

COVID-19 and Early Years Literacy Development





Research Paper by Literacy Expert Dr. Anne Brailsford.

Bio: Dr. Anne Brailsford has been an educator for more than 30 years. She is one of the lead authors for Scholastic's Literacy Place for the Early Years balanced literacy resource. During her career, she designed and implemented a successful balanced literacy program for elementary schools in Edmonton, co-authored the professional book, *Balanced Literacy in Action*, and currently works as a Language Arts consultant.

COVID-19 and Early Years Literacy Development

"This year is really confusing. In online, nobody really listens. Usually all my friends just turn their camera off and watch YouTube or something because it's so boring and they don't understand anything... [...] I like being at school because I can see my friends in person. And I get to play more. Online you just sit there and watch the screen. I just turn my camera off and start jumping on my bed. I just try and do something fun. Having to do online again and again is just terrible."

– James McLellan, aged 9, Grade 3 (*The Globe and Mail*, April 17th, 2021)

During the pandemic, many of our youngest children have been "at risk," not only from a virus but also in terms of social and emotional development and the language skills and strategies that provide the foundation for learning. In-person school experiences have varied across the country with some children largely connected to each other and their teachers through online learning, and others being in school but needing to return home when virus exposures occurred. It is even possible that some children have not experienced schooling at all during the pandemic.

A mid-pandemic study of 58 schools across England indicated that the children who started school in the autumn of 2020 needed more support than those children who had commenced schooling in previous years.

The researchers conclude that oral language development and, interconnectedly, children's social and emotional growth "will need to be a key focus for any education recovery plans." (p. 9)

Teachers reported three major areas of need:

91%

of schools reported concerns with their students' social and emotional development.

96%

of schools were concerned about children's language and communication abilities.

89%

of schools expressed concerns about the children's literacy delays.

(Bowyer-Crane, C., Bonetti, Sara, Compton, Sarah, Nielsen, Dea D'Apice, Katrina, and Tracey, Louise. The Impact of Covid-19 on School Starters: Interim Briefing 1: Education Endowment Foundation, 2021)

Research findings, just emerging during the pandemic, provide guidance for where we need to direct teaching focus. When school experiences become more normalized, emphasis on the development of oral language will be crucial for young children as:

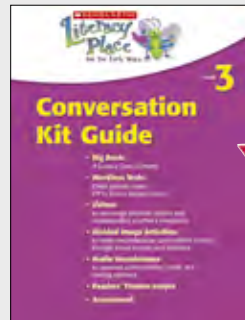
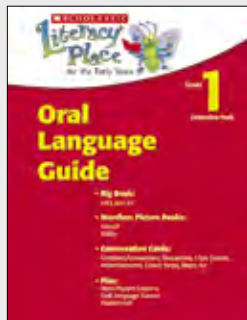
- Their pandemic language experiences have often been limited to small family groups and their brief interactions online. As we learn from James, it has been difficult for young children to focus attention when learning digitally, and their usual language interactions with friends, community members, extended family, and other children in clubs and classes have been curtailed. Even children who have been in school for most of the time have been unable to interact with friends on playdates and at hockey or dance class, and with their relatives and neighbours. The social world where language takes place has shrunk dramatically.
- Language flourishes in social situations where it is used for self-expression, collaboration, co-operation, and problem solving as well as for academic learning. Children who have been denied those important early-language exposures may well struggle to work co-operatively in a group or with a partner, have reduced abilities to problem solve socially, and more limited abilities to use language to express their ideas and feelings. Immersion in language experiences will be vital to stimulate children's social and emotional development.
- Movement and exploration have always been part of early childhood education, but encouraging exploration through play is definitely a challenge online! Language development through focused play has often been entirely dependent on parental stimulation during the pandemic. Immersion in playful, developmentally appropriate language sessions will be important in the normalization process.
- Oral language provides the foundation for children's literacy development. Playful engagements in stories, poems, plays, literacy-enhancing games, and conversations provide opportunities to listen to and learn the rhythm and patterns of written language. They help children understand that print holds meaning, that words make up sentences, letters have sounds and sometimes rhyming patterns, and that spoken language can be written down. That type of print immersion, and the links with oral language, has

undoubtedly been reduced during the pandemic and will need to be established or re-affirmed. For example, testing of Grade 1 students in Toronto District School Board indicated that 9% less of the students met reading grade level expectations in January 2021 than students in January 2019. The report concluded that "the pandemic seems to have disrupted literacy learning for many early elementary students." (Toronto District School Board: Program and School Services Committee, March 31st, 2021) It will be important not to think "delay" or "deficit" and to support children at their learning edge following the pandemic restrictions, and also to provide a wide range of materials and learning groups to meet their needs.

- High-risk children have missed crucial early language experiences that their homes may not have been able to provide. English Language Learners will undoubtedly be delayed in acquiring their new language, and other special needs' children will also need enriched language programming to renew attention to communication strategies and skills.
- Some children may have been wearing masks when they attended school, although mask wearing has been varied across the country. If children have been using face coverings, they may need oral language activities focused on reading the non-verbal cues we use in social communication to express our feelings. They may also need increased exposure to phonological awareness activities to discriminate those fine sound differences, and to modelling to enhance syntax in oral language.



How *Literacy Place* Oral Language Kits Can Assist



All aspects of the Oral Language Kits will help teachers to expand and refine children's language development, but following the pandemic, teachers may have particular classroom needs. For example, it is likely teachers will indicate that they need to focus on co-operation, being aware of others' needs, solving social problems, and communicating ideas and feelings to rebuild the social fabric in the classroom community.

You may want to consider pointing out key areas that will support those needs:

- If there are significant language delays, consider a kit at a lower grade level:

As students have had limited play exposures, it is entirely possible that, for example, Grade One activities suggested in the Oral Language Kit may be helpful for Grade Two students following the pandemic. Alternatively, teachers could maintain their Kit level but add adaptations, e.g., focusing on some phonemic awareness during the lessons on songs and poems in a Grade Two class.

- Teaching Strategies for each lesson:

Each lesson has a teaching strategy to work on verbal and non-verbal communication, e.g., modelling eye contact, disagreeing agreeably, piggy-backing on someone else's comments, assisting students to initiate a discussion, using role-play to explore another person's viewpoint. Explicit teaching and modelling of these strategies will help children rebuild their possibly depleted social strategies and networks.

Kindergarten: Pages 6–7
Grade One: Pages 6–7
Grade Two: Pages 7–11
Grade Three: Pages 7–11

- The Oral Language Assessment illustrates the language goals you are working on.

Children will be at a variety of levels of development especially after the isolating experience of the pandemic. This is the time to assess children's language needs to guide focused teaching and modelling.

Kindergarten: Pages 20–21
Grade One: Pages 22–23
Grade Two: Pages 30–31
Grade Three: Pages 33–34

NOTE: Assessments for Phonological and Phonemic Awareness are only in the Kindergarten and Grade One Kits. All Grade Level Kits include assessment for Language for Social Relationships, Language for Learning, and Language Structures.



Kindergarten Oral Language Kit

• Social problem solving receives attention:

One of the most urgent needs is anticipated to be in the area of using language to build and maintain social relationships. How to be a friend, how to solve disagreements, how to work in a group, and how to play and work together are vital aspects of early childhood programming. It's unlikely that a patchwork of school with some social distancing, online learning where social relationships are reduced to individual picture frames, and even home schooling with no opportunities for team sports, classes and clubs, have been conducive to enriching young children's social problem solving strategies. Working on building a range of social language strategies will be of major importance.

Kindergarten:

- Social Problem Solving lesson using puppets (p. 27)
- Conversation Card 3: Arguing Sisters (p. 139)
- Sequence Cards: "Sharing Things" (Cards 12, 13, and 14, p. 166); "Following the Rules" (Cards 21, 22, and 23, p. 169); "Including Others" (Cards 26, 27, and 28, p. 172)

Grade One:

- Social Problem Solving lesson using puppets (p. 31)
- Sequence Cards: "These Are Mine" (Cards 21, 22, and 23); "Come Play With Us" (Cards 26, 27, and 28)

Grade Two:

- Readers' Theatre: Creating Student-Made Scripts About Social Problem Solving (p. 45)
- Conversation Video: "Oh Brother!" (p. 177)

Grade Three:

- Readers' Theatre: Coping with Problems (p. 38)* Could also be used in "Expressing Emotions"
- Readers' Theatre Script: A Kindness Returned (p. 61)* Could also be used in "Expressing Emotions"
- Oral Language game: Chatty Countdown (p. 89) Ask questions that require social problem solving
- Video production lessons (p. 178): Students can make a video about a social problem solving situation

• Expressing emotions is emphasized:

The pandemic has created an emotionally challenging time for children. School has been a safe place and routines have been predictable, but that has changed during the pandemic. A feeling of lack of safety anywhere has made some children confused and anxious, especially when contacts with friends and extended family have been greatly reduced. Encouraging children to express their emotions, and develop empathy for others, is undoubtedly a need in post-pandemic life.

Kindergarten:

- Retelling personal experiences using puppets (p. 34)
- Conversation Cards: Emotions/Interactions (Cards 1–7, pp. 133–151)
- Sequence Cards: "Being Patient" (Cards 29, 30, and 31, p. 35)

Grade One:

- Retelling personal experiences using puppets (p. 39)
- Wordless Story: Yikes (p. 140) How the boy is feeling on each page
- Wordless Story: Tabby (p. 146) How the children feel when they lose their kitten
- Conversation Cards: Emotions/Interactions (pp. 155–188)
- Sequence Cards: "Where's Mom?" (Cards 13, 14, and 15, p. 191); "May I Have a Cookie?" (Cards 29, 30, and 31, p. 200)



Grade 1 Oral Language Kit



Grade 2 Conversation Kit

NOTE: Hopefully masking requirements will not be long term as phonological/phonemic activities are more effective when the mouth is visible, especially during teacher modelling.

Kindergarten:

- All lessons with songs and poems contain sections on enhancing phonological/phonemic awareness, e.g., using percussion instruments to beat out the rhythm of language, using rhyming patterns (e.g., "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," p. 77).

Grade One:

- All lessons with songs and poems contain sections on enhancing phonological/phonemic awareness, e.g., rhyming patterns and rhyming riddles ("The Scarecrow's Secret," p. 131).

Grade Two:

- Wordless Story: Beaver Is Lost (p. 152)
- Conversation Cards: 2 Wildfire (p. 199), 3 Flood (p. 202), Differing Viewpoints: 4 Speed Racers (p. 205), 5 The Doctor's Office (p. 209), 6 The Vet's Office (p. 212)
- Comic Strip Cards: 17 and 18 "The Show Must Go On," (p. 240)* Could also be used for Social Problem Solving
- Poems in Between Friends:
 - "Changing" (p. 128) What it feels like to be in someone else's shoes
 - "Circle of Sun" (p. 98) Happiness

Grade Three:

- Wordless Story: Chalk (p. 138)
- Readers' Theatre:
 - Communicating Emotions When Role-Playing (p. 35)
 - Coping with Problems (p. 38)* Could also be used for Social Problem Solving
- Readers' Theatre Script: A Kindness Returned (p. 61)* Could also be used for Social Problem Solving
- A Curious Case of Poetry: "I'm Not Afraid of Anything" (p. 126)
- Divided Image 3: Manitoba Flood (p. 194)
- Sound Stories: Camping at Night (p. 216)

• Phonological and phonemic awareness are covered for kindergarten and grade one:

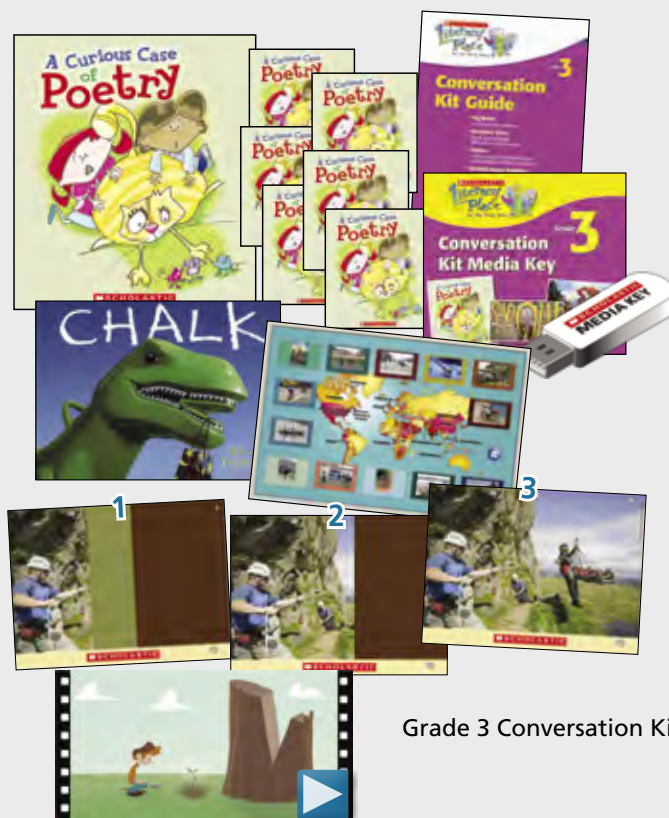
Phonological awareness (the broad skills of being aware of the sounds and rhythms of language and manipulating sounds, e.g., onset and rime... r-est, b-est) and phonemic awareness (the more specific skill of isolating and manipulating a sound or phoneme) are crucial needs in early reading. The Oral Language Kit focuses on developing these in age appropriate and meaningful ways in the songs and poems, and in some of the language games.

In Grades Two and Three, there is no specific emphasis on phonological/phonemic awareness in lessons, but analyzing sound and visual patterns (phonics) is mentioned in each of the lessons covering songs and poems.

Examples:

Grade Two: "Changing" (p. 128) and "The Lion and the Mouse" (p. 132), phonic word patterns

Grade Three: "Be Glad Your Nose Is on Your Face" (p. 111), identifying rhyming patterns and using them to write a new verse for the poem; "Booktime" (p. 114), compound words, nouns, and word families



Grade 3 Conversation Kit

ISBN	Literacy Place Oral Language Kits
978-1-4430-0375-9	Kindergarten Oral Language Kit The Oral Language Kit includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poetry Big Book, 6 small copies, digital version of book, and audio • Wordless books • Conversation cards • Felt puppets • Oral Language Guide
978-1-4430-0479-4	Grade 1 Oral Language Kit The Oral Language Kit includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poetry Big Book, 6 small copies, digital version of book, and audio • Wordless books • Conversation cards • Felt puppets • Oral Language Guide
978-1-4430-2589-8	Grade 2 Conversation Kit The Conversation Kit includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poetry Big Book, 6 small copies, digital version of book, and audio • Wordless books • Conversation cards • Conversation videos • Teaching Guide
978-1-4430-3227-8	Grade 3 Conversation Kit The Conversation Kit includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poetry Big Book, 6 small books, and audio • Wordless texts • Conversation videos • Divided Image Activities • Audio Soundscapes • Teaching Guide

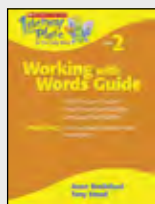
Other *Literacy Place for the Early Years* Resources that can help with literacy and oral language development



978-0-7791-5318-3



978-0-7791-5356-5



978-0-7791-6504-9



978-0-7791-6619-0

ISBN	Shared/Guided Reading Complete Packs
978-0-7791-4909-4	Kindergarten Small-Group Shared/Guided Reading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 Small-Group Shared/Guided Reading Packs • 5 Guided Reading Packs
978-0-7791-4918-6	Grade 1 Small-Group Shared/Guided Reading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 Small-Group Shared/Guided Reading Packs • 45 Guided Reading Packs
978-0-7791-4927-8	Grade 2 Guided Reading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 48 Guided Reading Packs
978-0-7791-4936-0	Grade 3 Guided Reading Complete Pack <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 44 Guided Reading Packs

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