

## Learning-oriented talk: Professional learning resource 4

# Literacy Talk

### What is literacy talk and why is it important?

Although most children start learning to read in primary school, toddlers show their understanding of the building blocks of reading and writing when they use words such as ‘word’, ‘letter’, ‘book’, ‘page’. We define these words as **literacy talk**.

Children’s ability to understand and use literacy talk is part of ‘emergent literacy’, or the skills, knowledge and attitudes that ensure success in learning to read and write. Using words such as ‘letter’, ‘word’ and ‘sound’ allows young children to demonstrate and develop their understanding of how spoken and written language work and how they are related. When children sing the ABC song, identify the first letter of their name or other words (*H for Henry, P for pirate*) or recognise sounds that make up words (*e.g. Fred and Phoebe start with the same sound /f/*), they demonstrate and build their knowledge of the alphabet, their understanding that written letters represent the sounds of words, and their ability to identify these sounds. These skills will help children to learn about sound-letter correspondences (phonics) during reading and writing instruction at school. When young children use words such as ‘page’, ‘book cover’, ‘writer’, ‘title’, ‘author’, ‘picture’, ‘illustrator’, and phrases like ‘I’ll be reading’, ‘I’m writing’, ‘turn the page’, ‘click here’ and ‘I want another book’, they reveal what they know about print and about how and why we use books, writing and electronic media.

### When do children start to use literacy talk?

Literacy talk emerges around age two, and by 3 years, half of the Toddler TaLK children were observed to use literacy words. Interestingly, while more children did use literacy words after they turned 2y 9m, growth in the use of literacy talk was slow. This possibly reflects the fact that literacy talk tends to occur during educator-led book reading and other literacy activities, where educators deliberately model literacy talk. If opportunities to interact with books and other literacy resources do not occur, young children are unlikely to use these words.

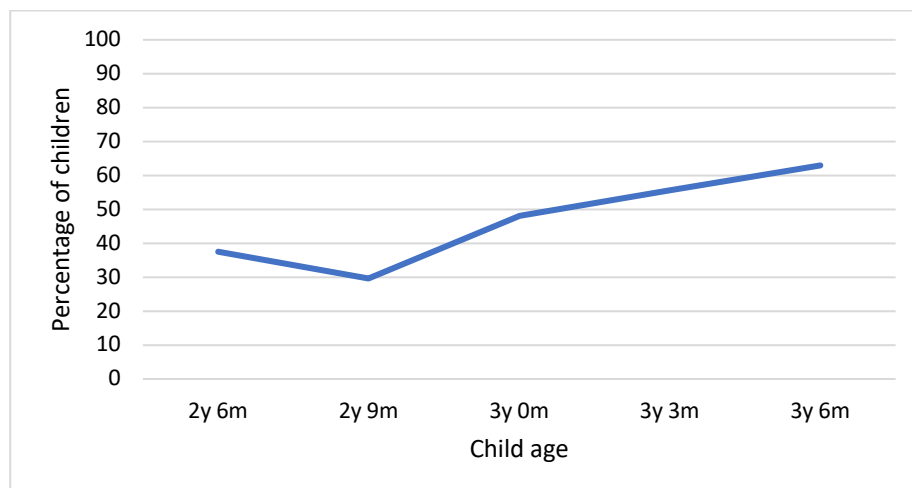


Figure 4.1: Development in Toddler TaLK children’s use of Literacy talk from 2½ to 3½ years.

## Children's use of literacy talk in practice

<b>Example 1</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
<p>Abigale (3y) and her educator are looking at a picture book.            Educator: And what is this? What is this in the book?            Abigale: It's the <u>page</u>.            Educator: That's a page. Yeah, good job. And what is this in the book? What is this? What are these little things here? [pointing at the letters]            Abigale: It's a bear.            Educator: And what's that? What's that? [pointing at the letters]            Abigale: It's a fox.            Educator: Abigale, what are these? Do you know?            A: The <u>pages</u>.            N: The pages. The letters.            A: <u>Letters</u>.            N: Letters. That's it.</p>	<p>Abigale's use of words such as 'page' and 'letters' demonstrates her knowledge about books and how they work. Awareness of print and engagement with books is an important foundation for further literacy development and positive attitudes to books and reading. This is an example of children's ability to "understand key literacy... concepts..., such as the sounds of language, letter-sound relationships, concepts of print and the ways that texts are structured" (EYLF, p. 60) and have "positive attitudes and competencies in literacy" (EYLF, p.57, Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators).</p>
<b>Example 2</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
<p>Jeremy (3y 6m) and Educator are looking at an Alphabet picture chart.            Educator: What is this?            Jeremy: Volcano!            Educator: Volcano! Volcano starts with...?            Jeremy: I don't know.            Educator: What alphabet?            Jeremy: <u>V</u>.            Jeremy: Pirates.            Educator: Aha.            Jeremy: <u>P for pirates</u>.            Educator: How about this one? What is this one?            Jeremy: Baby.            Educator: Baby starts with?            Jeremy: <u>B. D is for duck</u>.            Educator: Yeah, duck starts with what letter?            Jeremy: <u>D</u>.            Educator: D.            Jeremy: D. Look. <u>I for Ice cream</u>.            Educator: Yeah. What is this?            Jeremy: Volcano.            Educator: Volcano starts with what letter?            Jeremy: <u>V</u>.</p>	<p>The educator's Wh-information seeking questions invite Jeremy to recognise, sound out, and name the initial letters in several words (V at the start of volcano, P for pirate, B for baby and D for duck).</p> <p>This activity reveals Jeremy's understanding that alphabet letters represent speech sounds. When he identifies the smallest sound units in words (<i>phonemes</i>), he also demonstrates awareness that spoken words consist of individual sounds (<i>phonemic awareness</i>). This is the most sophisticated level of children's more general ability to identify different sound units (e.g. words, syllables, phonemes) in spoken language (<i>phonological awareness</i>). Phonemic awareness is essential for success in learning about letter-sound correspondences (<i>phonics</i>) when learning to read and write.</p> <p>Children's use of literacy talk in play, everyday interactions and during literacy activities, such as the one in this example, reflects their capacity to 'play with words and sounds' (EYLF, p.60) (Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators).</p>

## **Educators can encourage children to use literacy talk by:**

- modelling a positive disposition to reading, writing and books by talking about favourite books, authors, parts of stories, pictures, or types of books.
- providing "a literacy-enriched environment", which includes "displaying print in home languages and Standard Australian English" (EYLF, p.60).
- encouraging pretend play that helps children see the centrality of reading, writing and other literacy practices in a range of everyday activities (e.g. driving, shopping, going to the doctor, sending a postcard, reading or creating a bus timetable or map, etc.)
- introducing concepts such as 'rhyme', 'letter', 'title', 'author', 'illustrator', 'cover', 'image/picture' when sharing texts with children.
- Engaging children in conversations about words and sounds, reading, writing and the meanings of images, words and other elements in books and other types of print-based, multimedia and electronic texts
- creating picture books and writing notes, postcards, emails with the children and talking about the decisions made in this process (e.g. 'What colour should we use for the title?', 'Where should we write the address?').

## **How does literacy talk support learning in early childhood services?**

Literacy talk is central to children's growth as 'effective communicators' (Outcome 5). Literacy talk allows children to demonstrate and enhance their capacity to "take on roles of literacy and numeracy users in their play" and "actively use, engage with and share the enjoyment of language and texts in a range of ways" (p. 60). In early childhood services, literacy talk supports children to:

- "begin to understand key literacy ... concepts and processes, such as the sounds of language, letter-sound relationships, concepts of print and the ways that texts are structured" and share their responses to "printed, visual and multimedia texts" (p. 60)
- become "aware of the relationships between oral, written and visual representations" and "begin to identify the different purposes of text types, e.g. environmental print, informational texts, narratives" (p. 62)
- "develop an understanding that symbols are a powerful means of communication, and that ideas, thoughts and concepts can be represented through them" (p. 62)
- learn to "identify basic icons and keys (e.g. delete button) and use them to support their navigation (e.g. click, swipe, home, scroll) and understand these terms" (p. 63).

## **How does literacy talk support learning when children start school?**

Children's understanding and ability to use literacy words such as 'word', 'letter' and 'sound' and talk about reading and writing, print and other media and various types of texts (e.g. story, poster, street sign, magazine, dictionary) is key to explicit instruction in phonic knowledge (ENE-PHOKW-01), vocabulary (ENE-VOCAB-01), print conventions (ENE-PRINT-01), spelling (ENE-SPELL-01), and handwriting (ENE-HANDW-01) in Early Stage 1.

Literacy talk also supports children in 'Understanding and responding to literature' (ENE-UARL-01) as it enables them to "identify and discuss how creative language and/or symbols enhance enjoyment in texts", "identify how visual cues contribute to the meaning of a text" and "identify favourite stories and/or characters in texts using verbal and/or nonverbal modes". To support rich talk about literature, teachers also "identify and explore the creative, informative or persuasive language and text features their students need to know about" and may introduce terms that refer to features of specific types of texts (e.g. in a story, 'setting', 'character', 'problem'; in a comic, 'thought bubble' and 'speech balloon') and symbols other than letters such as punctuation signs.