

INVESTING IN YOUR CHILD'S LITERACY BANK ACCOUNT

Long before your child learns to read, he or she is soaking up the basics of more complex grammar and vocabulary needed for school and literacy activities. Toddlers and preschoolers may only be using three or four words in a sentence, but their brains are busily collecting the words, concepts, and sentence structures they will use as they grow older.

Research has shown that children with stronger language skills become better readers and better “decoders”—they have a better ability to sound out unfamiliar words because they have a better understanding of how language and speech sounds work.

Parents can increase the benefit of these critical preschool language learning years by creating an environment full of new ideas and vocabulary. This helps build your child's toolbox for learning to read and starting school. Here are a few ideas for investing in your child's literacy bank account:

Use a wide range of words – Using sophisticated vocabulary and synonyms exposes your child to more words. A preschooler may not be ready to use words like “continent” or “allergy” but her

brain will store the sounds and concepts. Similarly, using “painting”, “picture”, and “artwork” to refer to the same item will build not only vocabulary, but the concept of synonyms.

Play word sound games – Letter puzzles, rhyming games, breaking words into sounds, and other phonological play helps your child build a foundation that will later be used to decode words.

Ask questions and discuss stories – Research has correlated language skills not only with reading aloud, but with analytical discussion of the story during and after. Asking your child, “Why do you think Piglet did that?” helps him develop a better understanding of context and backstory.

Seek out new experiences – Going to the zoo, taking a different route on a walk, visiting a different area of town, or taking a drive in the country can all provide opportunities for using new vocabulary and discussing new concepts.

Watch TV together – Educational television—like *Word Girl*, *Super Y*, and *Reading Between The Lions*—are wonderful literacy skill builders. Science, travel, and nature programs can provide new contexts and vocabulary without leaving home, as long as you take the time to talk about the content and answer questions.

Continue to read aloud to children after they start reading themselves – Reading chapter books aloud introduces vocabulary and ideas your child may not be ready to read alone. It also allows you the opportunity to discuss the story together and answer questions.

The more varied the experiences your child has as a preschooler, the more vocabulary and context he or she has to draw on once

reaching school and learning to read. For children with normal language skills, this can make the difference between being an average reader and an above average reader. For children with a diagnosed language disorder, investing in their literacy bank can improve their language skills and lessen the struggle to learn to read.

Literacy building activities can also help signal potential trouble before school begins. If you have created a language-rich environment for your child and he or she has any of these red flags, it may be time to seek help:

- Late preschoolers (4 year olds) who cannot tell you about an experience, such as visiting the circus
- Beginning Kindergarteners who don't know at least half the letter names and sounds, or who make frequent grammatical errors (“Yesterday I jump off my bike.”)
- Beginning First-Graders who are not able to sound out simple words

Investing in your child's literacy bank today is a small amount of effort now for a huge payoff later on. If you are concerned about your child's language and literacy skills, talk to your pediatrician or your child's teacher. To find out more about language and literacy, visit Vanderbilt's Language and Literacy Lab website at www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/languagelab or the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association at www.asha.org. For an appointment with a speech-language pathologist specializing in language and literacy in children, call the **Vanderbilt Bill Wilkerson Center Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences** at 615-936-5000.



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