



# PACER'S

## EARLY CHILDHOOD CONNECTION

Information and Resources for Parents of Young Children with Disabilities

Winter 2014

### HELPING YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN: WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

We know that from the time a child is born they grow and learn. As parents, we don't call it "literacy," but that is the term educators use to describe the set of skills that help children learn to read and write. Parents of children with disabilities may want to be more intentional about laying the foundation for these learning skills.

"Young children learn to listen, talk, read, and write as a result of their involvement in interesting activities," says Judy Swett, PACER's early childhood staff advocate. "By talking, reading, singing, and playing with your infant, toddler, or preschooler, you are providing the foundation that helps your child develop reading, language, and writing skills."

For some children with disabilities or developmental delays, these skills may develop more slowly than those of typical children. Doing activities with your child that are appropriate for his or her developmental level will encourage and support the growth of these skills.

"From the moment babies are born, they begin developing literacy skills through their relationship with their parents and other adults," Swett says.

#### Talk, listen, learn

Annalia Koren is a happy young child who likes arts and crafts, loves to play with her cousin's dog, and enjoys building with LEGO. She also loves learning to read. Annalia's mom has been helping her daughter develop literacy skills from the time her child was born. "I have



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always read to Annalia every night,” says Ruthy Koren, whose daughter is now 5 years old. “She really likes reading.”

Young children learn best through play or by being engaged in fun activities, whether that is with their parents or other adults in their lives. Encourage those who spend time interacting with your child throughout the day to talk, play, and share their experiences with your child, too.

Here are some fun activities you can do with your child on a daily basis to encourage the development of reading and writing skills.

### Infants

- Look at books together, naming and pointing to pictures of familiar objects such as a car, a ball, a shoe, or a cup. Then have the child name the object.
- Sing fun songs, recite nursery rhymes, or carry on a

conversation with your child during diaper changes.

- Name the parts of the body, pointing to eyes, ears, hands, feet, and so on.

### Toddlers

- With most children you can make a game out of just about anything. When riding in the car, children enjoy naming familiar places and things they see out the window. This could include naming the color of cars, identifying animals, or talking about signs along the highway. “Annalia loves to do the ABC game,” Ruthy said. “We try to name things that match the letters of the alphabet.”
- Music is an excellent source of inspiration for parents and children alike, and many families sing familiar songs together. “My daughter has CDs of her favorite children’s songs that she sings along to,” says Ruthy.

## Helpful tools you can use

PACER offers a wide variety of resources for parents of children with disabilities to encourage the development of early literacy. Here are a few tools parents can use. Visit [PACER.org/ec](http://PACER.org/ec) to learn more.

### Let’s Talk and Count! Activity Cards

Lets Talk and Count! is an easy and fun way to interact with your child and help him or her be ready for reading and counting. Use the cards to build your child’s vocabulary, speaking skills, and early math skills. No special supplies are needed — just you and your child! Also available in Spanish, Hmong, and Somali, sets are \$4 each with discounts for larger quantities. To order, call PACER at (952) 838-9000 or (800) 537-2237 and ask for item PHP-a27.

### The Center for Early Learning Literacy (CELL)

CELL offers many resources to help parents and professionals guide a child’s early literacy development through the use of fun and exciting learning experiences. All of the tools were developed for children ages birth to 5 with identified disabilities and/or developmental delays.

<http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/parentresource1.php>

### Tips to Support Reading and Writing: Every Writer Needs a Pencil

When a young child writes a note to her mother in crayon, adults might see it as random squiggles. In reality, these are the foundation of conventional writing. This handout shares tips on supporting the development of writing for children with significant disabilities.

<http://www.pacer.org/parent/php/php-c208.pdf>

### Tips to Support Reading and Writing for Children with Significant Disabilities

Researchers have examined how best to support learners with significant disabilities so they can improve their reading, writing, and communication skills. This handout offers ideas on how to encourage your son or daughter to read and write.

<http://www.pacer.org/parent/php/php-c206.pdf>

### Tips to Support Reading and Writing: Every Child Needs a Voice

Communication is a lifelong process that begins at birth, and listening and speaking are important parts of literacy learning. This handout explores options for parents of children with significant disabilities to provide access to the words that will help their child develop important reading, writing, and communication skills.

<http://www.pacer.org/parent/php/php-c207.pdf>

## Preschoolers

- Is it time for your child's bath? When preschoolers are in the tub, parents can help their child name objects in the bathroom, identify toys in the water, or point out his or her "heads, shoulders, knees, and toes."
- Grocery shopping is a family activity and a wonderful opportunity to help your child learn. Next time you are going to the supermarket, talk with your child about the things you intend to buy. In the store, you can identify items on the shelf together. It's a fun activity and you will be helping your son or daughter develop early reading skills.



Helping children develop the skills they need to learn to read and write does not require you to purchase expensive resources or go out of your way to buy anything. Consider how many of these reading materials you may already have at home:

- Books
- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Catalogs
- Takeout menus
- Brochures or fliers
- Grocery lists
- Recipes
- Calendars

A library card can be a parent's best friend! Many libraries have fun family reading activities and offer a variety of resources.

"Annalia loves the library and we go about once a week," Ruthy says. "We do a lot of activities there and even before she could read I always let her choose any book she wanted. She gets so excited about anything new, and she really likes things that she has seen in a video or a movie."

### Nothing better than a book

From the grocery store to the gas station, there are many ways to help your child develop reading, writing, and language skills on a daily basis, but there is still nothing quite like sitting down with your child and sharing the simple satisfaction of a good book.

Most families are busy and you may need to be intentional about planning the time to read with your children, but it is a worthwhile goal. "I think it is important to sit down and spend time reading with Annalia," Ruthy said. "I know in the long run it will make a difference."

## *Families Are Important: An Early Childhood Guidebook for Families of Young Children with Disabilities*

Raising children is a big responsibility. It can be even more of a challenge if you know your infant or toddler has a disability or you think your child is not developing in the same way as other children of the same age. Parents are their children's best and most important advocates, but you need information and support. This booklet is designed to help you understand Minnesota's Early Intervention system and how to access services for your infant or toddler. Books are \$7 each (free for Minnesota families) with discounts for larger quantities. Order online at PACER.org or call PACER at (952) 838-9000 or (800) 537-2237 and ask for item PHP-a9.



## PACER ANSWERS FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do you have questions about your young child's early learning? Judy Swett, PACER's early childhood advocate, provides helpful answers.

**Q:** My son was recently diagnosed with autism. I'd like to enroll him in a private program and also continue special education preschool services through the school district. Is this possible?

**A:** That depends on scheduling. Most school districts in Minnesota place children in either a morning or afternoon class so you'll need to consult with the district and the private program to learn about their specific schedules. Some families are able to work out a convenient schedule that enables the child to attend one program in the morning and the other in the afternoon.

**Q:** I would like my 4-year-old child to learn how to read. Can I ask that a reading goal be included in his Individualized Education Program (IEP)?

**A:** IEP goals, services, and supports are designed to help the child make progress in the general education curriculum. In your case, that would mean progress in whatever preschool curriculum is being used, but preschool usually emphasizes pre-reading skills only. You could ask team members about how you can support his pre-reading skills at home. Reading to and with your child is one of the best ways to promote reading.

**Q:** My 5-year-old daughter is not toilet trained yet. We're working on this at home but she is in school in the morning. Is it possible to have a goal written into her IEP to work on toilet training at school?

**A:** Yes, both academic and functional goals can be included, but be sure to discuss it with your IEP team.



Your daughter is probably going to be more successful in toilet training if the same strategies are being used at home and in school. If you have found strategies that work at home, share these with the team so they can also use them at school.

**Q:** My son is in childcare nine hours a day, so the childcare provider knows him well. Can I invite her to attend my upcoming IEP meeting?

**A:** Both the parents and the school can invite anyone they believe would be appropriate to attend the IEP meeting. You can invite your childcare provider if you think she has helpful information to share, but be sure to clarify her role at the meeting — to share strategies, for example, that are working in a childcare setting and learn about strategies that are successful at school. As an alternative, you could ask the provider to write a brief statement about how she sees your son functioning in the childcare setting and give that statement to you as the parent to submit to the IEP team.

*Have more questions? Call PACER at (952) 838-9000 and ask to speak with an early childhood advocate.*

## DO IT YOURSELF: CREATIVE AT TOOLS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Assistive technology (AT) doesn't need to be expensive or complex to make a positive difference in the life of a child with a disability. Sometimes the most effective devices can be built at home by do-it-yourself families. Here are a few examples to explore.

### Crayon Nibbles

Many children have an easier time grasping larger objects. Crayons in particular can be difficult for little hands to hold. To solve this problem, typical crayons can easily be adapted to make larger crayons. All you need are crayons and a muffin tin. Simply break traditional crayons into small pieces and arrange two or three crayons of the same color in each muffin mold. Bake the crayons for 6 to 8 minutes in an oven preheated to 265 degrees. Let the crayons cool for a few minutes. Then place them in the freezer for 30 minutes to make the crayons easier to remove from the pan.



### All By Myself

Tiny hands sometimes have difficulty turning the pages of a book. To make this task easier, board books (books with pages made of sturdy cardboard) can be adapted with commonly found objects to allow children to read independently. For example, try attaching popsicle sticks to each page of a board book with glue to make the pages easier to turn.



### My Favorite Books

Creating a personal book can help hold the attention of a child who has trouble staying focused on a book. To create a personalized book, slip printed images of family members, favorite places, or preferred toys into page protectors. Put the page protectors with pictures into a three-ring binder. Page fluffers — large tabs used to separate pages like those described above — can be added to make turning the pages easier. Enjoy the book with your child!

To learn more about these and other innovative tools, check out the new “EZ AT 2” iBook now available for free through iTunes. Printed copies of this guide for parents and professionals are also available. It contains creative ideas to help children ages birth to 3 with disabilities participate more fully in daily activities with the use of assistive technology (AT). Books are \$5 each or free to Minnesota families. A pdf copy may also be downloaded at [pacer.org/stc/pubs/EZ-AT-book-2011-final.pdf](http://pacer.org/stc/pubs/EZ-AT-book-2011-final.pdf). To order, call PACER at (952) 838-9000 or (800) 537-2237 and ask for item STC-24 or visit [PACER.org/publications/stc.asp](http://PACER.org/publications/stc.asp).



## EVERYONE LOVES A GOOD STORY, INCLUDING YOUR TODDLER



Toddlers love stories. They may enjoy repeating a funny story about what happened at their birthday party, or listening to a story about the day they were born. Storytelling activities teach children about what makes a story before they actually learn to read. They can hear new words, learn the order of events, build listening and language skills, and find out more about what interests them.

Outside the home, there are many opportunities for storytelling:

- Libraries offer story times, divided by age groups. Stories are exciting when told aloud to a group, and toddlers are often asked questions by the group leader about what they are hearing. Some may offer a music and movement element.
- While children are waiting for food in a restaurant or for an appointment to begin, they may be ready to listen to a story or help a parent create one to tell: “Look at the fish in that fish tank. Should we name them?”
- Riding in a car or bus provides a wonderful opportunity for parents and children to talk about what they’re seeing: “I see a man and a dog. Do you think they’re going to the park? What do you think they’ll do when they get there?”

At home, parents can turn moments of their day into story time:

- Children are natural storytellers when they’re engaged with toys or in other imaginative play. Introduce an idea for a story — “Where is this train going today?” — and let your child take it from there.
- Paging through photo albums can trigger real-life stories. Children may enjoy hearing about what their parents’ or other relatives’ lives were like growing up. Simple stories about where you’ve traveled or people you’ve seen can give your child a broader view of the world.
- Quiet, relaxed moments, like snuggle time, before naps, or bedtime, are great story times, too.

To keep your child interested in the story, vary what you’re doing. Begin the story, but ask your child to add details. If a child is stuck, provide choices: “Is that the mommy fish, the daddy fish, or a baby fish?” If your child has a strong interest area – the family pet for example — create a story about it together or tell the story about how the pet came into the family.

Storytelling helps toddlers build their natural love for stories into pre-reading skills. It’s an engaging activity that’s ideal for the two of you to enjoy together. Soon, your toddler may be able to tell a complete story on their own, from beginning to end.

*This article was adapted from CELLpractices, a publication of the Center for Early Literacy Learning. For more helpful resources, visit [www.earlyliteracylearning.org/pgparents.php](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/pgparents.php)*

### Receive Early Childhood Updates Via Text Message!

Sign up now to receive updates via text message! This PACER services provides families and others with specific information about PACER programs, including notice of upcoming workshops, reminders, short tips and ideas, and new resources. To sign up, text ECSE to 51555. By subscribing you agree to the terms and conditions. To cancel, text STOP to 51555. Standard message and data rates may apply.

## HELP YOUR YOUNG CHILD GROW WITH THESE RESOURCES



These resources can provide you with information and support to help your child grow in important ways – and in the three outcome areas outlined by the U.S. Department of Education: building positive social relationships, acquiring and using knowledge and skills, and taking action to meet their needs.

### **TACSEI Families Community | [challengingbehavior.org/communities/families.htm](http://challengingbehavior.org/communities/families.htm)**

The Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (TACSEI) offers information and select resources that have been compiled specifically with the needs of families in mind. Just as a community changes and grows over time, this website evolves as new interactive elements and resources are created and added.

### **Help Me Grow | [helpmegrowmn.org](http://helpmegrowmn.org)**

Some young children need extra help to learn and grow. “Help Me Grow,” an interagency initiative of the State of Minnesota, provides resources for families to look at developmental milestones, learn if there are concerns, and take the lead in seeking additional support or in referring their child for a comprehensive, confidential screening or evaluation. Eligible Minnesota children, ages birth to 5, can receive services in their home, child care setting, or school, and services are free regardless of income or immigration status.

### **Early Childhood Family Leadership Summit | [PACER.org/ec](http://PACER.org/ec)**

The Family Leadership Summit on **April 5, 2014** is a free event for parents of young children with developmental delays or disabilities. This dynamic, interactive one-day training will help parents of young children enhance their communication and leadership skills. It includes skill-building sessions and networking opportunities. Contact Judy Swett for more information: e-mail [jswett@PACER.org](mailto:jswett@PACER.org).

### **New! A Family Guide to Participating in the Child Outcomes Measurement Process**

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has developed three child outcomes to measure the progress of young children. These outcomes are described in this helpful guide, which also includes tips for parents on what information to share with their child’s early intervention providers or early childhood special education teachers. The guide is available for free download at <http://www.pacer.org/publications/pdfs/ALL-71.pdf>, and printed copies can also be ordered for \$1.50 each with discounts for larger quantities. Call (952) 838-9000 or (800) 537-2237 and order item ALL-71.

### **PACER Center | [PACER.org/ec](http://PACER.org/ec)**

PACER’s Early Childhood Family Information and Resources Project offers individual assistance, workshops, and print and web-based resources for families of children ages birth to 5. The project webpage has numerous resources, publications, and links to organizations and programs that serve families of young children with disabilities, both in Minnesota and nationwide.

*For more information on early childhood resources, call PACER at (952) 838-9000 and ask to speak with a parent advocate.*

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(Alternate format is available upon request.)

## CELEBRATE YOUR CHILD ON PACER'S WALL OF CHAMPIONS!

Celebrate your young champions (birth to age 5) by submitting their photos to PACER's "Wall of Champions" on PACER's Facebook page. The photos will be posted with first names only. E-mail photos to Judy Swett, Early Childhood Coordinator, at [jswett@PACER.org](mailto:jswett@PACER.org).

