



Speech pathologists urge parents to lead the way with literacy learning

While the games of 'I spy' and endless renditions of 'Old MacDonald had a Farm' might wear thin on a long drive with the kids, the good news is that it can go a long way to help develop their literacy skills, according to speech and language experts.

On the eve of the first reference group meeting for the Federal Government's National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, Speech Pathology Australia is urging parents to talk more to their children to give them the best chance of literacy success at school.

The National Inquiry will examine reading research, teacher training and classroom practices for the teaching of reading. Speech Pathology Australia is part of the Inquiry Reference Group meeting on 11 March to assist with expert advice on literacy.

Although teachers are the focus of the Inquiry, parents have a key role to play in the development of their child's literacy skills, according to speech pathologist and reference group member Suze Leitão.

"Research has shown that a child's speech and language skills are one of the strongest predictors of literacy ability," said Dr Leitão.

"By developing children's sound and language awareness at an early age they are better equipped to understand the relationships and logic of sounds, letters and words.

"Given that one in five¹ children require additional support to master reading and writing, parents play a crucial role in developing their children's speech and language skills, in readiness for the learning demands of school.

"As speech pathologists we find that many parents are simply not aware of the relationship that exists between speech and language development and literacy development. We are urging parents not to underestimate the power of talking," she said.

"The good news is that parents can easily contribute to their children's oral language and sound awareness development. By simply talking and reading to their children and incorporating simple games into their everyday interactions, their children can be ready to read and write when they start school.

¹ *Mapping the Territory, Primary Students with Learning Difficulties: Literacy and Numeracy*, Federal Government Study, 2000

“We recommend parents:

- **read books, signs, shopping lists etc. aloud to their child**
- **talk about the stories they have read with their child**
- **talk about what they are doing as they do everyday activities**
- **talk about words (eg that’s a long word)**
- **play ‘I Spy ’ (eg. “I spy something beginning with a ffff sound”)**
- **sing Nursery Rhymes**
- **talk about sounds rather than letters (eg your name starts with a ssss sound)**
- **listen to their child when they are telling a story**
- **play rhyming games**

“It’s the building of these foundation skills early that will ensure a child has every opportunity to participate fully at school from day one. If a child’s oral language or sound awareness skills have not been developed, they may struggle to build literacy skills. It is no exaggeration to say that literacy is built on oral language foundations!”

“When children are experiencing difficulties or seem at-risk of literacy delay, team work between speech pathologists, teachers and families works powerfully to support children’s literacy progress.”

“If parents are concerned about their child’s speaking and listening skills, I strongly encourage them to contact a local speech pathologist,” said Dr Leitao.

-ends-

For further information or to schedule an interview please contact Emily Armet on 03 9600 0006 or 0414 742 307.

Speech pathologists work with parents, teachers and children to help children develop literacy skills. If you would like to organise a case study example for interview or a photo opportunity we would be happy to assist.

Please see attached background information for further information about literacy.

Literacy - Media Background Information

Reading is a language-based skill

The Federal Government's National Inquiry into the teaching of literacy includes Speech Pathology Australia on the Reference Group.

The inquiry will conduct an independent examination of reading research, teacher training and classroom practices for the teaching of reading in Australian schools.

The connections between spoken and written language are well established:

- Spoken language provides a foundation for the development of written language and the relationship is reciprocal;
- Children experiencing difficulties learning written language frequently have difficulties using oral language to communicate;
- Children with spoken language difficulties have an increased risk of difficulty learning to read and write.

Literacy teaching based on the evidence: What role can speech pathologists play?

Speech pathologists are trained in identifying, assessing and managing children with speech and language problems.

Speech pathologists can play a vital role in developing the key oral language and sound awareness abilities, which are the foundation from which literacy skills develop.

In addition to identification and prevention, *speech pathologists* can play a critical role in working in collaboration with schools, teachers and parents to meet the needs of students experiencing ongoing problems learning to read, write and spell.

A speech pathologist:

- Assesses and provides support for reading related language skills;
- Works closely with class teachers and specialist teachers to alert them when students are at risk of literacy difficulties and to collaboratively plan programs which provide a broad language based approach to literacy difficulties;
- Communicates the relationship between speaking, listening and knowing about sounds (ie expressive language, receptive language and phonological awareness) and reading and writing to parents and teachers;
- Works collaboratively with early childhood educators and parents to prevent literacy difficulties and provide early intervention for children at risk of literacy difficulties by providing language experiences necessary for literacy development, promoting an enthusiasm for reading and demonstrating the use and function of written language;
- Works closely with teachers in the management of students experiencing literacy difficulties;
- Targets speech sound awareness and oral language (especially vocabulary and extended discourse) when working with children with speech and language disorders.
- Assists in curriculum development;
- Contributes to the evidence for successful literacy approaches through involvement in ongoing literacy research.

What is literacy?

A large number of reading approaches and programs currently exist for children with difficulties learning to read and write. Many of these literacy approaches do not specifically target the underlying causes of the literacy difficulty and many make the assumption that one approach will address the needs of all students. Teaching needs to take account of all the ways we learn to read, write and spell, building on the existing and growing evidence base coming out of classrooms and research clinics.

Research demonstrates that children require a solid foundation in oral language before they can learn to read and write. 'The child's competence in language provides the basic foundation for reading' (p.34, Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, & Seidenberg, 2001). Oral language abilities are critical in guiding children's thinking and learning and include being able to put ideas into sentences, tell stories that make sense and understand what they read and hear.

Many children who are identified with literacy difficulties have pre-existing difficulties with oral language which impact on vocabulary, comprehension, expressive language and phonological awareness. These difficulties can be subtle.

Speech Pathology Australia

Is the peak body representing speech pathologists in Australia. *Speech pathologists* complete extensive study in oral language development and disorders in areas such as phonetics, phonology, grammar, morphology, semantics and discourse. *Australian speech pathologists* are involved in ongoing important research in the field of literacy development and disorders.

Speech pathologists are able to identify children who are at risk of literacy impairments before they start formal education through the assessment of oral language expression, comprehension and processing skills. In addition, they are able to analyse strengths and weaknesses in underlying processes and skills necessary for literacy development.

This means that literacy problems can be addressed prior to literacy failure occurring.