

EARLY LITERACY

How the First Years Shape Every Word to Come



The first three years of life offer an unparalleled window of neurological growth, with more than one million new neural connections made every second—a pace that will never be matched again.

That's why, before a child ever learns to read, their brain has already built its architecture for language, literacy, and lifelong learning. The foundations of literacy are laid in early childhood through every word spoken, every story shared, and every gesture named and noticed. What happens in these earliest years becomes the very foundation upon which all future learning and literacy can be built.

Building a Strong Foundation

Reading and writing are not where literacy begins—they are where it arrives after years of foundational building.



In the womb, the groundwork of literacy is already being built with phonological awareness, which they gain from hearing the language patterns of speech around them.



In the first year of life, babies tune into the sounds, rhythms, and patterns of their native language. Talking, singing, and reading aloud build the phonological foundation that future literacy rests on.



Between 1-2 years old, vocabulary learning accelerates dramatically, and toddlers begin understanding that words represent objects, actions, and ideas. Children exposed to ample conversation hear millions more words, giving them a lasting advantage as they later enter the pre-Kindergarten classroom.



From 2-3 years old, literacy is demonstrated in children's construction of simple sentences. Opportunities to learn through physical movement and pretend play helps further build their vocabulary as they learn to use language to imagine—core to both reading and comprehension later.

Child Care and Early Literacy

Child care settings lay the building blocks for children's future literacy in K-12.

Studies show that high-quality child care predicts higher literacy rates, high school graduation, and even college attendance decades later. Why? High-quality child care programs weave language and literacy into everything—meals, play, transitions, and story time—building the oral language, curiosity, and conceptual foundations that future reading rests on.



432,000

Michigan children ages 0–5
have all parents in the workforce—meaning a vast portion of the youngest children are building their foundational literacy in early care and education settings.

Key Components to Early Literacy Development



INTERACTIONS

Infants and toddlers thrive through predictable routines, familiar faces and voices, and consistent, nurturing relationships. Responsive, back-and-forth exchanges between a young child and a trusted caregiver play a key role in shaping brain architecture by building and strengthening neural connections. Ensuring families and caregivers have the support they need to provide consistent and responsive caregiving increases brain building activities for children.



PRINT EXPOSURE

Before reading, children must first understand that print on a page is language made visible. Infants and toddlers learn how print is used when caregivers point out print words and concepts around them. When caregivers and children engage in responsive and supportive book-sharing, the child is both increasing their exposure to print and building positive associations with books.



PLAY

Play capitalizes on children's natural curiosity. Activities such as storytelling, role-playing, singing, and rhyming games all promote the development of literacy, language, and executive function. Singing, dancing, and playing music can foster a love of words, sounds, and rhythm; and playing with letter magnets or blocks allows children to spell out words, stack letters, and knock them down—all conducive to early literacy development.