

Early Literacy Promotion in the Digital Age



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KEYWORDS

- Early literacy • Poverty • Digital media • Reading • Primary care
- Health supervision • Anticipatory guidance

KEY POINTS

- School readiness and educational success is strongly determined by early exposure to print and socioeconomic milieu.
- Early literacy promotion is a key avenue for clinicians to positively influence child development, parenting interactions, and intentional skill building in both child and caregiver.
- Quality children's literature, dialogic reading, and careful support of nurturing relationships in a child's environment are key elements to success.
- Digital media remains an increasingly popular yet not-well-researched exposure starting at younger and younger ages, with a lack of consensus as to how best to advise parents.

The better index of disadvantage for a child is not family income, but how often the child is read to.

—Nicholas Kristof¹

The nation's leading health researchers and public health agencies, not to mention national leaders in economics and national security, have reached consensus on the most cost-effective social factor promoting the nation's health and economic vitality: the quality of early childhood environments before school entry.^{2,3} Profound health effects across the life course are strongly and independently associated with home-based exposures during infancy and early childhood, both the negative effects of toxic stress and adverse childhood events as well as the positive and moderating effects of prosocial environments. For pediatric primary care, however, important questions remain. What can the general pediatrician do? What does the pediatrician need to know about these early childhood exposures? What can the pediatrician do to

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influence those determinants? What are the implications in the context of expanding income inequality and increasingly early exposure to digital media?

The topic of emergent literacy skills in children has evolved significantly in recent years and has become recognized as not only a vital component of a child's development and early learning but also a marker for other environmental influences, including parent-child engagement. However, that same period has also brought many new questions and challenges with it. How does one ensure that young children living in poverty build literacy skills appropriately so they begin school with skill sets comparable with other children? Across all income groups, how can one advise families well about other forms of media, including interactive digital experiences?

EARLY LITERACY AS A SOCIAL DETERMINANT OF HEALTH

In the United States, more than 1 in 4 children enter kindergarten with poor early literacy skills. These children are not only more likely to live in resource-poor households but also more likely to live in literacy-poor households, among the 17% of children who are not read to on a regular basis.⁴ Such disparities in early educational exposures are strongly linked to another dismal fact that has persisted over the past half century: 1 in 4 US children lives in poverty.⁵ The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has begun to address child poverty as a key and trenchant determinant of child health.⁶ School readiness is strongly associated with the socioeconomic gradient.⁷ The language milieu children in lower socioeconomic circumstances inhabit is poorer, with a nearly 30-million-word gap between children being raised in poverty and their more affluent peers (Table 1).

Early childhood literacy is one of the proposed mechanisms by which poverty acts as a profound social determinant of child health outcomes, not only to the development of physical health but also to that of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional health. During infancy and early childhood, the physiology of a child in poverty faces toxic stress, defined as prolonged, unremitting stress with limited presence of socioemotional buffering relationships, mediated by disordered cortisol responses. This type of stress is much higher than the typical, normative stress experienced by children in more affluent families.⁸ As a result of this toxic stress and associated adverse childhood events, children in poverty are more susceptible to illness and less able to perform adequately in educational settings, where they are more often affected by poor executive functioning, poor short-term memory, anxiety, and other behavioral health conditions.⁹ Fig. 1 shows the sizable difference in reading scores in schools that have a higher percentage of children living in poverty.

Table 1		
The difference between low SES and high SES children by age 3 years with respect to vocabulary size, IQ, child-directed utterances, encouragements, and discouragements		
1 by Age 3 y	Welfare	Professionals
Vocabulary size	525 words	1100 words
IQ	79	117
Utterances	178/h	487/h
Encouragements	75,000	500,000
Discouragements	200,000	80,000

Abbreviations: IQ, intelligence quotient; SES, socioeconomic status.

From Hart B, Risley TR. Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children. Baltimore: Paul H Brookes Publishing; 1995.

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