

With Literacy and Justice for All

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Where Does Literacy Start?

Here at the Valencia County Literacy Council (VCLC), we're a small agency still. So, as Director, I wear a lot of different hats, so much so in fact that often I feel like my baseball cap is on backwards, my cowboy hat is on top upside down, and...well, you get the picture.

For example, citizens around the country established literacy councils to help adults learn to read. Yet literacy providers eventually realized that young children of parents with low literacy levels often weren't read to at home. It's a cycle. So, literacy agencies began to develop early childhood initiatives. (The needs of school-age children generally remain with the local school districts around the U.S.)

One of the hats, then, that I wear is to know what recent research has told us about how we learn in early childhood. Now, at VCLC, we believe people can learn at any age. In fact, one of the requests for tutoring that we get is from seniors who just want to know how to read the Bible. That said, brain research is now revealing that many of the

assumptions we once made about early childhood learning are as false as many of our old ideas about seniors and other adults. We once thought, for instance, that experiences a baby has before age 3 had little impact on brain development. We now know that early experiences have a major impact on the structure of the brain. Early childhood is “prime time” for learning, and by the time a child is 3, his or her brain is actually twice as active as the brain of an adult (National Center for Family Literacy 2003).

But researchers Hart and Risley (2003) found a 30 million word gap at age 3 between the number of words that children in poverty hear and the number of words children hear in families where the parents are professionals. What’s also crucial is that these numbers tend to predict third grade reading success, that important year in which children shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” We also know that children from middle-income families own an average of 13 books each while the average ratio in low-income neighborhoods is 1 book to every 300 children (Neuman and Dickenson, 2006).

As researchers Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp (2000) say, “Children take their first critical steps toward learning to read and write very early in life.” These researchers found 8 key ingredients to the development of emergent literacy skills in early childhood, from infancy to age 5. One is that children experience (1) a quantity and variety of language. From this, children build (2) phonological awareness (knowledge of sounds). Children also need to build (3) background knowledge of the world through enriching experiences.

But some of the things children need are found only in print. Having a lot of (4) print in their environment can help. Children also need to see (5) how others interact

with print as they read and write. They need to (6) experience various types of print (stories, non-fiction, messages, poems) and (7) learn that the letters of the alphabet represent sounds and form patterns to become words. Perhaps more than anything, though, children need to experience the (8) power and pleasure of literacy, and critical to this is “meaningful interactions with adults through positive literacy experiences” (National Center for Family Literacy 2003).

This last year, our local school districts had a fantastic program where our school age children read a book every night. But how do we support our school districts by seeing to it that we do the same in early childhood?

Here at VCLC, we help through BOOK Readers. BOOK Readers volunteer in local First Choice, WIC, and Presbyterian Clinics. Medical personnel at these clinics then talk to families about the importance of reading to young children and give the parents a free book to take home.

And if you have about 1 hour a week to be a BOOK Reader, we need you! If you don't, we can also use gently used books for ages 0 to 5. You can also participate through your financial contribution, which will go directly to buying books for kids. Just call Lori Griego, our BOOK Coordinator, at 865-1878 or e-mail lgriego@valencialiteracy.org. This is an investment in the future of Valencia County that's well worth making.