

School Readiness Is Not the Same as Literacy Readiness

Children may be ready for school, but are they ready to learn to read and write?

1

Why are some children arriving at Kindergarten not ready to access reading and writing instruction within the ELA curriculum?

Many early childhood systems are asking the wrong question.

The focus is often on whether children are ready for school. In most cases, they are. They can participate, communicate, and engage with others. But this is not the same as being ready for literacy learning.

The more important question is whether children are ready to access reading and writing instruction.

Reading and writing do not develop from exposure alone. They depend on specific knowledge and skills that must be built deliberately.

When these are not yet secure, children can appear engaged and capable but still struggle to access what is being taught in an ELA curriculum.

In many settings, children experience rich language, play, and interaction. These matter.

However, without a clear focus on how language connects to sounds and how those sounds connect to print, some children do not develop the foundations needed to move into reading and writing with confidence.

The issue is not readiness for school. The issue is how literacy learning is built.

When learning is built from children's own spoken language, moving deliberately from speech to sound to print, more children arrive at Kindergarten able to access reading and writing instruction successfully.

This shifts the question from "Are children ready?" to "How is literacy learning being built?"



2

What needs to be in place before children can learn to read and write?

Children do not learn to read and write through exposure alone.

Before formal instruction begins, children need to develop strong language and vocabulary, be able to hear and work with the sounds in words, connect sounds to letters, and understand how books and print work. These are the foundations for literacy learning.

Research shows that phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and letter-sound

knowledge are among the strongest predictors of later reading success.

When these foundations are secure, children are far more able to move into reading and writing with confidence and success.

These foundations do not develop reliably through exposure alone. They need to be noticed, strengthened, and deliberately taught within everyday learning.

3

How do young children build foundational literacy skills through language, play, and interaction?

It is often assumed that foundational literacy skills develop naturally through play, rich experiences, and exposure to language.

They do not.

Children need to be explicitly taught how spoken and written language work.

They need to:

- learn to hear and recognize sounds and sound patterns in words
- understand that sounds can be written with letters
- understand that letters can represent more than one sound, that sounds can be written in different ways
- learn to print letters correctly, with the right grip and formation.

Again, this does not happen reliably through exposure alone. While some children do acquire



these foundational skills incidentally, many do not. The difference is not because of ability. It is because of the nature of instruction.

Without explicit teaching, many children do not acquire these critical foundational skills.

4

If children are engaged and experiencing rich play, why are some still not ready to access literacy learning in Kindergarten?

Children can be engaged, confident, and enjoy rich play experiences and still not develop the foundations needed for literacy learning.

This can be difficult to see because everything might look positive.

But engagement alone does not build the specific knowledge required for reading and writing.

Children are participating. They are talking, listening, and interacting. The environment is rich. The intent is right.

But there is a gap.

When attention is not consistently drawn to the sounds in words and how those sounds connect to letters, some children do not develop these foundations, even in otherwise strong learning environments.

The presence of play builds an engaging learning environment that supports children's readiness to learn.

The way adults build children's knowledge of foundational literacy skills during those experiences determines their readiness for literacy learning.

5

How do educators know what each child can already do and what needs to be strengthened next?

Some early literacy gaps remain hidden because children can appear engaged and involved, even when important learning is not yet secure.

If more children are going to be ready to access reading and writing instruction in Kindergarten, educators must know what each child can already do, what is developing, and what needs to be taught next.

Practical, valid, and reliable assessment, alongside informed observation, makes this learning visible.

In early childhood settings, this can happen through games, interactions, and purposeful learning experiences that show what children know and can do.

Practical assessments and informed observation allow teaching to be monitored and adjusted so that more children build the foundations needed for literacy learning.

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What does purposeful, developmentally appropriate literacy learning look like in daily practice?

Purposeful, developmentally appropriate literacy learning does not occur by chance. It requires educators to intentionally and explicitly build the knowledge and skills children need before formal reading and writing instruction begins.

The earliest literacy foundations do not develop on their own. They need to be explicitly taught.

In strong practice, educators intentionally and explicitly build on children's prior knowledge. They begin with words children already know, draw attention to the sounds in those words, and then connect those sounds to letters and print.

Children learn to:

- recognize and name letters, both upper and lower case
- hear and work with sounds in words — clap syllables, notice and produce rhymes
- identify individual sounds
- connect sounds and letters
- build vocabulary through talk and interaction.

For example, a teacher might use a child's name, draw attention to the first sound, connect that sound to a letter, use the name to build phonological awareness, then extend language through conversation and play.

Who has a name that starts with /k/ in our class?
Curt!

If I write Curt's name on the board, you can see the letter we use to write his /k/ sound.

C for the /k/ in Curt!



Let's clap the syllables in Curt's name. One clap, one syllable. Curt's full name is *Curtis*. How many claps in *Curtis*? Two! One clap for *Curt* and two claps for *Curtis*.

I'm thinking of a word that rhymes with *Curt* and starts with /h/ — /h/ — **urt** — *hurt!*

Can anyone think of another word that rhymes with *Curt* and *hurt*? (*shirt*, *squirt*, *Bert*, *dirt*)

Who can think of another word that starts with /k/? You thought of *cup*. What do we use a cup for? What could we put in a cup? What is a cup made from? Who knows another word that starts with /k/?

These foundations are taught in ways that are playful, engaging, and suited to each child's stage of development. Teaching them is brief, purposeful, and repeated across the day.

When this teaching is clear and consistent across daily practice, more children build the foundations needed to access literacy learning in Kindergarten.

Leaders should expect to see this happening every day across classrooms.

7

How can family engagement support children to build the foundations for literacy?

Family engagement plays an important role in children's early learning and development.

The opportunity is to connect everyday interactions at home with the specific foundations children need for learning to read and write.

This includes helping families understand how children build language, awareness of sounds in words, letter knowledge, and book and print knowledge.

It also means showing families simple games and activities they can use at home, and providing

short, accessible videos that model how these can be used in everyday moments.

The goal is to make it easier for families and caregivers to support their child's literacy learning in practical, manageable ways.

When home and early childhood settings are aligned in this way, children have more consistent opportunities to build the foundations they need for literacy learning.

The goal is to equip families with manageable ways to support their child's literacy learning.

8

What do we need to do now to ensure more children arrive at Kindergarten ready to learn to read and write?

Early childhood settings already provide rich opportunities for children to talk, play, listen, join in, and learn with others.

However, many children are still arriving at Kindergarten without the foundations needed to access reading and writing instruction.

What needs to change is not the presence of rich experiences but how clearly, consistently, and explicitly literacy foundations are developed within those experiences.

This means making literacy foundations visible within everyday learning, ensuring children have intentional and developmentally appropriate opportunities to build them, and using consistent approaches across classrooms so all children benefit.

The issue is not investment alone. What needs strengthening is how educators teach the foundations for learning to read and write intentionally, every day.

Small shifts in the way adults use language to connect to sounds, letters, and print can have a significant impact on what children are able to do.

Leaders should expect to see this reflected in everyday practice across their settings.

When language is used to develop literacy foundations with clarity and consistency, more children arrive at Kindergarten ready to learn to read and write.

9

How do leaders know whether current practice is developing the foundations children need?

Not all approaches that claim to support early literacy lead to improved outcomes for children.

Many approaches are described as evidence-based because they draw on research.

Evidence-based is not enough.

- **Evidence-based:** informed by research about literacy learning
- **Evidence-proven:** shown through evidence that the approach improves outcomes for children

An approach can be evidence-based and still not produce the outcomes children need.

The *Shine* Literacy Project showed that children's early knowledge of sounds and their connection to letters strongly predicts later reading success in real classrooms.

Phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge,

and letter-sound connections were among the strongest predictors of reading achievement.

This evidence makes clear why strengthening oral language, sound awareness, sound-letter knowledge, and book and print knowledge in the early years matters so much.

Respected education leaders have highlighted the importance of explicitly building these foundations using children's spoken language as a pathway to reading and writing.

Assessment tools that track children's development over time make this learning visible and allow teaching to be adjusted. Leaders should expect to see this learning clearly and consistently across their settings.

Leaders need confidence that an approach is not only aligned to research but also proven to improve outcomes in practice.



“Joy’s work in developing the literacy skills of our children is so important and so impactful, because it honors the language they speak. When we brought Joy to USC ... educators immediately saw the profound relevance and importance of what she was promoting, which is so much more than focusing on phonics alone.”

– **Dr. Pedro Noguera** Distinguished Professor of Education
Dean, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California



“The data from [the *Shine*] project indicate that this approach is related to impressive gains made by the trial group for key literacy outcome variables, including reading comprehension, reading accuracy, word identification, and spelling.”

– **Professor Sir James Chapman** Professor Emeritus of Educational Psychology
Massey University, New Zealand



“The resources and assessments throughout [*Elevate & Evaluate*] are a step above most programs. They are derived from many years of working in schools, developing programs and assessments that have been subjected to rigorous academic evaluation, and collaborating with teachers to ensure that the resources created are easy to use and work in real classrooms.”

– **Dr. John Hattie** Director, Melbourne Educational Research Institute
The University of Melbourne, Australia. Author, *Visible Learning for Teachers*



We all want children
to arrive at Kindergarten
ready to learn to read
and write.

**What foundational skills
are not yet secure?**



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