



By Karen Stephens

Home Routines that Build Children's Literacy Skills

Parents play a major role in nurturing children's language and literacy development. Such competence is critical to children's development and long-term quality of life. There are specific skills (listed below) that children must master as they learn to converse, read and write. Involving children in home routines of daily living can help them master all the skills needed. Including children in the processes of running a home helps them discover the usefulness of language. They develop self-respect as they contribute to family life, too.

Below I list home routines that help build children's language skills. For clarity, the skills are listed separately, but integrating skills provides more realistic and authentic learning. For instance, helping to sort and load laundry helps children learn to recognize and name colors and types of clothing. At the same time, they refine physical skills like fine motor control and eye-hand coordination. When skills work in concert with each other, children progress more smoothly toward success in all areas of language, including reading and writing.

VERBAL COMPETENCE: The ability to express ideas and use increasingly complex vocabulary and sentence structure. Needed for language acquisition and conversation.

Home Routines to Build the Skill

Converse during meal times, bath time or commuting to keep up on each other's activities and welfare. Make audio or videotapes to send to friends and family. Visit places that encourage observation, reflection and discussion, such as the library, zoo, children's museum, apple orchard, pumpkin patch, butterfly gardens, grocery store.

AUDITORY DISCRIMINATION: The ability to distinguish similarities and differences in sound. Needed for understanding spoken language and for good pronunciation.

Home Routines to Build the Skill

During daily chores, describe why you do things, such as, "I'm putting the Jell-O® in the refrigerator so it will be firm by supper." Sit on the porch, then listen to and describe outdoor sounds. Play calming music during meal times or nap time. Teach children how to respond appropriately to the door bell, microwave timer, alarm or telephone. Recite poems, finger plays, or nursery rhymes; or sing lullabies together.

VISUAL DISCRIMINATION: The ability to distinguish similarities and differences in size, shape, color, or number. Required for reading symbols, letters, numbers and words.

Home Routines to Build the Skill

Include kids in sorting laundry loads by color or fabric; finding groceries at the store and putting them away at home; storing yarn by color; sorting buttons by color or shape; putting away clean silverware; separating nails, screws, bolts and washers.

LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION: The ability to make sense of vocabulary and communication. Needed in order to follow directions, understand ideas, topics or plots, and to grasp the relationship between spoken and written text.

Home Routines to Build the Skill

Read family letters out loud. Using a recipe, include children in cooking muffins or puddings. From directions or pictures, let kids help assemble a new household item, like a picnic table. Describe the steps in grooming a pet or washing a car.

“There are
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FINE MOTOR and EYE-HAND COORDINATION: The ability to control and coordinate small muscles with vision. Needed particularly for writing.

Home Routines to Build the Skill

Provide scissors, paper, paste and markers so kids can cut and create get-well or holiday cards. Have children draw or write a list of food for grocery shopping. Include kids in gift wrapping and holiday treat making. Assign chores that require physical control like filling a bird feeder, watering plants, unloading the dishwasher or dryer, vacuuming, dusting, gardening, or raking leaves. Bath time can be learning time, too. Vision and small muscles are fine-tuned when kids pour water from one container to another. They enjoy filling plastic bottles, ice cube trays and bowls using tools like funnels, measuring spoons and cups, pitchers, and even plastic eye droppers.

“I wonder how they made this applesauce. How do you think? Should we buy a big or small jar for supper?”

ATTENTION SPAN and CONCENTRATION: The ability to focus on a detail, activity, or topic. Needed to acquire and retain knowledge through any form of language.

Home Routines to Build the Skill

Have kids help create an errand or grocery list. Have them put clothes away properly or make a bed from start to finish. They can pack their lunch or school bag. Keep a photo album where kids can write down (or dictate) details of a vacation. Or they can dictate a story about a picture they've drawn. Sometimes when reading children's books together, trail your finger along the text. This helps children learn that those squiggles called letters and words must be focused on. And it teaches that English reads front to back, left to right and top to bottom. (Not all languages do!)

CONCEPT RECOGNITION: The ability to compare characteristics, see relationships, sequence, categorize, and understand symbols. Needed to understand that all the elements of language — spoken or written words — represent abstract ideas.

Home Routines to Build the Skill

Use a family message board and post a schedule calendar. Refer to them so kids see how language helps daily living. When it serves a *real* purpose, label items, such as names on a backpack, toothbrush or personal books. (Don't label every item in sight thinking it will teach word recognition; it won't. It only overwhelms kids and teaches them to ignore print rather than notice it.) Have kids match pairs of socks from the dryer, line up pairs of shoes in the closet, or set the table. Play “I spy” and read signs during commutes: “I spy a triangle sign, where is it?” or “I spy the word ‘zoo,’ where is it?” During family outings, ask questions that help kids notice details, perceive similarities and differences, and make connections, as well as remember and apply knowledge to new situations. For instance, when grocery shopping, talk about foods: “I wonder how they made this applesauce. How do you think? Should we buy a big or small jar for supper?”

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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