

# Easy as A-B-C

*Simple and fun ways to nurture early reading skills in a child with low vision*

By Mashawna Thompson



Learning that the big red sign means, “Mommy is going to stop the car”, seeing their name printed 100 times and recognizing it before they can read, recognizing the logo on a cereal box and demanding “oooot loops”, or every child’s favorite, seeing the golden arches and realizing it’s time for cheeseburgers and fries... these are all examples of incidental learning that contribute to emergent literacy.

What is emergent literacy? In a nutshell, it is pre-literacy. It is all the experiences and learning that your child does that lead to the understanding of reading and writing. It is understanding that symbols, pictures, letters, numbers and words have meaning and are used to communicate.

Much of this early learning occurs incidentally

through observation. Over time your child develops the ability to connect meaning through words and letters. They begin to identify objects and symbols in their environment, and in television and books. They watch others reading and writing and learn the relevance of these tasks through daily experiences. For example, most children would see Mommy or Daddy write a grocery shopping list, then take that list to the grocery store, and then periodically read the list and put grocery items into the cart. How much learning would a child with low vision gain from that experience?

Children are exposed to print all around them every day on the television, riding in a car, reading books, etc. However, children with visual impairments are not able to take in as

much visually from that exposure and therefore, have fewer learning opportunities. Observational learning gets lost in the details of the environment. Learning words isn't meaningful unless the child can relate what they read to prior experience. What good is a book about seashells and seagulls by the ocean if the child has no idea what seashells or seagulls are?

A parent's role in helping their child develop early literacy skills is very important. We need to provide enriched experiences in a variety of environments at home and in the community. We need to guide our children's exploration of those environments and their development of concepts. Encouraging emergent literacy in your child isn't a terribly time consuming or difficult task. Parents of kids who are visually impaired just need to be more aware of it and be more deliberate as they're teaching their child these skills.

By far, the easiest and most important way to build early literacy skills is to read aloud to your child. We can do simple things and make adaptations that allow for our child to take in as much learning as possible from those reading experiences. Choose books with pages that aren't too visually cluttered. Look for books with big bright bold colors, letters, and shapes, but without a bunch of extra "stuff" on the pages. Make print in books more accessible by optimizing lighting and reducing glare. You can also increase the contrast of pictures by outlining shapes and letters with a dark permanent marker.

As you're choosing books to read to your child, remember to consider whether or not he or she has relevant experience to relate to the story. Before reading a book about animals at the zoo, take your child on a visit to the zoo where he or she can see, hear, smell and maybe even touch the animals. A book about animals at the zoo is way more exciting and enjoyable if

your child has that prior experience to relate to.

You don't have to go on a field trip before reading every book you have. You can make your own book from the experiences you and your child already have. You could make a book about a visit to Grandma's or a trip to the park. You could make a book about a daily routine like making dinner or getting ready for bed. You can draw the pictures for your book, use real photographs or even cut pictures out of ads and magazines. Let your child help as much as possible by drawing or pasting pictures, putting pages in order, even providing the words for the story by telling you what a picture is about.

An alternative to making a book is making an experience box. You could tell a story about bath time with a box full of items that could include a washcloth, rubber ducky, bar of soap, a bathtub drain plug, a towel and pajamas. You could substitute pictures for some of the objects if necessary, but use real items whenever possible. As you're telling your story, give your child time to tactually explore each item. Make it fun and exciting by using sound effects and using your "storybook voice."

Use music to further encourage your child's concept development and understanding that words have meaning. You can sing a story by using pictures or objects with the songs you sing to help your child better understand what he or she is singing about. Let your toddler decide which song he or she wants to sing by choosing either a picture of a spider for "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" or a picture of a bus for "The Wheels on the Bus."



Look for opportunities for your child to learn the function of literacy by

observing others reading and writing. Talk out loud about what you're doing when you read a recipe, look at a map, or go through the mail. Let your child open and "read" some junk mail. Let your child help you make a shopping list by

cutting out pictures from a grocery store ad and pasting them to a piece of paper. Teach your child how you use the shopping list by taking it to the store and letting him or her help find the items on the shelves. When you are out and about with your child, point out logos and signs relevant to your activities.

Last, but certainly not least, provide a multitude of writing opportunities for your child. Even at a very young age, give them the opportunity to try out a variety of writing tools and surfaces, crayons or markers on paper, chalk on a chalkboard, finger paints on an easel, or the doodle pen on a Magnadoodle.

When they draw or color a picture, encourage them to tell you about it and then help them write a caption for it. While you're writing a letter to someone,

give your child a pencil and paper and let him or her pretend to write a letter to someone. As they get older, allow them to experiment with writing on the computer and other electronic tools for reading and writing.

There are so many more ideas and activities

out there, I could go on forever. If you just do an Internet search for emergent literacy and low vision, you can find a ton of resources. Even better, take a trip to your local library and you and your child can both do a little exploring. My point is that there are easy and fun ways to promote literacy development in your child.

We as parents are responsible for providing the building blocks of literacy to ensure our child's enjoyment and success in reading and writing.



**Lyra Thompson reading the book she and her mother made together called "Lyra Plays Outside."**

**Some of our favorite websites with online stories and activities:**

- Leading to Reading and Reading Planet: [www.rif.org](http://www.rif.org)
- Mightybook: [www.mightybook.com](http://www.mightybook.com)
- International Children's Digital Library: [www.childrenslibrary.org](http://www.childrenslibrary.org)

**Websites where you can find more information about emergent literacy:**

- American Foundation for the Blind: [www.afb.org](http://www.afb.org)
- Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired: [www.tsbvi.edu](http://www.tsbvi.edu)
- Perkins School for the Blind: [www.perkins.org](http://www.perkins.org)