



Building Literacy from the Ground Up



Harriet Shaklee, PhD, Janica Hardin, BA, Tasha Clinton, BS,
and Diane Demarest, BS University of Idaho Extension, Boise, Idaho
and Sharon Bixby, MA, Lee Pesky Learning Center

Renewed concern for success in school has led to increasing focus on literacy as an essential skill for all children. Research in emergent literacy shows that the foundations of literacy are laid well before children come to school, and that family adults are central to the developmental process. Progress in ensuring strong literacy skills for all children will require attention to children's first teachers, their parents, and the daily language and literacy environment they build for their children. The present study analyzed the Parents as Teachers Born to Learn™ Curriculum Prenatal to 3 Years for the literacy and language content presented to parents. Results show that Parents as Teachers provides all the necessary elements to equip parents of young children for this important role.

Current concepts of literacy development suggest that children lay the groundwork for reading from the earliest days of life (National Research Council, 1999; Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998). Research in emergent literacy shows that reading ability in the school years depends on competencies developed long before school begins, including children's development in vocabulary and syntax, interest in print and books, awareness of word sounds and rhythm, and early scribbling and pretend writing.

Research further shows that the home literacy environment is related to later literacy development (Senechal and LeFevre, 2002; Burgess, Hecht and Lonigan, 2002; Bennett, Weigel and Martin, 2002). For example, a regular book sharing time provides a context for parents to introduce new words by labeling objects. Parent-child discussions about the book content allow the children to practice their new words to express ideas, and regular library visits and books in the home can raise children's interest in the written word.

"Reading, writing and oral language develop concurrently and interdependently from an early age."

*Whitehurst & Lonigan
(1998)*

Family mealtime provides a natural context for parent-child dialogue, and rhyme and word play increases children's awareness of word sounds. Minimizing background noise such as the television sets the stage for conversation among family adults and children.

Variation in language relevant experiences in the home and community can lead to disparity among children in literacy development (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998). A recent evaluation of print available in four Philadelphia communities shows that low income children have more restricted access to literacy opportunities in their neighborhoods (Neuman and Celano, 2001). Book sharing is also related to income, with estimates that middle-class children typically enter first grade with 1,000 – 1,700 hours of one-on-one book sharing with an adult, while low income children experience just 25 hours. Even style of book sharing can make a difference – children develop stronger language skills when family adults question them during reading, encouraging them to expand on book content. Parents' vocabulary and conversational styles also vary widely among families, influencing the daily exposure to language for children (Hart and Risley, 1995). Family and community variables such as these shape the literacy world of young children, influencing the foundational skills for literacy.

"When an infant shows excitement over pictures in a storybook, when a 2 year old scribbles with a crayon, when a 4 year old points out letters in a street sign – all of these actions signal a child's growing literacy development."

*The National Research
Council (1999)*

Emergent Literacy and the Parents as Teachers *Born to Learn™ Curriculum Prenatal to 3 Years*

The Parents as Teachers program is ideally positioned to address issues of emergent literacy through their parent education and support program for parents of young children (prenatal through Kindergarten entry). The curriculum focus on parent practices is supported by research showing that parents are in a unique position to develop strong language and literacy environments for their children.

The present study was designed to assess the literacy content of the Parents as Teachers *Born to Learn™ Curriculum Prenatal to 3 years*. The emergent literacy research shows the first three years to be important years for laying the groundwork for literacy.

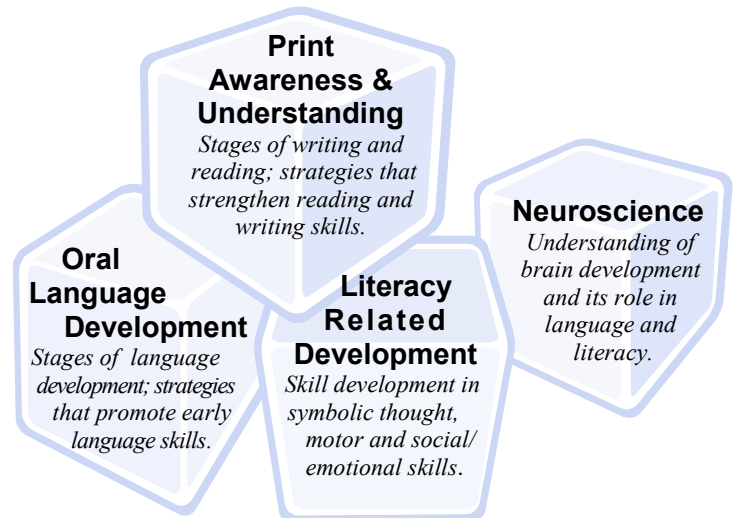
Important accomplishments in language and emergent literacy in these early years include:

- **Oral language development:** cooing and babbling, growth in vocabulary and syntax.
- **Phonological awareness:** rhyming, word play and awareness of word sounds.
- **Listening skills:** Listening to stories, following simple instructions.
- **Conversational competence:** describing events, telling simple stories, conversational turn taking.
- **Book awareness:** recognizing specific books by cover, understanding how books are handled.
- **Print interest:** requesting to be read to, pretend reading, attending to environmental print.
- **Attention to book content:** labeling pictures in books, commenting on characters, realizing pictures represent real objects.
- **Pre-writing:** development of scribbling/drawing.
- **Letter awareness:** recognizing that letters differ from pictures, recognizing letter shapes and sounds.

Literacy Content Coding Scheme

We developed a comprehensive coding scheme for the literacy content of the *Born to Learn™ Curriculum Prenatal to 3 Years*, based on the literacy strategies shown by research to promote language and emerging literacy in the early years as shown in the figure above. A more detailed description of the literacy content coding scheme is available from the authors. A trained coder reviewed all lessons and handouts for parents in the curriculum, using the literacy codes to categorize the content of the material. A second coder indepen-

Literacy Content Categories



dently coded 20% of the material. The two coders showed an inter-rater agreement of 79%. Disagreements were resolved through discussion to produce the final coding results.

In addition to literacy content, lesson themes were coded as follows:

- **Major Theme:** the topic with the most extensive development in the lesson plan, covered in the text of the lesson plan, implemented in the lesson activity, and theme of at least one accompanying handout.
- **Secondary Theme(s):** a topic with moderate coverage in the text of the lesson plan and generally having at least one accompanying handout. Secondary theme(s) often complement the Major theme.
- **Minor Theme(s):** a topic discussed briefly and/or only included as a handout to the lesson plan.

The thematic analysis complements the literacy coding scheme, showing the lessons in which emergent literacy themes were core components of the lesson. In addition, lessons are identified covering the major dimensions of child development and other key parenting issues.

Lesson Themes

Literacy: oral language, reading and writing development.

Core Development: neuroscience, intellectual, motor, physical, social-emotional and child development.

Other Themes: music/play, health/nutrition/safety, parenting.

Results of the Literacy Content Analysis

Results of the literacy content analysis show that, from the very first lessons, the Parents as Teachers Born to Learn™ Curriculum Prenatal to 3 Years introduces parents to core concepts of language and literacy development, including the four major areas of neuroscience, oral language development, print awareness and understanding, and literacy-related development. In fact, every monthly and weekly lesson over the three year period includes literacy content within at least 3 of those 4 areas.

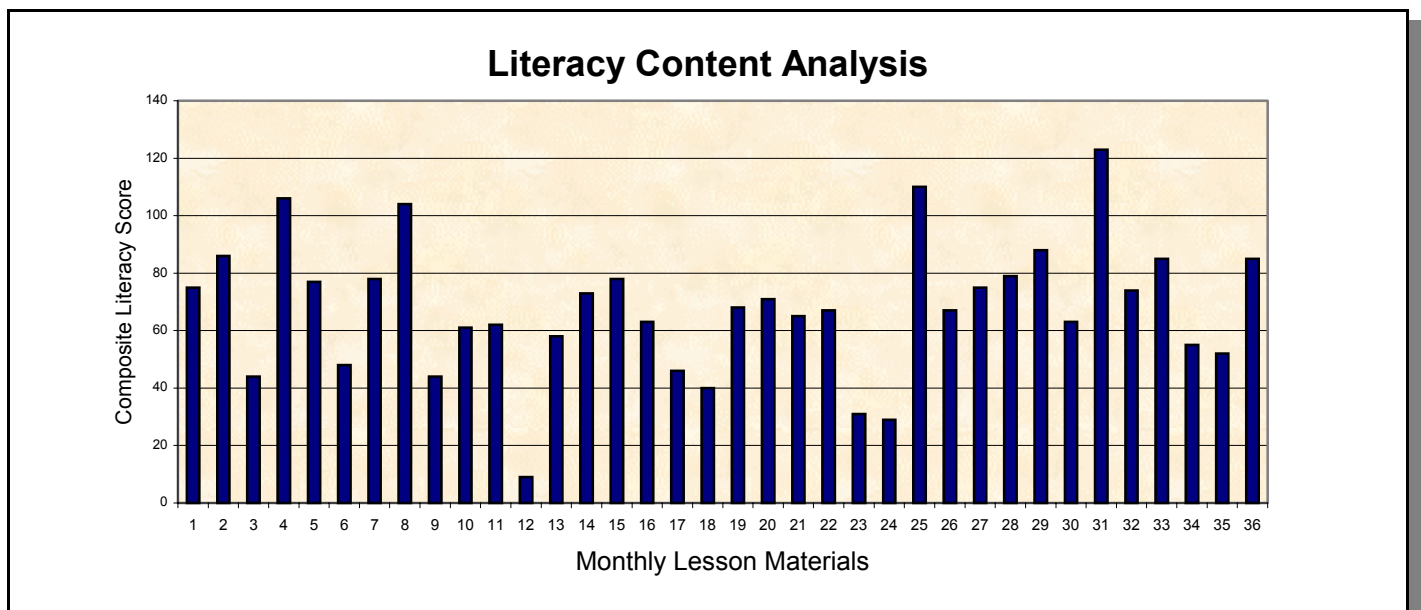
The extent of literacy representation in the curriculum is best seen through the composite literacy score, the total number of times a literacy code is assigned to the printed lesson material (lesson plan and handouts). As shown in the figure below, literacy is an omnipresent theme in the Parents as Teachers curriculum. Emergent literacy content is represented 40 or more times in 92% of the monthly lessons. In some cases this occurs as an extended discussion, while in other cases it is a brief reminder.

While language and literacy are well represented throughout the curriculum, the analysis of lesson themes shows that literacy is often not the explicit lesson topic. In half of the monthly lessons, parents learn strategies that foster basic literacy development in the context of non-literacy topics such as attachment, play, or stranger anxiety. For example, the monthly plan at 25 months features a discussion of toilet training. This includes core features of oral language development such as introduction of new words for body parts and bath-time play activities to help children learn the terms. Parents must also consider how to introduce the toileting expectations in developmentally appropriate language.

Discussions with their children about the new expectations will involve turn taking in conversation and stretch talk – two excellent strategies for expanding talk with children. Parallel talk will be a



good way for parents to comment on their children's toileting efforts, another strategy for vocabulary expansion and conversation development. Parents are encouraged to read books about the potty with their children, using the books to spark further conversation on the topic. Parents themselves will be reading the lesson handouts on toilet training, modeling reading and interest in the printed word to their children. Parents are encouraged to be sensitive observers of their child's readiness for toilet training, and to praise their children's positive efforts – both strategies which will serve well in all teaching contexts with their children. In this way, thoughtful curriculum development can make any topic relevant to emergent literacy.



Getting the Literacy Message Across

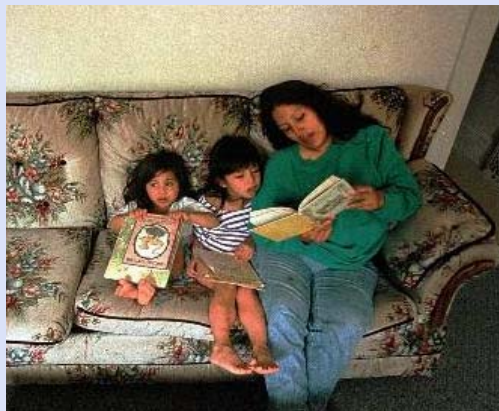
Our content analysis shows that the Parents as Teachers *Born to Learn*™ Curriculum Prenatal to 3 Years offers thorough coverage of literacy concepts to parents. A comparison of features of this curriculum to core strategies of adult learning show several strengths in how the program gets the message across to participating parents:

- *Just in Time Training*: Parents learn about language and literacy in terms relevant to the current stage of their child's development. Concepts and activities can be directly applied at the time they are learned.
- *Anticipatory Guidance*: Lessons orient parents to upcoming developmental stages of language and literacy for their children, so they understand changes in their child's behavior as they occur.
- *Embedded Content*: Literacy and language topics and activities are embedded throughout the curriculum as recurrent themes on all topics covered.
- *Distributed Learning*: Literacy concepts are introduced into the curriculum through extended discussion and supporting activity, then reappear regularly as refreshers in future lessons, helping parents adopt the concepts as integral to their thinking in their daily interactions with their children.
- *Concept to Action*: Literacy-relevant ideas are introduced in conceptual terms, but parents also learn the skills of observation and application necessary to apply them on their own.
- *Literacy Environment*: Lesson handouts and parent activities increase the home literacy environment through book-making activities, book sharing at each lesson, handouts for parents at an appropriate literacy level, and literacy-relevant activities left with the parents to do with their children between personal visits.

The extensive emergent literacy content of the *Born to Learn*™ Curriculum Prenatal to 3 years combines with effective strategies for adult learning to promote a positive environment for drawing parents into the language and literacy worlds of their children.

"What parents said and did with their children in the first 3 years of language learning had an enormous impact on how much language their children learned and used."

Hart & Risley (1995)



Research shows the early years to be important for laying the foundation for the reading skills so important for children's success in schools. Our analysis shows the Parents as Teachers program uses a well designed curriculum to help parents build strong literacy environments for their children from the first days of life.

References

- Bennett, K., Weiger., D., and Martin, S. (2002). Children's acquisition of early literacy skills. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17, 295-317.
- Burgess, S., Hecht, S., and Lonigan, C. (2002). Relations of the home literacy environment (HLE) to the development of reading-related abilities: A one-year longitudinal study. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37 (4), 408-426.
- Hart, B. and Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful Differences*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes Publishing.
- National Research Council (1999). *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success*, Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Neuman, S. and Celano, D. (2001). Access to print in low-income and middle-income communities: An ecological study of four neighborhoods. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36 (1), 8-26.
- Parents as Teachers National Center, Inc. (1999) *Born to Learn*™ Curriculum Prenatal to 3 years. St. Louis, MO.
- Senechal, M. and LeFevre, J. (2002). Parental involvement in the development of children's reading skill: A five-year longitudinal study. *Child Development*, 73 (2), 445-460.
- Whitehurst, C. and Lonigan, C. (1998). Child development and emergent literacy. *Child Development*, 69 (3), 848-72.

This research project was made possible through the support of the Office of the Governor of the State of Idaho the University of Idaho and The Parents as Teachers National Center