

DOMAIN 5: COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE, AND LITERACY

INTRODUCTION

Communication, language, and literacy are recognized as essential for all individuals to function in all societies. Acquisition of language and literacy skills is a complex process during which, over the course of only a few years, children learn the meaning and structure of words, how to use words to convey meaning, and how to understand and use printed materials. Language plays a central role in the child's ability to build relationships as they share meaning with others. Skills for speaking and writing, and listening and reading are key components. In acquiring language, children gain the ability to articulate ideas and feelings, share them with others, and respond to the ideas and actions of other people.

RATIONALE

When language is acquired, an incredibly complex and powerful system is at the child's fingertips. The ability to communicate effectively through oral language, the written word, and alternate means (especially for children with speech, language, and hearing disabilities) is essential for a broad range of activities that characterize daily living. To participate in a broad range of daily activities, children need the ability to communicate effectively through oral language, the written word, creative expression, and a variety of other means.

Language is a mediator of social competence. Children use language as a tool to express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas to others; and to receive, understand, and interpret communications from other people.

Children acquire language skills in the context of a culture. No matter which language is being learned (i.e. English, American Sign Language, Spanish, or other languages); the vital role of children's opportunities to practice those languages cannot be neglected. Language is fundamentally embedded in children's everyday relationships and experiences. Parents, primary caregivers, and teachers play a critical role in facilitating young children's language and literacy development by providing exposure to language and print-rich environments, interactions, and opportunities.

GENERAL DEFINITION

The *Idaho Early Learning eGuidelines* define communication, language development, and literacy (reading and writing) skills as separate components in order to highlight the essential aspects of each. These three components are inextricably interrelated. The development of oral language forms the foundation for early literacy development, just as the ability to communicate early in life impacts the development of vocabulary and speech.

COMMUNICATION

Communication includes making meaning of what is being communicated by others and communicating ideas to others. Children communicate before mastering symbolic language. Their "communicative competence" is dependent upon a complex set of skills including, but not limited to, awareness of the social conventions of language usage and gesture; and the ability to listen, to understand, and to follow verbal conversation. An important element in communication is *social referencing*, the look exchanged between child and caregiver to "check in." It conveys the child's desire to know if the caregiver approves of an action or situation. It is the child seeking

reassurance, and perhaps testing the limits. The caregiver's reaction, either by words or gesture, completes the communication exchange and sets up the next actions. A smile and nod, or an admonition of, "Stop!" or "No!" or "Let me help you," conveys meaning to the child in the social context.

Development of communication skills requires an understanding of the social context within which communication occurs, knowledge of the goals of the interaction, and the elements of emotion in communication. Children learn a variety of styles of communication and ways of expressing emotions that are determined by the specific social setting; whether it is in the home, at preschool, on the playground, a cultural event, or at a store.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Language is the acquisition of linguistic forms and procedures, social rules, and customs for expressing and interpreting thoughts, feelings, and ideas. This knowledge of language has three key aspects: content (vocabulary and meaning), form (grammatical structure or syntax), and use (function). As children learn the sound system, the meaning of words, and the rules of form and grammar, they begin to use language constructively in social situations.

LITERACY

Literacy, as defined in the *Idaho Early Learning eGuidelines*, includes using language, symbols, and images in a variety of forms to read, write, listen, speak, represent, observe, and think critically about ideas. Emergent literacy refers to skills and behaviors that are precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing. Emergent literacy appears in the early years of life, and includes visual expression, oral language, emergent reading, print awareness, and writing processes.

SUPPORTING INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES, LANGUAGE, AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Children learn words and forms of language to express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. They learn language to meet personal and social objectives as determined by the community and culture where they live and develop.

Millions of young children in the United States speak a language other than English in their homes. Children benefit cognitively from learning two or more languages. The ability to communicate in more than one language supports children's cognitive flexibility and awareness of words as symbols.

Children learn second languages in two ways. They either acquire two or more languages at the same time, or they learn a second language after mastering the "home language" (i.e. first language learned and primary language used at home).

Children, who follow the path to dual language learning by simultaneously learning more than one language, are said to be bilingual as a first language. Children who learn two languages from birth operate with two separate language systems. It is typical that they may mix words from the two languages in the same sentence for a short time.

For children who follow the path to dual language learning through sequential learning of more than one language, competence in the home language can be supported while the child learns a second language. Rather than focusing on one language over another, the child can acquire both languages with support for achieving growth and fluency in both. Some children go through a "silent period" when learning a second or third language. Parents, educators, and caregivers can continue using both languages as they talk with children and give them time to speak in the newer language when they are ready. When their home language is actively supported and

valued, children will learn English or another language faster. Given the growing number of young children in Idaho whose home language is not English, the *eGuidelines* provide indicators and strategies to support the development of children's home language while helping children acquire beginning proficiency in English.

Children's communication, language, and literacy may be impacted by visual, hearing, neurological, or motor disabilities. While it takes children months to acquire aspects of language, it may take other children considerably longer. Delays in language development may indicate that a child has a hearing loss or developmental delay or disorder. Early diagnosis and intervention for language delays are critically important.