

## **Early Literacy Skills and AAC**

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### Introduction to Early Literacy

Early literacy development is critical during the preschool age and is a precursor to children's reading abilities as they go through grade school. Literacy development includes concepts such as print knowledge, phonemic awareness, and phonological awareness. Print awareness refers to book knowledge (appropriate way to hold a book), understanding sentences are read from left to right, alphabet awareness, and story knowledge (understanding there is a beginning, middle, and end). Phonemic awareness is the ability to recognize that words are made up of sounds (sound play) and sounds can be manipulated (in sound blending or sound segmenting). Example, "what is the first sound in 'boot'?" Phonological awareness is manipulating words without print (word play) and may include rhyming, alliteration, sentence and syllable segmenting. Example, "what word rhymes with 'dog'?" These are the foundation for literacy development and help children learn more complex literacy skills as they get older.

Reading and written language depends on a child's oral language. Children with language impairments will have more difficulty with letter-recognition and spelling abilities. Speech therapists must recognize how reading and writing skills develop for children with language impairments to provide the services they need. If difficulties in early literacy abilities persist as the child goes through grade school, they will encounter difficulties with more complex literacy skills such as grammar, constructing ideas into written language, and narrative and expository writing.

### Exploring the Evidence

In Millar, et al 2004, research focused on instructional activities to measure student's progress in learning letter-sound correspondence, selecting the initial letter of words, and writing skills. Students participating in the study were between the ages of 6 and 12, diagnosed with Autism, and used an AAC device. During the first activity, the researcher orally presented the student with a letter and students were asked to choose the corresponding letter on their keyboard. When selecting the initial letter, the researcher orally presented the student with a word and the student chose the initial letter on their keyboard. A hierarchy of prompts were used for students that required more support during the activities. In the writing workshop activity, the students were encouraged to use target words in the "initial letter of words" activity and to be creative in their story. Pictures of the target initial letter were given to the students.

Results of the study indicated that two of the three students learned and maintained the selection of initial letter, while one student was overgeneralizing a target letter and had difficulty

distinguishing between two letters. Two out of the three students also used the initial letter in their writing texts with improved accuracy from their baseline. When implementing a literacy intervention, providing multiple opportunities for the students to practice are imperative for learning and generalizing the targeted skill, providing appropriate scaffolds/support, specific instruction (only focus on one target at a time), and review previously learned skills prior to session are some suggestions to help students succeed.

### Early Literacy Activities for AAC

Use books that have repetition! This structure allows the child to build vocabulary and connect sounds to print and print to pictures. Examples, in “Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?” by Bill Martin, Jr. and Eric Carle, the student can spell out each color/ animal and identifying the rhyming words in the book. When students participate in the activity, they are more likely to stay engaged and practice learning the targeted skill.

Play a guessing game! The speech therapist will sound out each sound and have the student guess what the word is! Example, “/m/ /n/ /ŋ/ /k/ /l/” and the child can either produce or guess the animal on their device. If they have difficulty, increase support by asking, “what sound did you hear in the beginning?”, have the child spell out sound-by-sound what they heard on their AAC device, or giving the child 2 options, “did I say ‘frog’ or ‘monkey’?” A speech therapist plays an important role in teaching students early literacy skills that will impact language, reading, and writing in the future.

### Resources

Cambell, S. Q., Puranik, C. S., & Tortorelli, L. S. (2014). Supporting Early Literacy Skills Through Preschool Writing Instruction in Therapeutic and Classroom Contexts . *ASHA*, 21, 88-97.  
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Bruno, J. (2015). eBooks for Children who use AAC.  
<http://www.gatewaytolanguageandlearning.com/products/ebooks/>