



POLICY BRIEF

Read All About It:
School Success Rooted in Early
Language and Literacy



FIRST THINGS FIRST

Ready for School. Set for Life.

Read All About It: Early Language and Literacy Are Foundations of School Success

Reading is vital to children’s success – in school and in life. And in Arizona, the stakes for young children to develop the foundational skills for literacy have never been higher.

Arizona law blocks the promotion of students reading well below grade level at the end of third grade. A.R.S. §15-701 prohibits advancement to the fourth grade “if the pupil obtains a score on the reading portion of the Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) test, or successor test, that demonstrates that the pupil is reading far below the third-grade level.”ⁱ The law took effect with last year’s kindergarten class, making them vulnerable to retention at the end of the 2013-2014 school year. Exceptions exist for students with learning disabilities, English language learners, and those with reading deficiencies.ⁱⁱ Arizona joins the states of Florida and Texas and the cities of Philadelphia, New York City and Chicago to require academic standards for grade-level promotion.ⁱⁱⁱ

As Table 1 shows us, only 76% of Arizona third-graders passed the AIMS reading assessment in 2011, leaving nearly one-quarter of their classmates with scores below the state standard. While these scores represent an improvement over time, concerns remain as to how well Arizona students will match up with the national standards, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). For example, in 2011, 58% of Arizona fourth graders scored **at or above a basic** reading assessment level, and of those, only 26% scored **at or above a proficient** reading assessment level on the NAEP test, leaving Arizona in the bottom ten of all states.^{iv}

Time will tell if this new mandatory retention law will highlight the literacy gaps among Arizona’s children. But for now, the law instills a new sense of urgency for developing literacy skills in the early grades. Research shows that early reading

experiences, opportunities to build vocabularies and literacy rich environments are the most effective ways to support the literacy development of today’s babies, toddlers and preschoolers, so the AIMS-level literacy standards will be an easy hurdle to clear when they reach third grade.

Table 1: AIMS Reading Test Scores, 3rd Grade Students

	% of Students Falling Far Below the Standard	% of Students Approaching the Standard	% of Students Passing
2011	5%	19%	76%
2010	6%	21%	73%
2009	7%	22%	71%

The National Association for the Education of Young Children says early literacy skills are an excellent litmus test for a child’s future performance:

One of the best predictors of whether a child will function competently in school and go on to contribute actively in our increasingly literate society is the level to which the child progresses in reading and writing. Although reading and writing abilities continue to develop throughout the life span, the early childhood years – from birth through age eight – are the most important period for literacy development.^v (p.3)

The seminal work of Hart and Risley provides a deeper understanding of the critical role the early years play in developing literacy skills. Their work shows that the foundations of literacy are established early, and that **later interventions in school (even after the age of 3) may be too late to close gaps caused by the lack of early literacy experiences.**^{vi} Hart and Risley studied and carefully recorded the number of words spoken in the homes of very young children. Their findings show significant differences in both the quantity and quality of words adults spoke with children.

While Hart and Risley’s research findings are presented in relation to socioeconomic status,

in a subsequent interview, Risley points out that – above income or race – **it is the amount and quality of the communication that parents have with their children that matters.** Dr. Risley summed this up well in a subsequent 2005 interview with *Children of the Code*:

Now, the interesting thing is that when we look at the amount of talking the parents are doing, and the amount of extra talk they are doing over and above business talk [instrumental talk about daily activities, such as, please put on your coat or don't touch that], nothing is leftover relating to socioeconomic status. Some working poor people talked a lot to their kids, and their kids did very well. Some affluent business people talked very little to their kids, and their kids did very poorly. All of the variation in outcomes [is] taken up by the amount of talking in the family to the babies before age 3.^{vii}

In a typical hour, children from highly communicative families will hear over 2,000 words including 32 positive/encouraging words. In that same hour, children in less communicative families may hear only about 600 words, only five of which are positive/encouraging.^{viii}

Over the course of a child's early life, these differences become staggering. Hart and Risley found that, on average, the child of a highly communicative family will hear 45 million words in four years, while a child from a less communicative



family will hear only 13 million. Early language experiences have a profound impact on vocabulary. **By the time they reach the age of 3, children in highly communicative families will have a vocabulary of 1,100 words, while the child in a less communicative family will have a vocabulary of less than half of that (500 words).** And research tells us these early differences are compounded when the child begins school.

Their findings suggest: (1) differences in children's language abilities and measured intelligence are directly related to the amount of words parents say to their children; (2) children's academic success in elementary school can be attributed in large part to the amount of words children hear in the first few years of life; (3) parents of children with higher school performance use significantly more words and use words in qualitatively different ways with their child from birth onward, than parents of children with lower school performance. Taken together, these findings suggest that the amount of words parents use has a big impact on early and later child development, which in turn influences a child's ability to read and acquire other academic proficiencies. The bottom line is children do best when they have lots of opportunities to talk and interact with parents and other caring adults, and a language-enriched environment is important for all children.

Rich early language experiences do more than teach words. They instill an excitement for learning and a sense of personal efficacy. Children without early positive language experiences have more to learn when they get to school – and fewer skills to enable that learning. Hart and Risley found that the number of words children knew at age 3 was strongly correlated with their reading and comprehension abilities at ages 9 and 10. **In other words, an achievement gap that appears at age 3 becomes wider by the age of 10.^{ix}**

Environments that encourage seeking, noticing, categorizing, and thinking behaviors also contribute to young children's learning about words and print. In literacy-rich homes and out-of-home settings, children are continually exposed to written and oral language. They engage in literacy practices – such as reading aloud, storytelling, playing word games, hearing bedtime stories,

singing songs, making shopping lists – from birth onward.^x Yet, not all early environments are equal; researchers have found important differences in children’s exposure to language. When adults spoke more with children, exposing them to more language opportunities, it positively impacted the children’s vocabulary level.^{xi}

Talking and playing with adults and other children are how children develop language and literacy skills. Researchers agree that reading aloud to children, developing their ability to recognize rhythms and sounds in language, and extensive exposure to print throughout early childhood are three key strategies for improving preschool language and literacy skills.^{xii} Additional research finds that literacy-enriched play settings help to increase early literacy skills among young children.^{xiii} Children who play “office” using paper, stationery, wall signs and file folders, or kids who play “grocery store” making pencil-and-paper lists, do more than explore their imagination – they also gain literacy skills through play.^{xiv}

Oral language is also an important component of literacy in facilitating both early reading and writing skills.^{xv} Storytelling and retelling is one way of increasing children’s oral fluency and expression, and improved story comprehension while songs and finger play, such as *Itsy-Bitsy Spider*, allow for risk-free language play that fully engage children’s minds as they act out the words of a song.^{xvi} This kind of risk-free language play that singing songs permits gives children a chance to experiment with language, to make safe mistakes as they experiment with new sounds, which can be especially important for children learning a new language.^{xvii}

Although there is no consensus “best” strategy for developing literacy skills in young children, researchers do agree on one thing: adult/child book reading using a style that engages children as active participants leads to numerous language

and literacy developmental skills. So a parent who reads to their child while also pointing out words and asking questions provides an optimal environment for literacy development. Parents are key players in their child’s relationship with literacy. They know when their child is most open learning and how their child learns best.

Language and literacy experts suggest six pre-reading, or emergent literacy skills that parents can help their babies and toddlers develop:^{xxii}

1. Vocabulary – parents can talk frequently to their babies or toddlers, asking them many questions, speaking clearly and reading to them every day.
2. Print Motivation – parents should begin reading books early, visit their public library and let their child see them reading.
3. Print Awareness – parents should use board or cloth books that the child can hold, and they should read aloud to their child every day.
4. Narrative Skills – parents should talk to their child about what they are doing, telling their child stories, and listen patiently to their child’s verbalizations.
5. Phonological Awareness (the sounds and rhythms in oral language) – parents should say nursery rhymes and emphasize rhyming words, sing songs emphasizing different syllables, and make up their own rhymes with their child.
6. Letter Knowledge – parents can point out letters in their child’s environment, read them alphabet books, and emphasize the similarities and differences between objects.



First Things First Infuses Literacy Development in its Funded Programs

Literacy skills do much more than enable reading proficiency. They offer structure and challenge to the developing mind. Because of the critical link between early literacy development and success in school, First Things First makes early literacy a dominant theme in the programs it funds to help Arizona kids birth to 5 be prepared for school.

In 2010, 60% of Arizona children lived in homes where all of the adults worked.^{xxiv} Many of those children spend all or part of their day in center or home-based early learning environments. Quality First, FTF's statewide quality rating and improvement system for early learning programs, helps to ensure that those environments promote early literacy in a variety of ways. The assessments used to gauge participating early learning providers' quality – and their progress in improving that quality – focus heavily on elements that promote early literacy, including: a curriculum that promotes early literacy, teachers well-trained to support children's language and literacy development, and classrooms rich with developmentally appropriate materials, especially books. There are currently more than 700 providers enrolled in Quality First, impacting more than 36,000 children throughout Arizona. In addition, First Things First funds expansion programs and scholarships to help more children throughout Arizona access early learning environments through schools, private and non-profit child care providers and in certified child care homes. These supports helped more than 6,000 Arizona kids access early learning opportunities statewide in the past year.

First Things First also supports a broad slate of programs to help children encounter literacy early and often in their first five years. The Arizona Parent Kit is offered to the parents of every newborn before they leave the hospital; more than 58,000 kits were distributed in the 2011 fiscal year. Each kit contains six DVDs with vital information to help parents support their child's learning. One of those DVDs is devoted almost entirely to language

and literacy development, including chapters on the importance of communication with newborns, establishing reading habits, materials that prepare kids birth to 5 for reading and writing, activities that spark a child's interest in learning, and incorporating learning into everyday activities (vocabulary and concept development). Each kit also includes a board book – ideal for tiny hands – to encourage parents to read daily to their child starting in the earliest months of life.

First Things First also provides voluntary, in-home support for parents who may face a number of challenges. During those interactions, home visitors assess the developmental progress of children and offer parents tips and tools on how to help their children learn. Home visitors stress critical early literacy behaviors for parents, including reading, talking and singing. In the past fiscal year, young children in more than 7,700 families received home visitation services.

In addition to supporting early literacy in homes and in child care settings, First Things First also funds a number of community-based parent education and family literacy programs. More than 59,000 parents and caregivers attended these community-based sessions in fiscal year 2011. A sample of these programs includes:

First Things First partners with various entities – including municipal governments, family support providers and non-profit organizations – in establishing family resource centers that offer parent education courses and other resources to help families nurture early literacy skills in their young children. For example, the Benevilla Family Resource Center in Surprise offers “coffee talks” with parent education experts, and school readiness kits designed for 3 to 5 year-olds. These kits contain books, crayons, and activity supplies to boost early literacy skills. The talks, and the kits, are available at multiple locations throughout the Surprise area.

First Things First sponsors numerous library-based programs, as well – like the Fun Van at the Pinal County Public Library. This mobile, rural library offers reading programs and story time for babies, toddlers and preschool-age children throughout Pinal County. Other libraries, such as the Safford

City-Graham County Library, offer the Imagination Library program, a free service where books are mailed monthly to the homes of children ages birth through 5 for them to keep and begin building their own home library. Parents register, online or in person, and books arrive at the child's home. Free books are especially important to young families in Arizona's rural areas, where the nearest library could be far away, or families may lack the transportation to reach it.

Reach Out and Read Arizona encourages member pediatricians to "prescribe" reading to children during well-child visits. The program stresses to parents the importance of reading with their kids and gives children under 5 a free book to take home after each visit. Reach Out and Read impacts more than 121,000 kids each year. Phoenix and Maricopa County families have recently been taking part in Raising a Reader, a national literacy program that began locally in 2010. Raising a Reader uses regular workshops to educate parents on the importance of early literacy skills. Each workshop includes a bag of books that parents can take home to share with their kids. In apartment complexes and multi-housing units, the books also can be used as part of a "lending library," where families can swap books they have already read for new reading adventures.

Looking Ahead

Learning and literacy begin at birth. Research demonstrates that reading, singing and talking with infants, toddlers and preschoolers supports early and lifelong reading success. If we wait until kindergarten to introduce the foundations of reading and writing, our children may never reach their fullest potential. In Arizona, the stakes are especially high. The mandatory retention of third graders who do not read to grade-level should further compel Arizonans to start supporting the development of literacy skills in early childhood. By supporting kids birth to 5 with literacy rich environments, creative programs and activities that foster pre-literacy skills, we give children the tools to achieve in school and in life; enhancing their future and ours.



Endnotes

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- ii *ibid.*
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