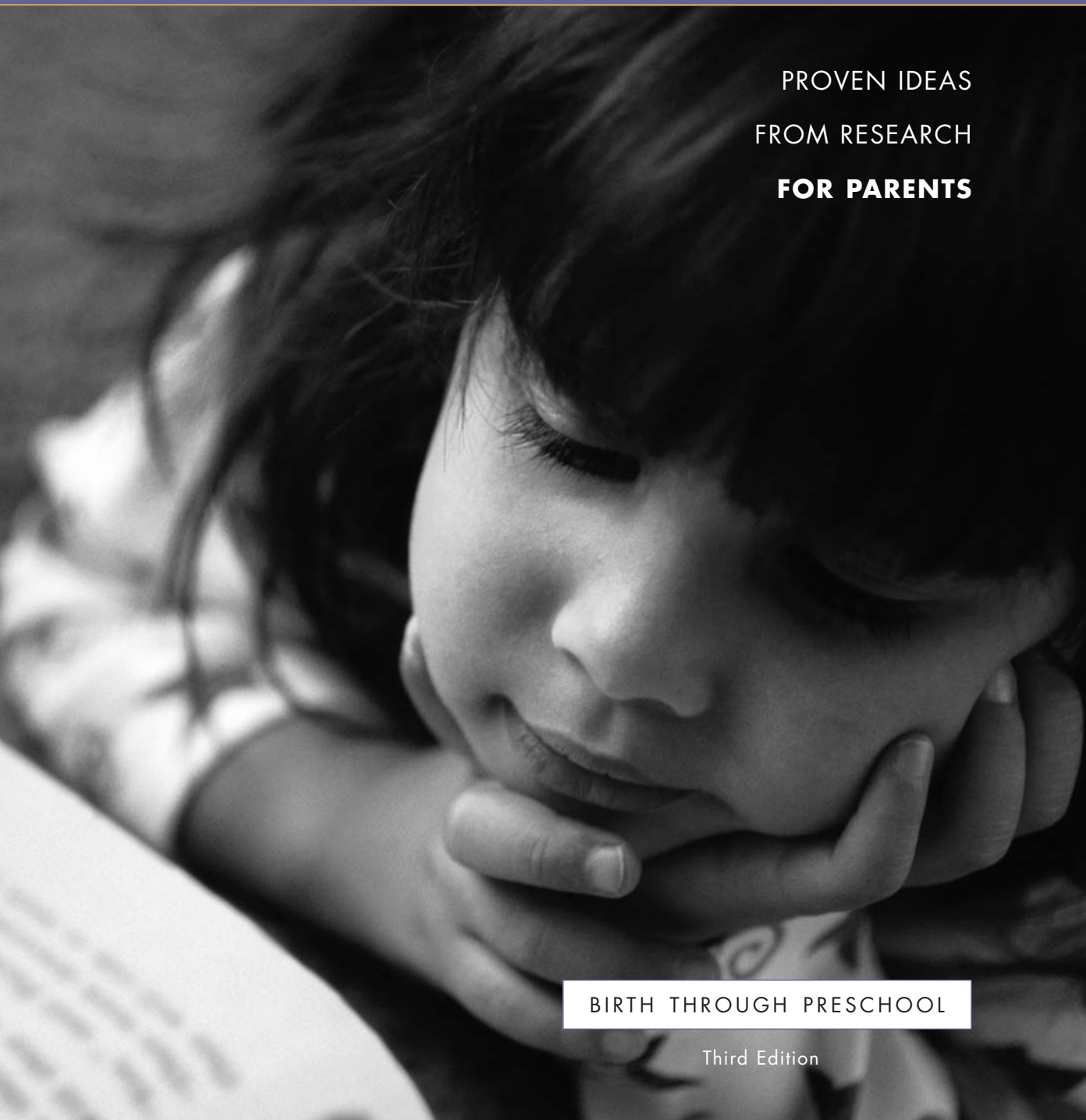
National Institute for Literacy
The Partnership for Reading

A Child Becomes a Reader

PROVEN IDEAS
FROM RESEARCH
FOR PARENTS



BIRTH THROUGH PRESCHOOL

Third Edition

BIRTH THROUGH PRESCHOOL

A Child Becomes a Reader

PROVEN IDEAS FROM RESEARCH FOR PARENTS

Produced for the National Institute for Literacy
by RMC Research Corporation, Portsmouth, New Hampshire

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Proven Ideas from Research for Parents
Birth through Preschool

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The National Institute for Literacy, an agency in the Federal government, is authorized to help strengthen literacy across the lifespan. The Institute works to provide national leadership on literacy issues, including the improvement of reading instruction for children, youth, and adults by sharing information on scientifically based research.
Sandra Baxter, Director
Lynn Reddy, Deputy Director

The Partnership for Reading, a project administered by the National Institute for Literacy, is a collaborative effort of the National Institute for Literacy, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to make evidence-based reading research available to educators, parents, policy makers, and others with an interest in helping all people learn to read well.

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INTRODUCTION

When does a child learn to read? Many people might say, "in kindergarten or first grade." But researchers have told us something very important. Learning to read and write can start at home, long before children go to school. Children can start down the road to becoming readers from the day they are born.

Very early, children begin to learn about spoken language when they hear their family members talking, laughing, and singing, and when they respond to all of the sounds that fill their world. They begin to understand written language when they hear adults read stories to them and see adults reading newspapers, magazines, and books for themselves. These early experiences with spoken and written language set the stage for children to become successful readers and writers.

Mothers, fathers, grandparents, and caregivers, this booklet is for you. It gives ideas for playing, talking, and reading with your child that will help him* become a good reader and writer later in life. You don't need special training or expensive materials. For your baby or toddler, you can just include some simple, fun language games and activities into the things you already do together every day. For your preschooler, you can keep in touch with your child's teachers so that you know what he is learning in school and support that learning at home.

This booklet contains:

- A short summary of what scientific research says about how children learn to read and write
- Things you can do with your children from birth through age 2 to help them become readers
- Things you can do with your children between the ages 3–4 and what to look for in quality day care centers and preschools to help your children become readers
- A list of helpful terms. Throughout the booklet, these terms appear in **bold type**
- Ideas for books to read and organizations to contact if you would like more help or information

Remember, keep it simple and have fun. Make these activities part of the warm, loving relationship you are already creating with your child.

**To make this booklet easier to read, we sometimes refer to a child as "he" or "she." However, all of the information about how children learn to read applies to both boys and girls.*

The Building Blocks of Reading and Writing

From several decades of research, we have learned a lot about how children learn to read and write. This research tells us that to become skilled and confident readers over time, young children need lots of opportunities to:

- Build **spoken language** by talking and listening
- Learn about print and books
- Learn about the sounds of spoken language (this is called **phonological awareness**)
- Learn about the letters of the alphabet
- Listen to books read aloud

Talking and listening

Remember the old saying "children should be seen and not heard"? Research tells us that for children to become readers, they should listen and talk a lot.

By the time children are one year old, they already know a lot about spoken language—talking and listening. They recognize some speech sounds. They know which sounds make the words that are important to them. They begin to imitate those sounds. Children learn all of this by listening to family members talk. Even "baby talk," which exaggerates the sounds and rhythms of words, makes a contribution to children's ability to understand language. Children who do not hear a lot of talk and who are not encouraged to talk themselves often have problems learning to read.

The information in this booklet comes from many research studies that examined early **literacy** development. The reports and books listed at the back of this booklet offer more research-based information about how children learn to read and write.

Print and books

Even though books don't come with operating instructions, we use them in certain ways. We hold them right-side up. We turn the pages one at a time. We read lines of words starting at the left and moving to the right. Knowing about print and books and how they are used is called **print awareness**.

Print awareness is an important part of knowing how to read and write. Children who know about print understand that the words they see in print and the words they speak and hear are related. They will use and see print a lot, even when they're young—on signs and billboards, in alphabet books and storybooks, and in labels, magazines, and newspapers. They see family members use print, and they learn that print is all around them and that it is used for different purposes.

Sounds in spoken language

Some words rhyme. Sentences are made up of separate words. Words have parts called **syllables**. The words bag, ball, and bug all begin with the same sound. When a child begins to notice and understand these things about spoken language, he is developing phonological awareness—the ability to hear and work with the sounds of spoken language.

When a child also begins to understand that spoken words are made up of separate, small sounds, he is developing **phonemic awareness**. These individual sounds in spoken language are called **phonemes**. For example, the word ***big*** has three phonemes, /b/, /i/, and /g/.*

Children who have phonemic awareness can take spoken words apart sound by sound (the name for this is **segmentation**) and put together sounds to make words (the name for this is **blending**). Research shows that how easily children learn to read can depend on how much phonological and phonemic awareness they have.

The ABCs

Singing the alphabet song is more than just a fun activity. Children who go to kindergarten already knowing the shapes and names of the letters of the alphabet, and how to write them, have an easier time learning to read. Knowing the names and shapes of letters is sometimes called **alphabetic knowledge**.

Reading aloud

Reading aloud to children has been called the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for success in reading. Reading aloud, with children participating actively, helps children learn new words, learn more about the world, learn about written language, and see the connection between words that are spoken and words that are written.

** A letter between slash marks, /b/, shows the phoneme, or sound, that the letter represents, and not the name of the letter. For example, the letter b represents the sound /b/.*

Infants and Toddlers

BIRTH THROUGH AGE 2

WHAT TO DO AT HOME

Talking to and reading to infants and toddlers are two good ways to prepare them for later success in reading.

Talk to your child

1. ***Begin talking and singing to your child from birth.*** Your baby loves hearing your voice. Play peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake. Recite nursery rhymes or other verses that have strong rhythms and repeated sounds. Sing lullabies and other songs.
2. ***Let your baby know that you hear her babbles, coos, and gurgles.*** Repeat the sounds she makes. Smile back. When you respond to her sounds, she learns that what she "says" means something and is important to you. Sometimes, you can supply the language for her.

> **PARENT TALK**
>
> *When your baby stretches her arm toward her bottle and says,"ga-ga-ga," say, "Oh, you're ready for some more milk? Here's your milk. Isn't it good!"*

3. ***Play simple touching and talking games together.*** These games help a child learn what different parts of the body are called.

> **PARENT TALK**
>
> *Ask "Where are your toes?" Then touch your child's toes and say, "Here are your toes!" Repeat several times, then switch to fingers or ears or eyes or the nose.*

4. ***Point to familiar objects and name them.*** When a child hears an object called the same name over and over, he learns to connect the spoken word with its meaning.

PARENT TALK

"Here's your blanket. Your very favorite blanket.
What a nice, soft blanket!"

5. ***When your child begins to speak, build his language.*** A child starts talking by using single words and short sentences. You can help by filling in missing words and using complete sentences.

PARENT TALK

Child: "Cookie."
Parent: "Oh, you want another cookie? OK, you can have just one more."
Child: "Go car."
Parent: "Yes, we're all going to go in the car.
But first, you have to put on your coat."

6. ***Encourage your child to talk with you.*** Ask questions that show you are interested in what she thinks and says. Ask her to share ideas and events that are important to her. Ask her questions that require her to talk, rather than just to give yes or no answers. Listen carefully to what she says.

PARENT TALK

"What would you like to do next?"
"What do you suppose made that big noise?"

7. ***Answer your child's questions.*** Listen to your child's questions and answer them patiently. Take time to explain things to him as completely as you can. Keep answering questions that your child asks again and again, because children learn from hearing things over and over.

Read to your child

1. ***Make reading a pleasure.*** Read to your child in a comfortable place. Have her sit on your lap or next to you so that she can see and point to the print and the pictures. Show her that reading is fun and rewarding.
2. ***Show enthusiasm as you read with your child.*** Read the story with expression. Make it more interesting by talking as the characters would talk, making sound effects, and making expressions with your face and hands. When children enjoy being read to, they will grow to love books and be eager to learn to read them.
3. ***Read to your child often.*** Set aside special times for reading each day, maybe after lunch and at bedtime. The more you can read to him, the better—as long as he is willing to listen. Reading times can be brief, about 5 to 10 minutes.

READING TOGETHER

Even six-week-old babies like the feeling of closeness when a parent, grandparent, or other caretaker reads to them. When children find out that reading with a loving adult can be a warm, happy experience, they begin to build a lifelong love of reading.

Reading aloud also helps children learn specific things about reading and words.

- **About books**—how to hold them. How to turn the pages one at a time. How books have words and pictures to help tell the story.
- **About print**—there is a difference between words and the pictures. You read words and look at pictures.
- **About words**—every word has a meaning. There are always new words to learn.
- **About book language**—sometimes book language sounds different from everyday conversation.
- **About the world**—there are objects, places, events, and situations that they have not heard about before.

GOOD BOOKS FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

- Board books are made from heavy cardboard with a plastic coating. The pages are easy for very young children to turn. Board books are sturdy and can stand hard wear by babies, who tend to throw them, crawl over them, and chew them. Board books can be wiped clean.
- Cloth books, which are printed on cloth, are soft, strong, and washable.
- Touch-and-feel books invite children to explore them with their fingers. They contain objects with different textures or contain holes or pages of different shapes.
- Interactive books have flaps that lift or other parts that move. Toddlers love them, but these books tend not to hold up well under rough treatment.
- Books with interesting language, rhythm, and sounds such as books with rhymes, songs, and poetry.
- Books with predictable patterns and repeated language such as those that retell traditional nursery rhymes or songs.

4. ***Talk with your child as you read together.*** Comment about what's happening in the story. Point to pictures and talk about what's happening in them. When your child is ready, have him tell you about the pictures.

PARENT TALK

"See the cat under the tree?"
"Look, the family is getting into a car. I wonder where they're going?"
"What's happening on this page?"

5. ***Encourage your child to explore books.*** Give your baby sturdy books to look at, touch, and hold. Allow her to turn the pages, look through the holes, or lift the flaps. As your child grows older, keep books on low shelves or in baskets where she can see them and get them herself. Encourage her to look through the books and talk about them. She may talk about the pictures. She may "pretend" to read a book that she has heard many times. Or, she may **pretend read** based only on the pictures.
6. ***Read favorite books again and again.*** Your child will probably ask you to read favorite books many times. You might get tired of reading the same books, but children love hearing the same stories again. And it helps them learn to read by hearing familiar words and seeing what they look like in print.

WHAT CHILDREN SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO BY AGE 3

The following is a list of accomplishments that you can expect for your child by age 3. This list is based on research in the fields of reading, early childhood education, and child development. Remember, though, that children don't develop and learn at the same pace and in the same way. Your child may be more advanced or need more help than others in her age group. You are, of course, the best judge of your child's abilities and needs. You should take the accomplishments as guidelines and not as hard-and-fast rules.

A three-year-old child:

- Likes reading with an adult on a regular basis
- Listens to stories from books and stories that you tell
- Recognizes a book by its cover
- Pretends to read books
- Understands that books are handled in certain ways
- Looks at pictures in a book and knows that they stand for real objects
- Says the name of objects in books
- Comments on characters in books
- Asks an adult to read to him or to help him write
- May begin paying attention to print such as letters in names
- Begins to tell the difference between drawing and writing
- Begins to scribble as a way of writing, making some forms that look like letters

The main sources for this list of accomplishments are Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children *and* Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children. *For more information about these sources, see* Bibliography *at the end of this booklet.*

Preschoolers

AGES 3 AND 4

At ages 3 and 4, children are growing rapidly in their language use and in their knowledge of reading and writing. They are learning the meanings of many new words, and they are beginning to use words in more complicated sentences when they speak. They know more about books and print. They are eager to write. They may even be showing an interest in learning to read.

Many three- and four-year-old children attend day care centers or preschool for part or most of the day. The information in this section of the booklet will help you and your child, whether your child stays at home all day or attends a day care center or preschool.

WHAT TO DO AT HOME

Continue to talk and read with your child, as you did when he was an infant and toddler. Also, add some new and more challenging activities.

Talk and listen

1. ***When you do something together—eating, shopping, taking a walk, visiting a relative—talk about it.***
2. ***Take your child to new places and introduce him to new experiences.*** Talk about the new, interesting, and unusual things that you see and do.
3. ***Teach your child the meaning of new words.*** Say the names of things around the house. Label and talk about things in pictures. Explain, in simple ways, how to use familiar objects and how they work.

PARENT TALK

"That's a whale! It's a great big animal, as big as a truck. It lives in the ocean."
"This is a vacuum cleaner. We use it to clean the floor. See how it cleans up the spilled cereal?"

4. ***Help your child to follow directions.*** Use short, clear sentences to tell him what you want him to do.

> **PARENT TALK**
>
> *"Give me your hand, please."*
> *"Please take off your mittens and put them on the table. Then I'd like for you to bring me your jacket so that I can hang it up."*

5. ***Play with words.*** Have fun with tongue twisters such as "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" and nonsense rhymes such as "Hey Diddle, Diddle," as well as more modern nonsense rhymes.

Read together

1. ***Keep reading to your child.*** Read her a lot of different kinds of books. Reread her favorite books, even if you get tired of them before she does.
2. ***Read predictable books.*** Your child will begin to recognize the repeated words and phrases and have fun saying them with you.
3. ***Read poetry and other rhyming books to your child.*** When reading a familiar rhyme, stop before a rhyming word and ask your child to provide the word.
4. ***Ask your child what she thinks will happen next in a story.*** Get excited when she finds out whether her guess was right.
5. ***Talk about books.*** Ask about favorite parts. Help your child relate the story to his own life. Answer his questions about characters or events.
6. ***Build a library, or book collection, for your child.*** Look for books at bookstores, garage sales, used bookstores, and sales at the library. Suggest that people give books to your child as birthday gifts and on other special days.

Teach about print and letters

1. ***Help your child learn to recognize her name in print.*** As she watches, print the letters of her name, saying each letter as you write it. Display her name in special places in your home. Encourage her to spell and write her name.
2. ***Point out words and letters everywhere you can.*** Read street signs, traffic signs, billboards, and store signs. Point out certain letters in these signs. Ask your child to begin naming common signs and find some letters.
3. ***Teach your child the alphabet song.***
4. ***Share alphabet books with your child.*** Some alphabet books have songs and games that you can learn together.
5. ***Put magnetic letters on your refrigerator or other smooth, safe metal surface.*** Ask your child to name the letters as he plays with them.

6. ***Play games using the alphabet.*** Ask your child to find letters in books, magazines, newspapers, and other print.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN DAY CARE CENTERS AND PRESCHOOLS

If your child attends a day care center or preschool, look for these important characteristics of teachers, classrooms, and instruction.

Teachers

In quality day care centers and preschools, teachers:

- Keep a well-run, orderly classroom that also encourages children to participate in and enjoy learning
- Use many creative ways to help children learn language and learn the knowledge and skills that will help them become readers

Classrooms

In quality day care centers and preschools, classrooms have:

- Lots of books and magazines that children can handle and play with
- Areas for many different activities, such as art, science, housekeeping, writing, and perhaps computers
- Plenty of print on labels, signs, and posters
- Writing materials, including paper, pencils, crayons, and markers
- Magnetic letters, or letters made of foam, plastic, wood, or other durable material so children can pretend write and play

Instruction

In quality day care centers and preschools, teachers:

- Read aloud to children frequently, from many different kinds of books
- Talk with children throughout the day and listen carefully to what they say
- Play games such as "Simon Says" and "Mother, May I?" that require children to listen carefully
- Give children opportunities to build their knowledge by exploring their interests and ideas
- Help children learn the meanings of new words by naming colors, shapes, animals, familiar objects, and parts of the classroom
- Teach about the sounds of spoken language by reading aloud books with interesting sounds, chanting, and rhyming; by having children say or sing nursery rhymes and songs; and by playing word games
- Teach children about print by pointing out and using the print that is all around them
- Teach the letters of the alphabet
- Encourage children to scribble, draw, and try to write

WHAT CHILDREN SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO BY AGE 5

The following is a list of some accomplishments that you can expect for your child by age 5. This list is based on research in the fields of reading, early childhood education, and child development. Remember, though, that children don't develop and learn at the same pace and in the same way. Your child may be more advanced or need more help than others in her age group. You are, of course, the best judge of your child's abilities and needs. You should take the accomplishments as guidelines and not as hard-and-fast rules.

Spoken language

A five-year-old child:

- Understands and follows oral (or spoken) directions
- Uses new words and longer sentences when she speaks
- Recognizes the beginning sounds of words and sounds that rhyme
- Listens carefully when books are read aloud

Reading

A five-year-old child:

- Shows interest in books and reading
- Might try to read, calling attention to himself and showing pride in what he can do ("See, I can read this book!")
- Can follow the series of events in some stories
- Can connect what happens in books to her life and experiences
- Asks questions and makes comments that show he understands the book he is listening to

Print and letters

A five-year-old child:

- Knows the difference between print (words) and pictures and knows that print is what you read
- Recognizes print around him on signs, on television, on boxes, and many other places
- Understands that writing has a lot of different purposes (for example, signs tell where something is located, lists can be used for grocery shopping, directions can tell you how to put something together)
- Knows that each letter in the alphabet has a name
- Can name at least 10 letters in the alphabet, especially the ones in her name
- "Writes," or scribbles, messages

The main sources for this list of accomplishments are Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children *and* Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children. *For more information about these sources, see* Bibliography *at the end of this booklet.*

SOME HELPFUL TERMS TO KNOW

Day care providers and preschool teachers might use some of the following terms when talking to you about how your child is learning to read. You will find that many of these terms are used in this booklet.

- **alphabetic knowledge**—Knowing the names and shapes of the letters of the alphabet.
- **big books**—Oversized books that allow for the sharing of print and illustrations with children.
- **blending**—Putting together individual sounds to make spoken words.
- **developmental spelling**—The use of letter-sound relationship information to attempt to write words.
- **emergent literacy**—The view that literacy learning begins at birth and is encouraged through participation with adults in meaningful reading and writing activities.
- **environmental print**—Print that is a part of everyday life, such as signs, billboards, labels, and business logos.
- **experimental writing**—Efforts by young children to experiment with writing by creating pretend and real letters and by organizing scribbles and marks on paper.
- **invented spelling**—See developmental spelling.
- **literacy**—Includes all the activities involved in speaking, listening, reading, writing, and appreciating both spoken and written language.
- **phonemes**—The smallest parts of spoken language that combine to form words. For example, the word *hit* is made up of three phonemes (/h/ /i/ /t/) and differs by one phoneme from the words *pit*, *hip* and *hot*.
- **phonemic awareness**—The ability to notice and work with the individual sounds in spoken language.
- **phonological awareness**—The understanding that spoken language is made up of individual and separate sounds. In addition to phonemes, phonological awareness activities can involve work with rhymes, words, sentences, and syllables.
- **pretend reading**—Children's attempts to "read" a book before they have learned to read. Usually children pretend read a familiar book that they have practically memorized.
- **print awareness**—Knowing about print and books and how they are used.
- **segmentation**—Taking spoken words apart sound by sound.
- **spoken language**—The language used in talking and listening; in contrast to written language, which is the language used in writing and reading.
- **syllable**—A word part that contains a vowel or, in spoken language, a vowel sound (*e-vent*, *news-pa-per*, *pret-ty*)
- **vocabulary**—The words we must know in order to communicate effectively. *Oral* vocabulary refers to words that we use in speaking or recognize in listening. *Reading* vocabulary refers to words we recognize or use in print.

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RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

The following web sites can provide you with useful information about learning to read.

The Partnership for Reading. www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading

National Parent Information Network (NPIN). www.npin.org

National Institute for Literacy (NIFL). www.nifl.gov

No Child Left Behind web site describes the current education law and how it affects K-3 schools, parents, and children. www.ed.gov/nclb

Reading Rockets offers activities and ideas for building your child's reading skills at home. www.readingrockets.org/families

PBS Parents can help parents learn how children become readers and writers by helping them develop by talking, reading, and writing together every day. www.pbs.org/parents/readinglanguage/

The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans offers resources on helping the language development of infants and young children. www.yesican.gov/earlychildhood/index.html

The Head Start Information and Publication Center provides publications and other resources on literacy for parents of young children. www.headstartinfo.org

The American Federation of Teachers web site offers pages for parents on building strong partnerships with schools. www.aft.org/parents/index.htm

The National Education Association web site contains information on parent involvement in literacy and other topics. www.nea.org/parents/index.html

HIPPYUSA (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters) has a web site for parents to help them understand their roles as their children's first teacher. www.hippyusa.org.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children promotes excellence in early childhood education. www.naeyc.org/families/

Parents as Teachers National Center suggests ways for parents to interact with their children to develop early literacy. www.parentsasteachers.org

Resource list provided by the Parent Information and Resource Centers, U.S. Department of Education.

If you have children attending kindergarten

or grades 1–3, look for the booklet

A Child Becomes a Reader: Kindergarten through Grade 3.

www.nifl.gov

To order copies of this booklet, contact the

National Institute for Literacy at EdPubs,

PO Box 1398, Jessup, MD 20794-1398.

Call 800-228-8813 or

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