

Early Childhood Connection

PACER Center Newsletter for Minnesota Families of Young Children with Disabilities

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Children with disabilities thrive in literacy-rich environments

By Beth Casper

Joan Blaska's son benefited from early literacy activities before his mother had even heard of the term.

"There was no early intervention at that time," said Joan, a special education expert, professor and author. "I just did what I did with my other son, and accidentally we did some things right."

David, now 37, has mental retardation and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. When David was a toddler, Joan wasn't told about the best pre-literacy activities for David, but she made sure that she read to him, talked to him about the objects in his environment, and responded to his sounds. It turns out that Joan gave David the best possible gift: the ability to read.

"At David's workplace, there are about 20 people with disabilities," Joan said. "He and four other people do the mail route



Joan Blaska

because they are the only ones who can read. He also reads the headlines of the sports page and the box scores, which gives him things to talk about with other people. He can look at a menu and order food or find a movie that is playing at the local theater. While some of our children with disabilities won't be able to read everything, even a lower level of reading opens door after door."

It was because of David that Joan began her studies in the field of early childhood special education. She says that she wanted to find out "what makes David tick," but she learned so much that she felt compelled to teach and share her knowledge with others.

"Literacy is about reading, writing, speaking and listening. They all develop concurrently."

Through her studies and research, Joan developed components for a literacy-rich environment that would help children learn. She determined that a literacy-rich environment was one that is filled with activities that promote literacy, print materials available for reading or looking at, and adults that can guide children to these important activities.

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Home Literacy Activities:

Important for children with & without disabilities

By Joan K. Blaska

Early literacy includes listening, speaking, reading and writing. In young children, the four areas develop at the same time. For children with disabilities, literacy skills may develop more slowly. Children need to be engaged in activities to develop literacy skills. It is important for parents to support literacy activities and recognize their importance—below are some examples.

Listening:

- Respond to infant's cooing
- Talk, talk, talk to infants and toddlers
- Give names to things in the child's environment to increase vocabulary, i.e. body parts, colors, clothing, food, toys
- Sing songs and recite rhymes daily
- Make sounds of animals as you see them in books
- Give simple directions to children
- Listen to music, move to the beat of the music, clap to music
- Use sign language with children
- Read stories; talk about illustrations

Speaking:

- Respond to infant's coos and talking
- Encourage young children to ask for what they want, not point
- Ask children questions about their day, about stories they are read
- Teach children to use manners, i.e. please, thank you; greetings, i.e. hi, good-bye
- Sing together and say rhymes
- Explain new vocabulary used in books, label new items in their environment
- Show interest in what children have to say
- Parents and children share storytelling time
- Have children participate in making telephone calls
- Use communication boards or other technology with children who cannot speak
- Increase vocabulary by reading daily

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Thriving in a literacy-rich environment

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“Literacy is about reading, writing, speaking, and listening,” Joan said. “They all develop concurrently.”

“We need to start these activities when our children are babies,” Joan said. “They need the richness of literacy every day and every week. If we give every one of our children—with and without disabilities—a good strong literacy background, it opens the doors for everyone.”

Joan Blaska, Ph.D., is a professor emeritus from St. Cloud State University and an education consultant.

For the past 20 years, she has provided varied training to parents of children with disabilities birth through 21 years and professionals who work with them. Her main areas of research are designing literacy-rich environments in early childhood programs and using diverse literature with young children. Blaska approaches her work from a combination of perspectives: her doctoral studies, working in special education for more than 25 years, teaching at the university for 17 years, conducting research, and having a child with a disability. The second edition of Blaska's book, “Using Children's Literature to Learn About Disabilities and Illness,” was published recently.

Home literacy activities continued

Reading:

Help young children learn about book concepts, i.e. front/back, right-side-up, turn one page at a time, read left to right, beginning/end to story
Read daily to your children beginning at infancy; have children “read” a story to you
Read, then reread the story as often as children request
Put your children’s names on their belongings so they learn to “read” their names; they learn that squiggles, i.e. letters, say something important
Teach children to read symbols and signs, i.e. McDonald’s arches; Sponge Bob
Read predictable books so children can join in, i.e. Brown Bear
Have print materials visible all over the house, i.e. books, magazines, recipes, coupons
Have a variety of children’s books accessible
Expose your children to the many books at your local library or bookstores
Catalogues may be read, analyzed and discussed
Be sure your children see you read; see the need for reading; see the joy of reading
Support the importance of reading through positive attitudes and actions
Have children involved in selecting programs from the TV guide with parent guidance
With your children, look at and read their work from school.
Use Braille or talking books with children who cannot see to read
Help children learn colors, shapes, sizes, names of letters
Talk about illustrations in books

Writing:

Provide lots of opportunities to play with toys that develop grasp and fine motor development, i.e. puzzles, Play Doh®, stringing beads—this helps the hands be ready to use writing instruments
Provide daily opportunities for young children to draw or write with different instruments, i.e., crayons, pencils, markers, pens, paintbrushes
Recognize the importance of drawing, coloring and scribble writing
Have children join with you to make grocery lists, sign birthday cards, enter events on the family calendar, send thank you notes, invitations and greeting cards
Display children’s scribbling, writing and art work at the child’s viewing level
Use adaptive writing instruments, table surfaces, computers etc. for children who have fine motor disabilities

Literacy Activities in the Natural Environment:

For busy parents, interact with literacy activities during the naturally occurring times throughout the day that you already spend time with your child. Some examples include:

Dressing/undressing: naming body parts, clothing, colors, numbers, concepts: soft/scratchy, big/little
Meal times: naming foods, talk about how food grows, colors, numbers, concepts: hot/cold, sweet/sour
Diapering: tell child what you are doing, name items, i.e. diaper, ointment, wipes
Bath time: have some bath toys related to literacy, i.e. vinyl books, tub letters, shapes, numbers; tell stories, sing songs, say rhymes
Ritual before bed: tell or read stories every night, talk about illustrations, older children can tell what they think will happen next in the story
Play times: during awake/play times, talk and listen to your child, read and provide opportunities for your child to do fine motor activities and writing, sing songs
Time spent in the car: identify what the child is seeing, rain, snow, sunshine, trees, truck, bus, colors, signs and symbols; talk about where you are going, sing songs, say rhymes; with older preschool children play word games

Meet the staff: Simon Technology Center

By Jodi Legge

Janet Peters believes that while assistive technology can be a powerful and life-changing tool to teach reading and communication skills to children with disabilities, it can also be a little scary and confusing for parents already dealing with a number of other issues.

“Technology can be intimidating at first,” admits Janet. “But I believe the sooner we can reach a child and show them what technology is available, the easier it will be for them to learn and communicate, especially as it relates to early literacy.”

Janet, the coordinator of the Simon Technology



Janet Peters

Center (STC), has been with PACER for more than 10 years and has a background in computer science. Prior to that, she worked as a computer programmer for West Publishing. Janet and the STC staff provide free technology consultations for all age groups, with an emphasis on youth (birth to age 21). During the consultation, children and adults have the opportunity to try a variety of software and assistive technology devices that will best suit their specific needs.

“Assistive technology continues to grow as more people are becoming experts in the field,” said Janet. “This technology can have a great impact during early childhood development, especially when the child is learning to communicate. I would encourage parents of children with disabilities to call or visit STC to find out what services are available to assist your child.”

Janet noted that research proves a young child typically reads his or her favorite book more than 400 times before starting kindergarten. This early

exercise introduces a child to the importance of literacy.

“If a child is unable to hold a printed book, we can help parents

by showing them how to use technology to create a digital book, specific to the child’s interests and family situation,” she said. “This will allow the child with a disability the same access to reading. Making technology accessible to children and young adults with disabilities is what PACER’s Simon Technology Center is all about.”

In addition to providing technology-related information, training and referral services to children and adults with disabilities, STC has a lending library with more than 2,000 pieces of software available statewide through a mailing service.

Some of STC’s services relating specifically to early literacy and communication:

- **Workshops for young children** are provided throughout the year to teach how to use technology to improve early literacy skills. Some examples of such workshops include:
 - **IntelliShare Classroom Suite** is a reading conference that focuses on using IntelliTools products to support a best practice reading curriculum in the early grades.
 - **Young Children with Disabilities Can Write!** will discuss writing barriers for young children with disabilities and present strategies for overcoming those barriers using technology. *Clicker 4* software will be highlighted.

promotes early literacy

- *Inclusion Building through Accessible Digital Books* offers a hands-on opportunity to create accessible digital book images, sounds and video.
- *Various other communications workshops* will explain the important link between communication and early literacy, and will explore ways to use technology to assist children having difficulty communicating with others.



This two-year-old girl has fun while learning about programs available at the Simon Technology Center.

- **Project KITE** (Kids Included through Technology are Enriched) includes 15 hours of classroom curriculum to train parents and educators how to use assistive technology to promote inclusion. PACER staff provides both personal technical support and at-school training for parents, teachers and other service providers working with the child. Each training session is tailored to the specific needs of the participants, to include:
 - Using technology as a voice for a child with communication needs
 - Adapting books on the computer to reinforce early literacy skills
 - Making technology available to everyone.

“Let’s Talk” activity cards help children build vocabulary skills

PACER Center’s “Let’s Talk” activity cards are a fun and easy way for parents to teach their young children with disabilities vocabulary and speaking skills – the first steps in learning to read.



The activity cards are designed to develop language skills for children ages two to six.

The brightly-colored, easy-to-read cards do not require any special instruction or preparation to use – just a willing parent and child. Simple directions explain how to get started.

The activity cards cost \$4 each per set. For sets of 10 or more, \$2.50 each; 100 or more, \$2 each. For more information or to purchase the cards, please call PACER at (952) 838-9000 or toll-free in Greater Minnesota at (800) 53-PACER. Or, visit our Web site at www.pacer.org.

Early literacy can be fun... Anoka-Hennepin

By Beth Casper

In the Anoka-Hennepin School District, children with disabilities are immersed in early literacy activities, often without even knowing it. This district, which educates about 41,000 students, has been on the cutting edge of imbedding early literacy techniques into their early childhood special education program since the 1970s.

“Early literacy has always been a part of our program,” said Linda Den Bleyker, an early childhood special education teacher. “We really want to show what a love for books can do to enrich a child’s life.”

Program staff serves children ages birth to 7. Children under 3 years old are usually enrolled in a home-based program where staff can assist parents with activities that teach pre-literacy skills to their children. (Pre-literacy skills are those skills that help children be ready to learn to read).

“So many of our children start out in this program at home,” said Sue Thibedeau, a speech language pathologist in the district. “Our staff take

books into the home and help parents with adapted activities. It’s an emphasis right from the start.”

For example, staff shows that parents don’t need to read an entire book to a young child— simply pointing to pictures and saying the names of objects and animals are important to helping a child learn to read. Role-playing or dramatic play, where children can pretend they are in a post office or store, is another way to teach pre-literacy skills. Books with large symbols that help children follow along with the story are also popular.

Once children reach school age, pre-literacy skills are incorporated into special and regular education classroom activities. All special education teachers are trained as “reading

specialists” in the district, and regular education teachers attend many of the early childhood special education meetings. Each month, staff meets to discuss new ideas and answer questions about curriculum.

In each classroom, teachers use a variety of books, such as books with flip-up parts, books with puppets, books with surfaces that children want to touch, and books that have play activities associated with the story.

One classroom in the Anoka-Hennepin School District uses a friendship book that includes a page about each child in the class. The students take turns bringing the book home to read with their family and learn about their classmates. Not only are students learning that letters and words are used to communicate, but they also learn about

other students in the class. Also, through the friendship book, students often find the classmates who share their interests.

Another classroom has a “sound of the week” activity in which

students are introduced to a sound and a letter symbol. If a child’s name starts with that letter, he or she writes his or her name near the letter symbol. Throughout the week, the teacher notes different books, songs, or snacks that start with the same letter.

There are positive results: In one classroom, students were instructed to find the word “milk” on the milk carton. Afterwards, a girl in the class was looking at a book about farms, and she found the word “milking.” She ran over to the teacher, covered the “-ing” and exclaimed, “I found the word “milk!”

“With each of these activities, literacy is imbedded into the students’ education,” Sue said.

“So many of our children start out in this program at home. Our staff take books into the home and help parents with adapted activities. It’s an emphasis right from the

School District emphasizes reading

“This way teachers aren’t just working on one skill at a time—they are incorporating literacy into many other activities that teach many other skills as well.”

“All of the classrooms use a visual schedule so that students can look at the symbols and see what activity is next: snack, story time, or recess,” said Sue. “With these schedules, all students learn about

communication and reading, and there are fewer problems with transition between activities.”

“All of these activities also have an emphasis on language,” Linda said. “Language is the basis for most everything we do in our lives. Whenever we talk about literacy, we are also talking about language. These students are gaining the skills they need to communicate, which is the most important skill we can help them develop.”

Bunny Breakfast helps promote literacy

For the past 10 years, the Anoka-Hennepin School District’s Early Childhood Education Department has sponsored a Bunny Breakfast and Book Fair to promote early literacy.

“The event is a wonderful opportunity for families and children to come together and play games, read books and experiment with different computer programs,” said Sue Thibedeau, coordinator of the breakfast. “In addition, we are able to raise funds for our early childhood education program.”

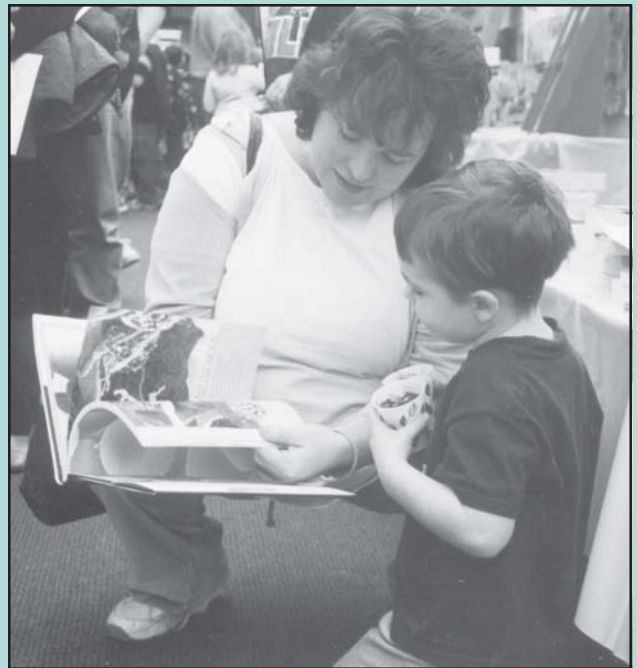
The event is at the Anoka-Hennepin Learning Center instead of at one of the schools, because this location provides a comfortable environment for children with special needs and their families.

The event began as a way to encourage reading at home and other family literacy activities. It has continued to grow each year.

More than 800 children and families attended this year’s breakfast, which was held on Saturday, March 20.



This family enjoyed winning a book during “Book Bingo” at the Bunny Breakfast.



The Book Fair offered an opportunity for children and parents to choose a book to read at home.



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PACER resources and national projects

State of Minnesota Dept of Education

Even Start is a program that helps low-income parents and children to improve their education. Adults must have at least one child age 7 or younger to qualify for services. The goal of Even Start is to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy. Research shows that children are more likely to learn to read well when their parents are able to read. With federal funds, the state awards grants to local partnerships. Partnerships build on existing community resources. Services include early childhood education, adult literacy and adult basic education, and parenting education. http://education.state.mn.us/html/intro_even_start.htm

University of Minnesota - as part of CEED

The Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) provides information regarding young children (birth to age eight), including children with special needs, in the areas of education, child care, child development, and family education. One of its projects is called: **Improving Preschoolers' Reading Outcomes through Measurement and Intervention in Classroom Environments (I'PROMICE)** I'PROMICE investigates the relationship between preschool indicators of expressive language and early literacy and other continuous progress monitoring measures of

kindergartner's and first-graders' growth toward reading proficiency. The project includes young children with disabilities, typically developing children, children for whom English is a second language, and children from low-income families. I'PROMICE activities will help explain how preschool measures of growth in language and early literacy are related to similar measures used in kindergarten and reading measures used in first grade, and will help to better understand how they can support language and early literacy development through classroom activities. <http://www.education.umn.edu/ceed/projects/>

NECTAC (National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center)

The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center supports the implementation of the early childhood provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Its mission is to strengthen service systems to ensure that children with disabilities (birth through five) and their families receive and benefit from high quality, culturally appropriate, and family-centered supports and services. <http://www.nectac.org/topics/readiness/Readiness.asp>

Good Start Grow Smart Initiative