storytime at home."

– Childcare Provider

In addition to providing a rotating collection of age-appropriate books for children, a few providers also shared that they **received professional development materials** from Bookshare in the form of teacher books. These materials are designed specifically to support childcare providers in enhancing their teaching strategies, facilitating lesson planning, and integrating literacy concepts into their daily routines. They are a crucial tool for providers who may not have access to specialized professional development resources or who are looking for new ways to engage with children on a deeper level. The teacher books also provide structured activity ideas that support specific learning goals. These activity ideas are beneficial because they align with developmental milestones, helping teachers scaffold the learning process and introduce new concepts in a way that's both

engaging and age appropriate. They offer guidance on how to incorporate diverse learning styles into the curriculum. Many of the books focus on strategies for supporting children with varying abilities or learning needs, such as children with developmental delays, those who are learning English as a second language, or children with different cultural backgrounds. For example, one provider mentioned a specific book about incorporating sign language into their lessons, which was a helpful resource for supporting children who are not yet verbal or have limited language skills.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Providers and Bookshare staff shared several challenges and lessons learned, including:

- **The importance of adapting to a provider's preferred method of communication:**
Some providers prefer text messages, others are more responsive to emails, and certain ones may only be able to engage at specific times. Establishing clear communication preferences upfront and remaining flexible has been crucial to successful coordination. In addition to communication preferences, the Bookshare team has learned to be mindful of providers' time and personal circumstances. Similarly, keeping emails brief and focused on one or two key requests, with important points highlighted at the beginning, has also proven to be more effective than long, detailed messages.
- **More bilingual storytime offerings:**
Providers have expressed strong interest in storytimes conducted in multiple languages to help support multilingual families more meaningfully. To do this, Bookshare also aspires to increase the number of staff who

can lead storytime sessions. With more staff available for storytime, Bookshare could build stronger, more consistent relationships with childcare centers, providing regular and ongoing literacy programs for the children. Staff shared that it would be ideal to have a set weekly storytime schedule at all the sites, so that children can build familiarity with the librarian and have more consistent exposure to books. In addition, a key part of the Bookshare coordinators' current efforts involve working with Spanish immersion childcare centers.

"It's challenging, yes, but the benefits far outweigh the difficulties. Forming these connections and figuring things out together, it's been incredibly enjoyable."

— Bookshare Coordinator

- **More open-ended activities and materials:** While they appreciated the Play and Learn activities, such as crafts and hands-on projects, some providers felt that certain activities were too structured or required too much assistance from the teacher. As shared previously, providers found that open-ended activities that encouraged creativity and independent expression, allowing children to explore the material on their own terms, were more successful.
- **More resources that aligned with specific curriculum and educational philosophy:** Some providers wished for books and activities that could better integrate with the specific learning objectives of their classrooms. While the books provided by Bookshare were generally well-received, the addition of more tailored resources that complemented their existing lesson plans

and learning goals would enhance the overall educational experience. However, many of the providers recognized it was just a matter of them connecting with the library staff to request these specific materials.

- **Expansion of the Bookshare program to include other centers:** This was a need expressed by Bookshare coordinators as well as providers. If Bookshare could find a way to offer delivery services to more distant locations or find alternative methods to ensure these centers also had access to the program, it would allow more children and families to benefit from the resources Bookshare offers. Bookshare coordinators envision a future where all 16 Washington County libraries had some form of Bookshare program tailored to their specific needs.

"It might look different at each location, but the goal would always be the same: to support the vital work of childcare providers. There are childcare providers everywhere, and they all need support. This program is a great way to help them."

— Bookshare Coordinator

- **Listen to providers and adapt to their needs:** The Bookshare team tracks the usage of book boxes and other materials, noting how many are used versus returned unused. When a box is returned untouched, it signals that something may not be working, whether it's because the program no longer needs it or because the kit is not meeting expectations. While this type of information is invaluable, the team also places significant importance on qualitative feedback gathered through one-on-one conversations with childcare providers,

which provides deeper insight into what is working well or needs to be changed. For example, when Bookshare staff spoke with providers about the Play and Learn kits, they learned that the magnetic tile-like pieces were found to cause issues for younger children as they were pinching their fingers. Upon receiving this feedback, the team responded by adding warning signs to the kits, alerting providers about the potential hazard for toddlers.

- **Extend the program to more types of childcare providers:** Currently, Bookshare only serves full-time childcare providers. However, many providers that only operate part-time (such as those serving children for four hours a day or those open just a few days a week) are left out. Expanding the program to include these part-time providers would ensure that more children, regardless of their care schedule, have access to quality early literacy resources.
- **Deliver books and resources for providers:** Many providers have expressed interest in having personal books and resources brought directly to their sites, as visiting the library can often be challenging due to time and logistical constraints.
- **Create a "mini bookmobile" mobile library:** A dream for Bookshare staff is to have a mobile library. This vehicle would visit childcare centers, allowing children to select books to take back to their classrooms for the month. The idea is to bring choice and variety directly to children, making it easier for them to engage with a range of reading materials, all while integrating smoothly into the existing system. This mobile service would give children greater access to books and the joy of choosing their own reading materials,

which is one way to help cultivate early literacy habits.

Essential Elements of Success

A few key elements contributing to success were identified:

- **Books and activities that offer a high degree of autonomy:** These were highlighted as the most successful. Open-ended activities allowed children to engage with the material on their own terms, promoting creativity and independent thinking. In the example of the activity inspired by a book about emotions, children matched their feelings to colors, drawing pictures in the cutout of the body. The providers appreciated the simplicity and the way it allowed the children to express their emotions without rigid constraints, giving them more control over their learning process.

"It was a big cutout of a body. It went with an emotion book, and then they match their emotion with the colors, and they just drew in the body which they really liked. So just things that were easier for them to be creative on their own rather than having it look a certain way and having it be hard to use."

– Childcare Provider

- **Books that featured diverse characters and experiences:** These were also particularly impactful. For example, books that portrayed children from different cultural backgrounds or explored themes of diversity helped children feel seen and valued. One teacher highlighted a book with a character who was like one of the children in the class, making the story feel more

personal and meaningful. These types of books helped foster a sense of pride and self-worth.

"Some of the books, especially for minorities, make the children feel represented. They feel like, 'Oh, yay, I see a child who looks like me.'"

— Childcare Provider

- **Consistency:** The predictability of receiving new books each month gave providers the flexibility to weave them into their weekly lessons.
- **Adaptable to different settings:** There are a few notable differences in how the Bookshare program is experienced in home-based versus center-based childcare settings. Home-based providers, who typically serve fewer children, can integrate the materials in a more personalized way. In this setting, the flexibility of the program allows for a more individualized approach to literacy development, where books and activities can be tailored based on the child's interests and developmental stage. On the other hand, center-based childcare settings often have a larger number of children and multiple classrooms. This requires more coordination to ensure that the books and materials are distributed appropriately across age groups.
- **Scalability:** The Bookshare coordinators highlighted the program's scalability and

potential to be replicated in any community with a public library. Despite the seemingly daunting task of reaching thousands of childcare providers in the area, they emphasized that starting small was key.

"It's important to start somewhere, all you really need is a set of books and someone willing to take those books to the childcare sites. You don't have to do everything at once. You can begin by selecting five sites, finding a staff member with an hour to spare, and then picking books from the library's collection. Put them in a Friends of the Library bag and drop them off. It's a simple but effective way to get started."

— Bookshare Coordinator

In conclusion, the Bookshare program plays a vital role in fostering early literacy development for children ages 0–3 by bringing curated, age-appropriate books and interactive learning materials directly into home-based and center-based childcare settings. By eliminating barriers to library access, Bookshare ensures that even the youngest children are consistently exposed to language-rich experiences that support a love of reading. Bookshare not only supports early literacy but also strengthens the broader ecosystem of early learning by empowering providers and creating lasting community connections centered around books and language.

Early Literacy Literature and Additional Resources

The literature and resource guide below summarizes research on effective early literacy practices and evidence-based strategies for promoting literacy development in children aged 0-3. First, we briefly share a few key resources that describe the importance of early literacy as it relates to cultivating academic success, supporting dual language learners, and fostering early literacy at home. Next, we describe three high impact strategies that are widely accepted as effective ways to increase language development and early literacy for this age group. Following this, we review examples of specific programs for the home environment and in early childhood settings to support language and literacy development. Finally, we provide a list of resources that give detailed information both about the evidence behind the “best practices” or “high impact” strategies as well as practical resources describing key program models and approaches.

Early Literacy in Academic Success

Early literacy skills involve more than the ability to read and write; they include foundational skills such as phonological awareness, vocabulary development, and print awareness. These skills provide the building blocks for later academic achievement and are essential for helping children and families to thrive. The development of these early skills has been linked to the amount and quality of language exposure children receive, particularly in the first three years of life. Research underscores the importance of early literacy in preventing later reading difficulties. According to the [National Institute for Literacy \(2008\)](#), children who develop strong language and literacy skills in their early years are more likely to succeed academically throughout their schooling. Studies

have also shown that children from language-rich environments exhibit better cognitive and academic outcomes in later years (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Early Literacy in the Home Environment

The importance of family literacy and having a home environment rich in parenting interactions that support literacy skills cannot be overstated. Studies have shown that children whose families actively participate in literacy practices, such as reading to their children and providing access to books, have better language development and literacy outcomes (UConn, 2021). Involving parents and caregivers in structured literacy activities, even at the infant stage, is a high-impact strategy for early literacy development.

Programs like Reach Out and Read (described more fully below) offer parents guidance on how to integrate literacy-promoting behaviors into daily routines, reinforcing the connection between literacy and everyday life (Mendelsohn et al., 2001). These programs also provide books and educational materials to families, encouraging regular reading practices from an early age.

More resources on promoting literacy development in the home environment:

- [How Parents and Families Support Oral Language and Vocabulary](#)
- [How Parents and Families Support Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing](#)
- [How Parents and Families Support Phonological Awareness](#)
- [Early literacy infant practice guides for parents](#)

Early Literacy for Dual Language Learners

Supporting young children in their native language, especially for dual language learners, is critical. Creating home and early learning environments that affirm and encourage the use of the native language is a powerful way to help children thrive. Simple, everyday interactions like storytelling, singing, or speaking in the home language, build critical early literacy and communication skills. Early Learning programs that partner with families to provide culturally and linguistically responsive strategies empower caregivers to take an active role in their child's language development. When families feel confident using their home language and see it valued by schools and communities, both children and families are more likely to succeed socially, emotionally, and academically.

More resources on supporting dual language learners:

- Kane, C., Sandilos, L., Hammer, C. S., Komaroff, E., Bitetti, D., & López, L. (2023). [Teacher language quality in preschool classrooms: Examining associations with DLLs' oral language skills](#). *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 63, 352–361
- Ball, J. (2010). [Enhancing learning of children from diverse language backgrounds: Mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education in early childhood and early primary school years](#). UNESCO.
- Cho, G. (2000). [The role of heritage language in social interactions and relationships: Reflections from a language minority group](#). *Bilingual Research Journal*, 24(4), 369-384.
- Koenig, M. & Woodward, L. (2012). [Toddlers learn words in a foreign language: the role of native vocabulary knowledge](#). *Journal of Child Language*, 39, 322-337.

Best Practices and High-Impact Program Strategies (HIPS)

Early childhood literacy programs that focus on high-impact strategies (HIPS) have shown promising results in promoting literacy skills among young children. These strategies aim to engage children in rich linguistic exchanges, fostering the development of vocabulary, listening skills, and early comprehension. These practices and resources that detail the research evidence and/or provide additional information about programs are described below.

Shared Reading and Dialogic Reading

One of the most influential practices in early literacy development is shared reading, where an adult reads with the child, engaging them in the story. The practice of Dialogic Reading has proven particularly effective. In this approach, adults ask open-ended questions, encourage the child to predict and describe pictures, and prompt the child to recount parts of the story in their own words (Whitehurst et al., 1994). This interaction promotes vocabulary growth, narrative skills, and critical thinking, as well as promoting and increasing positive parent-child interactions.

More resources describing the importance of shared and dialogic reading for literacy development:

- Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. (2023). *Best practices and strategies to support early literacy in PreK-3 programs*. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/northwest/>:
- National Institute for Literacy. (2006). *A child becomes a reader: Birth through preschool*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED501551>
- [Illinois Early Learning Project \(2012\)](#)

Responsive Adult-Child Interactions

Research supports the notion that responsive communication between adults and young children play a central role in the development of language and literacy skills. Responsive caregiving includes recognizing and responding to a child's vocalizations, gestures, and expressions. High-quality interactions promote the development of communicative competence, helping children understand that language is a tool for social engagement and expression.

Incorporating responsive communication practices into everyday routines is an effective way to foster early literacy skills. For example, caregivers who engage in back-and-forth exchanges with their infants, even before they can speak, create opportunities for the child to develop essential language skills such as listening, turn-taking, and language production (Mendelsohn et al., 2001). In addition, early childhood home visiting and parenting programs that focus on supporting positive parent child interactions are examples of responsive adult-child interactions that can support the development of early literacy skills.

More resources describing the importance of responsive adult-child interactions for literacy development:

- [Children's Institute Early Literacy Resources](#)

Singing, Rhymes, and Play

The inclusion of songs, rhymes, and playful language activities in daily routines helps with the development of phonological awareness, an important pre-reading skill. Rhyming and singing activities help children tune into the sounds and rhythms of language, which is crucial for the later development of reading and spelling skills. Play-based language activities also support vocabulary acquisition and narrative skills, particularly when

children engage in imaginative play or interact with storybooks (National Institute for Literacy, 2006).

More resources describing the importance of singing, rhymes, and play for literacy development:

- [Sound Off Together!](#)

Evidence-Based Programs for Ages 0–3

Several evidence-based programs focus on promoting early literacy skills in children aged 0-3 and incorporate one or more of the best practices described above. Below are brief descriptions of these, as well as links to more information about each program model.

[Reach Out and Read](#) is a widely recognized program that emphasizes the importance of reading aloud to children from infancy. It is implemented in pediatric offices, where healthcare providers give age-appropriate books to families during well-child visits. The program has been shown to improve parents' reading behaviors and develop children's language skills, including vocabulary and pre-literacy abilities. Pediatricians provide guidance on how to read interactively, even with babies as young as 6 months, encouraging parents to engage with their children through shared reading.

The [Born to Read](#) program is another public health initiative encouraging parents to read and talk to their babies from birth. Healthcare providers and libraries often partner to distribute books and literacy resources to families, along with workshops and guidance on how to promote early literacy at home. Research indicates that programs like Born to Read help improve literacy behaviors and increase awareness of the importance of early reading, with long-term benefits for language development.

[Talking is Teaching](#) is a program created by the [Too Small to Fail](#) initiative that offers simple, research-

based strategies for fostering early language development. It focuses on encouraging caregivers to talk, read, and engage with their babies and toddlers through everyday activities. This program is grounded in research showing that early exposure to language is crucial for brain development and language skills. By offering tips on how to describe the child's surroundings, use diverse vocabulary, and respond to vocalizations, it helps caregivers create a language-rich environment for young children.

[Early Head Start](#) is a nationally recognized, evidence-based program designed to support the healthy development of young children and their families. [Grounded in decades of research](#), Early Head Start provides comprehensive services that support children and families, particularly through early language and literacy development. By engaging families, offering high-quality early learning environments, and using strategies rooted in developmental science, Early Head Start helps children build critical pre-literacy skills. From rich language interactions to access to books and parent education, the program lays a strong foundation for lifelong learning and success that allows children and families to thrive.

Several [evidence-based home visiting models](#) such as [Healthy Families Oregon \(HFO\)](#), [Parents as Teachers \(PAT\)](#), and [Nurse Family Partnership \(NFP\)](#), are grounded in rigorous research demonstrating measurable impacts on children's early literacy, vocabulary, and school readiness. These models support parent-child interactions and nurturing communication, promoting vocabulary development and literacy-rich environments. The [ParentChild+](#) program is another home visiting program that focuses on increasing verbal interaction and cognitive development for children aged 16 months to 3 years old. Trained home visitors work with families

to enhance literacy skills through reading and play. The program provides books and activities that encourage language development and fosters regular reading and play interactions between caregivers and children.

[Vroom](#) is a program that provides daily "brain-building" tips for parents to help support early brain and literacy development. These tips focus on creating language-rich interactions throughout the day during everyday routines like mealtime, bath time, and bedtime. Vroom is based on neuroscience research that shows how simple, nurturing interactions between parents and children can build strong cognitive and language skills. By offering easy-to-follow activities, Vroom helps parents make the most of their daily moments with their children.

Conclusion

The early years are important for literacy development. Research clearly identifies several high-impact strategies that foster foundational language skills in young children. Programs such as READY! for Kindergarten, Play and Learn groups, and Bookshare are exemplary in using these evidence-based practices, creating meaningful and lasting literacy growth for children ages 0–3.

Central to these high-impact strategies is dialogic reading, where interactive storytelling encourages active participation, vocabulary growth, and comprehension. RFK programming integrates dialogic reading techniques by equipping caregivers with practical tools and high-quality materials, enabling them to engage children in rich, responsive conversations that stimulate language development. Likewise, Play and Learn groups use play-based activities that naturally embed dialogic reading and interactive language experiences,

helping children build phonological awareness and communication skills in a supportive social context.

Responsive adult-child interactions are another cornerstone of effective early literacy development. Both RFK and Play and Learn programs emphasize empowering caregivers to respond attentively and sensitively to children's verbal and nonverbal cues. This responsive engagement nurtures children's confidence and encourages experimentation with language, laying the groundwork for future literacy success. The supportive community environments these programs create also help caregivers share knowledge and build skills collectively, reinforcing consistent, nurturing literacy interactions at home.

The use of songs, rhymes, and activities featured in these programs addresses critical phonological awareness, a predictor of later reading ability. By integrating these playful language experiences, children develop an ear for sounds and patterns essential to the development of early literacy.

The Bookshare program removes barriers to accessing high-quality, age-appropriate reading materials. By delivering books directly to childcare settings, Bookshare ensures that families have the tools necessary to cultivate a love of reading and ongoing literacy engagement.

Together, these programs contribute to a holistic early learning system that supports thriving children, empowered caregivers, and connected communities. Rather than focusing solely on preparing children for school, these KPI-funded programs recognize and value the diverse ways Oregon's Early Learning Hubs support families and help build strong foundations for children's lifelong success and overall family well-being.

References

- Boyes, M. E., Leitão, S., Claessen, M., Dzidic, P., Boyle, G., Perry, A., & Nayton, M. (2017). Improving phonological awareness in parents of children at risk of literacy difficulties: A preliminary evaluation of the Boost program. *Frontiers in Education, 2*, 47. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2017.00047>
- Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- High, P. C., LaGasse, L., Becker, S., Ahlgren, I., & Gardner, A. (2000). Literacy promotion in primary care pediatrics: Can we make a difference? *Pediatrics, 105*(4 Pt 2), 927–934. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.105.4.927>
- Huttenlocher, P. R. (2002). *Neural plasticity: The effects of environment on the development of the cerebral cortex*. Harvard University Press.
- Illinois Early Learning Project. (2012). *How parents and families support oral language and vocabulary*. Retrieved from <https://illinoisearlylearning.org/weblink/how-parents-and-families-support-oral-language-and-vocabulary/>
- Mendelsohn, A. L., Mogilner, L. N., Dreyer, B. P., Brockmeyer, C. A., Berkule, S. B., & Huberman, H. S. (2001). The impact of a clinic-based literacy intervention on language development in inner-city preschool children. *Pediatrics, 107*(1), 130–134. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.107.1.130>
- National Institute for Early Education Research. (2020). *Early literacy practices and policy*. Retrieved from <https://nieer.org/>
- National Institute for Literacy. (2006). *A child becomes a reader: Birth through preschool*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED501551>
- National Early Literacy Panel. (2008). *Developing early literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel*. National Institute for Literacy.
- Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. (2023). *Best practices and strategies to support early literacy in PreK-3 programs*. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/northwest/>
- Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early child development*. National Academy Press.
- Snow, C. E. (2010). Academic language and the challenge of reading for learning about science. *Science, 328*(5977), 450–452. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1182597>
- Tennessee Department of Education. (2020). *Governor's Science of Reading Initiative*. <https://www.tn.gov/education>
- UConn. (2021). *Best practices in early childhood literacy*. UConn Policy Brief. Retrieved from <https://education.uconn.edu/>
- Whitehurst, G. J., & Lonigan, C. J. (1998). Child development and emergent literacy. *Child Development, 69*(3), 848–872. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1998.tb06174.x>
- Whitehurst, G. J., Arnold, D. S., Epstein, J. N., Angell, A. L., Smith, M., & Fischel, J. E. (1994). A picture book reading intervention in day care and home for children from low-income families. *Developmental Psychology, 30*(5), 679–689. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.30.5.679>
- Center for Early Literacy Learning. (2016). *Practitioner practice guides*. Retrieved from <https://earlyliteracylearning.org/pgpracts.php>
- Center for Early Literacy Learning. (n.d.). *Early literacy guides for parents*. Retrieved from <https://www.pathstoliteracy.org/resource/early-literacy-guides-parent/>