



# HELP: Healthy Early Literacy Program

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## Abstract

H.E.L.P. Healthy Early Literacy Program Abstract A daily intensive supplemental reading and writing program was developed to assist students who were 1. identified with a language disability and 2. identified as at-risk for reading failure in an urban elementary school. The purpose of the program was to help these students understand and develop the connection between oral and written language that is so critical to reading and writing success.

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## Keywords

Literacy, Reading Difficulties, Oral Language, Language Impairment, Special Education

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### Time for Change

The past decade has witnessed extraordinary progress in our understanding of the nature of reading and reading difficulties (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2004). According to Shaywitz and Shaywitz, never before have rigorous science (including neuroscience) and classroom instruction in reading been so closely linked. For the first time, educators can turn to well-designed scientific studies to determine the most effective ways to teach reading to beginning readers, including those with reading disabilities (National Reading Panel, 2000). Thus, according to Shaywitz & Shaywitz, several lines of investigation have found that reading originates in and relies on the brain systems used for spoken language.

How is it that students learn to understand what they read and how do some students get lost in their reading and enter new worlds, build knowledge and improve vocabulary, whereas others find reading a constant struggle (Klinger, Vaughn, & Boardman, 2007)? The

process of reading, of getting meaning from a printed page, is a complex one. It is based in language and shaped by our understanding of the world (Kiefer, 2001). Kiefer continues on to say psycholinguists, those who study the relationship between language and cognition, have helped us understand that the act of reading depends on two types of information, visual and nonvisual. It is our nonvisual information, however, all our past experiences with language, with books, and the world around us, that helps us obtain meaning from the text. As a result, reading requires us to use

our knowledge of meaning, language structure, and letter-sound relationships to help us get meaning from print. Thus, discussion focusing on these areas of language development, as they relate to the skills associated with the process of reading, is paramount to understanding how to plan, create and implement instructional and curricular changes.

### Oral Language and Print Connection

The ability to map oral language onto print is important for early reading and writing experiences. Specifically, recognition of printed words depends on the ability to map speech sounds to letter symbols- the alphabetic principle and to recognize letter sequences accurately and quickly-

orthographic processing (Moats, 2000). Through interaction with others who model language functions, children learn to attend to language and to apply this knowledge to literacy situations (Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1996). In English, the relationship between oral language (speech) and written

language (print) uses the equivalence between phonemes and graphemes. However, because talking and reading are different processes and produce different outcomes (Akinlasi, cited in Mason & Allen, 1986), we cannot assume that children learn this equivalence solely by mapping their knowledge of oral language onto written language (Mason & Allen, 1986). Typically, this mapping process has been viewed as a developmental process, rather than an accumulation of discrete skills.

However, because there are differences in early literacy experiences, children

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may come to school with varying concepts about the distinction between the physical cues of reading and the aural cues of spoken language. Similarly, language deficient children often miss the subtle differences in speech sounds (Moats, 2000). For example, Ferreiro and Teberosky (cited in Mason & Allen, 1986) found that children varied in their ability to distinguish between oral conversation and a fairy tale or a news item when a researcher “read” to them from a storybook or newspaper. Such failure to pick up on physical cues that differentiate written and spoken language can be problematic for beginning readers. In fact, the problem is so great that the American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA) recommends early literacy intervention for all children with speech and language delays and/or disorders (Arnold & Colburn, 2005). Research by Arnold and Colburn suggests that approximately 60 to 80 percent of these children will have difficulty learning to read. Therefore, to help children succeed in relating some specific aspects of oral language to print, teachers may need to assess children’s knowledge about the differences between speech and print, then clarify and expand their understanding.

The reader must convert the printed characters on the page into a linguistic code: the phonetic code, the only code recognized by the language system (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2004). Once a child develops an awareness of the sounds of spoken words, he can then link the letters to these sounds and go on to sound out new words (Shaywitz, 2005). In fact, researchers claim that perhaps the greatest prognostic indicators of success in reading in the early grades are the frequency of being read to and the acquisition of a literate language style. These are the keys to breaking the reading code and we have to help children who struggle with it.

### **Reading Disability: The Language Impairment Link**

This strong relationship between oral and written language problems has led us...to view a specific reading disability... as a developmental impairment. On the basis of highly reliable scientific evidence, investigators in the field have now reached a strong consensus: Reading reflects language and reading disability reflects a deficit within the language system (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2004). Results from large and well-studied populations with reading disability confirm that in young school-age children (Fletcher et al., 1994; Stanovich & Seigel, 1994) and in adolescents (Shaywitz et al, 1999), a weakness in accessing the sounds of spoken language represents the most robust and specific correlate of reading disability (Morris et al, 1998).

In fact, those who enter school with limited language (due to a language delay or disorder) are expected to have difficulty dealing with words as objects in and of themselves. Words which are taught in a more meaningful spoken or written context are likely to be learned more readily than words taught apart from such contexts. Instruction that works stimulates language awareness (Moats, 2000). The context makes it easier for students to connect the new word to their existing knowledge about the larger context. Associating new vocabulary with concepts that are already known (background knowledge) is a powerful way to learn.

In fact, this word knowledge is among the most critical pieces of language development. Children who acquire a substantial vocabulary are often able to think more deeply, express themselves better and learn new things more quickly (Canizares, 2003). Providing rich and varied reading experiences

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around key concepts increases the acquisition of new vocabulary words as well as the “world knowledge” that is needed to connect the words with the text in order to improve reading comprehension (Hirsch, 2003). Research presented by Canizares shows that children who reach school age with smaller vocabularies, less depth in prior knowledge and background experiences, and fewer experiences with hearing stories and exploring with print, are more likely to have significant problems in learning to read. In fact, just to keep up with their peers, students need to learn between 2,000 and 4,000 new words per year (Graves, 2004)-that is, approximately 40-50 new word each week. If we boost children’s language and literacy experiences early in life, later difficulties may be alleviated or even avoided.

### **Program Goals and Development**

Keeping these concepts in mind, a program, Healthy Early Literacy Program, (HELP) was developed for a group of students (10 students in grades K-2) who were identified with language delays in accordance with the guidelines set forth through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Specifically, the students who participated in the HELP program were part of a larger school program, Language Development Program, that was uniquely designed to provide instruction to students who demonstrated mild to moderate language delays without deficits in intellectual functioning. Similarly, the students were targeted by their teachers as at-risk for failure on state mandated testing due to the language delays. Thus, the purpose and focus of this very spe-

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cialized program was to provide the students with an intensive language remediation and enrichment program which not only provided assistance with their language delays, but enhanced their potential on state mandated testing as well.

Keeping these general program concepts in mind, the goal for HELP was to create and implement a very specific program that would link language development with reading instruction in such a way that the special education teacher would meet the unique needs of this population within the classroom setting (not a pull-out program of language therapy by the speech language pathologist).

After in depth and careful discussions with a team of school and district literacy coaches as well as speech pathologists and special educations teachers, a daily hour long reading and language development supplemental program was developed. However, the process for program development was not easy. More specifically, the team met weekly for six months to discuss the potential components of the program, discuss literature that would support the program and discuss materials and/or activities that should be included in the program.

The theoretical rationale for many of the program components was primarily related to the works of Johnson, Johnson and Schlichting; Beck and McKeown; and Louisa C. Moats and Marie Clay. Together, these works captured the essence of the program goals and provided a framework for program development as well.

In addition to establishing theoretical underpinnings for the program, members of the development team also attended professional development sessions on Response to

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Intervention (RTI), Understanding by Design (UBD), and Differentiated Instruction (DI). The purpose of attending these specific professional development sessions was to make sure all team members were using the same “language”. In other words, it was felt that all team members needed to attend professional development workshops together so that they could develop a program that would be acceptable to all professionals and professions involved in the discussions. Ultimately, the team developed a program that was not only provided during the school day but was implemented daily, in the afternoon, so that students were able to participate in the standard literacy block during the morning. Thus, the team developed the program so that all students participating in the program were included in the standard reading and writing literacy block as well as the Healthy Early Literacy Program (HELP).

### **Program Objectives**

There were 7 specific objectives for the program. The objectives for the program were determined by team discussions, reviews of current literature and best teaching practices for language development and early reading development. Again, the works of the theorists previously mentioned helped define the program objectives.

These included:

- mastery of age appropriate concepts about print (obtained from Marie Clay- appendix A)
- naming and recognizing the letters of the alphabet
- correctly forming lower case letters of the alphabet
- mastery of consonant sounds
- mastery of high frequency special words presented in context

- utilization of learning strategies to obtain meaning from print
- introduction to word families and spelling patterns (appendix B- linked to the works of Beck & McKeown, 2002).

The objectives of the program were met through a daily half hour intensive literacy plan and a half hour intensive language development plan.

The intensive literacy half hour included three activities for 10 minutes each. The activities included:

- working with words and sounds
- authentic reading
- writing a reaction.

All three activities were centered around a special word list which focused on 64 sets of words and word families (appendix B). This structured word list was developed to provide students with the opportunity to learn a variety of word decoding strategies utilized by fluent readers. In other words, words that were selected represented diverse patterns and combinations allowing students to become confident with various strategies for word recognition. Additionally, the word list was generated by the research of Beck and McKeown who suggested that a person’s vocabulary can be grouped into three tiers. For the purpose of this program, it was decided to use the first tier for vocabulary development which included commonly used and understood words that students would encounter frequently.

Specifically, the goals for Working with Words and Sounds included:

- Attending to print detail
- Applying visual cues to recognize letters

- Developing knowledge of consonant sounds
- Recognizing and being able to read common word family vocabulary
- Identifying letters
- Rhyming

The specific goals for the Authentic Reading and Writing components included many Concepts about Print established through the works of Marie Clay (Appendix A)

- developing a sight vocabulary
- tracking and matching the spoken word with the written word
- understanding that print contains a message
- understanding directional movement and being able to read from left to right using return sweeps
- learning strategies to apply to oral reading

**This program allows students to remain in the general literacy block in the morning and does not operate as a pull-out program**

(During this specific activity, the teacher would rewrite the sentence on sentence strips and cut it apart for students to reinforce text reconstruction and new vocabulary on a daily basis).

The language development half hour included 30 minute language development activities which focused on using songs to promote language development. The team believed that songs would promote language development by focusing on the rhymes and other sound patterns that are necessary for students to make the connection between oral language and written language. Specifically, because rhyming is a prominent characteristic of many songs, it was thought that singing and listening to songs would help students attune to the phonemic nature of spoken language. It was further thought that songs that engage students in the active manipulation of the sounds in words would be most effective in attuning students to the sound structure of language. Specifically, after

The authentic reading activities included:

- reviewing previous books and introducing a new book
- developing an awareness of meaning, structure, and visual clues to decode text
- using the strategy of stretching a word for decoding
- asking the questions: Does it sound right?, Does it look right? And Does it make sense?

The authentic writing activity included:

- writing a reaction to the text by writing a sentence in a response journal.

listening to songs, students were asked to perform a variety of activities with the words in the songs. The seven categories of word play established by Johnson, Johnson, and Schlichting (2004) were used as the basis for program development. Specifically, the team used the concepts of onomastics, expressions, figures of speech, word associations, word formations, word manipulations and ambiguities to provide a springboard for a multitude of activities for this part of the program. For example, students were asked to:

- hunt for things in the song (words that rhyme, words that begin with a certain letter or sound)

- 
- identify words that belong to a certain category or group of words
  - insert missing phrases in a song
  - supply new words to a song
  - add and delete phrases in a song
  - change names in a song
  - dictate new lyrics that fit the song's repetitive pattern.

The songs and activities were again related to the sets of 64 words and word families that had been specifically designed for the intensive literacy half hour. In other words, the students were exposed to the same set of words and word families in both half hour sessions. Connecting the half hour sessions with the same sets of words was critical to these students because it was through this connection that they were likely able to make the vital connection between oral and written language that they were missing.

Although this program was new to the school this year, it was felt that all 10 students who have participated in this program have already increased their connection between oral and written language. Anecdotal records and Curriculum Based Measures (CBM) primarily in the areas of phonemic awareness and vocabulary development suggested that these particular students very likely have an increased awareness between oral and written language throughout the day. Thus, it is strongly posited that students who were participating in the program clearly have transferred the knowledge into their daily learning experiences thus far. Ultimately then, it is felt that their instructional opportunities for language and literacy connections have substantially increased.

It is clear that students identified with language delays may benefit from this unique program designed to meet their very specific needs within the classroom setting and spe-

cial education teachers looking for additional instructional strategies for this population are strongly encouraged to follow the format provided in this program. More specifically, because this program allows students to remain in the general literacy block in the morning and does not operate as a pull-out program, HELP may now become the program of choice for elementary schools subscribing to policies of Inclusion and Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

### **Final Thoughts**

Language is embedded in everything teachers do with students throughout the day and the teacher's role is to provide a language rich environment with opportunities to explore and play with the rhythmical and lyrical qualities of language and to celebrate the sounds, feel, texture and meaning of words. Whether reading, writing, listening or speaking, students should experience written and oral language as an integrated, vital part of their curriculum. As educators, our goals should be to enrich and expand competency in language use and to develop within students an awareness of written language—"what can be said can be written", "what can be written can be read".

Learning to read is a lengthy and difficult process for many students who are experiencing reading difficulties. Thus, success in learning to read is based in large part on developing language and literacy-related skills indicated in this program. It is only when students understand this connection that the doors to reading and writing truly begin to open.

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## Appendix A: Concepts About Print

### **Book Concepts**

1. Front of book
2. Back of book
3. The title

### **Reading Concepts**

4. The text
5. Words one-to-one

### **Directionality Concepts**

6. Where to begin reading the story
7. Direction in which to read  
(Left to right)
8. Where to go next at the end of a line

### **Concepts of Letter and Word**

8. First word on the page
9. Last word on the page
10. One word/two words
11. First letter in a word
12. Last letter in a word
13. One letter/Two letters
14. Names three letters on a page

### **Punctuation Marks**

15. Capital letter
16. Small letter
17. A period
18. A question mark
19. An exclamation mark
20. A comma
21. Quotation mark
22. Question mark

(Adapted from *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*, Marie M. Clay)

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## Appendix B: Special Words List

1. 1.Student's Name	27. there	57. could- should, would
2. I	28. are	58. good- hood
3. a	29. did- hid, lid, kid	59. little
4. is-his	30. fun- bun, run, sun	60. don't
5. it- bit, fit, hit, mit, pit, sit, lit	31. get- bet, wet, jet, pet, set, let, vet, net, met	61. ake- bake, lake, take, make, fake, rake, cake
6. in- win, bin, fin, pin, tin, sin	32. not- dot, lot, hot, pot, got	62. night- light, tight, might, fight, bright, right
7. ink- wink, sink, rink, mink, pink, drink, blink	33. will- fill, dill, still, hill, pill	63. all- ball, call, wall, tall, mall, fall, hall
8. am- bam, ham, ram Pam, jam, Sam	34. you	64. old- gold, sold, fold, hold, mold
9. at- bat, cat, fat, hat, mat, pat, rat, sat, that	35. said	
10. as- has	36. was	
11. an- can, fan, man, pan, tan, van, ran	37. or- for	
12. and- band, land, sand, hand	38. but- cut, nut, shut	
13. an- Don	39. they	
14. ox- box, fox	40. of	
15. og- log, hog	41. with	
16. up- pup	42. one	
17. go- so, no	43. her	
18. my- by, cry, fly, shy, spy, why, dry, try, fry	44. what	
19. we- me, be, she, he	45. him- Jim, Kim, rim, Tim	
20. to- do	46. out	
21. the	47. some- come	
22. see-bee	48. day- pay, stay, play, lay, may, gray, say, way	
23. like- bike, hike, Mike	49. have	
24. ride- side, wide, hide, tide	50. your	
25. look- book, cook, took, hook	51. Mother- other, brother, another	
26. this	52. then- hen, pen, den, ten, men, when	
	53. thing- wing, sing	
	54. from	
	55. had- dad, mad, pad, sad, lad, bad	
	56. want	