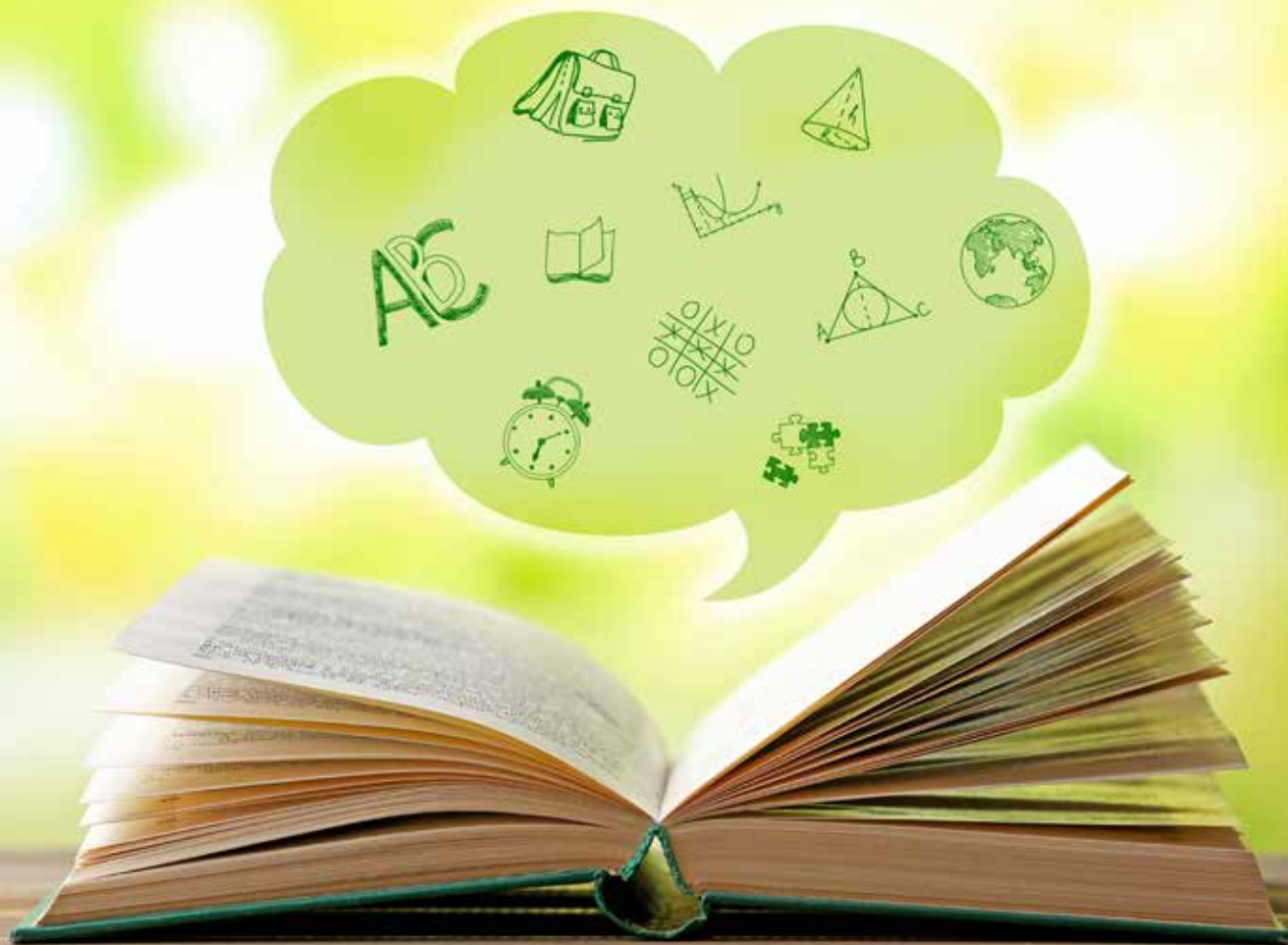


# LITERACY



By **Clare Erasmus**



**A**s a parent, educator, author and researcher, literacy is highly regarded. There are several definitions of literacy around, some broader than others, but at the crux of them is the acknowledgement that literacy refers to and encompasses oral, visual and written communication, that can be both socially, culturally and politically constructed. A loose definition is the ability to read and write. As an educator and advocate for literacy development, I often get asked how parents can better support their children and their learning. This article aims to highlight practical ideas at home to support your child's literacy development journey.

Being literate is a skill that not only empowers individuals into the world of knowledge and information but also engages individuals in connecting to others, allowing them to communicate meaningfully in a variety of ways.

### Parents, Children and Literacy

Parents are a child's first teacher and are usually always keen to support and be involved in developing and enhancing children's cognitive development. Parental support is excellent news because what we know is that parents play an undeniably crucial role in developing their child's early literacy skills (Lopez 2013).

Research conducted by Weigel, Matein and Bennett (2016) found that mothers who were actively involved in building their preschoolers' knowledge developed literacy-rich homes. The children of these mothers manifested greater interest in reading than children whose mothers believed that schools were primarily responsible for educating their children. Parental involvement in early literacy is the number one predictor of early literacy success (Burton 2013).

Research on parent involvement in early literacy has highlighted that for children to be successful with early literacy skills, they need to be given more specific skills while they are reading (Roberts, Jurgens & Nurchinal 2005). Parental involvement in children's learning positively affects a child's performance at school in a variety of ways outside of literacy too (Clark 2007):

- It increases higher academic achievement
- Better school attendance
- Fewer behavioural problems
- Greater cognitive competence
- Greater problem solving
- Better school enjoyment

Thinking of literacy as a set of mechanical cogs working together to achieve a final result is a metaphoric way to understanding how to embrace

literacy - connecting reading, writing and oral language (speaking and listening). Writing, reading, and oral language have reciprocal relationships. In the early years, reading and writing skills are primarily dependent on oral language. Later, reading and writing extend oral language.

### Ways to enhance literacy skills at home:

#### ◆ Read to and with children

Children need to hear other people reading for several reasons. First, it models for them how reading should sound in terms of reading pace, intonation, expression and the acknowledgement of the punctuation in texts. It stimulates their imagination and enhances their listening and comprehension skills. It also demonstrates that you value reading to your child. During reading sessions, children can ask questions, clarify their understandings, predict and ask about unknown vocabulary.

#### ◆ Look at the title and make predictions

When reading with your child at home, look at the front cover and ask your child what he or she predicts the story will be about. Ask your child if he/she can relate to the image on the page. For example, if the picture has a child skipping through the rain, ask if he/she remembers skipping through the rain. How did it make them feel, and why? Discussions such as these are opportunities to discuss social-emotional responses and to deepen your child's knowledge of emotions and emotional intelligence.

#### ◆ Visual cues

Looking at pictures in books is an entirely appropriate way to conjure up excitement about the story and anticipation about what may transpire in the story. Teaching early readers to read involves lots of visual cues to help children to problem solve and decode words. Visual clues include looking at the beginning and ending sounds as well as images on the page.

#### ◆ Journaling

A fun way to engage your child in writing is to get them to journal exciting events, holidays or family visits to particular places. Adding pictures, like photographs or hand-drawn illustrations, to support their writing makes it both meaningful and empowering for them.

#### ◆ Make resources available

Making sure that you have resources around your home to support and encourage your child being literate is essential. First and foremost, make your home 'print rich', which means having books at home (a good variety) and words visible. Label things around your child's bedroom; have pencils, coloured pencils and paper readily available for your children to express their ideas and thoughts on paper. Children are innately creative and curious about their world. Give them as many opportunities to create booklets, both fiction and non-fiction. Show your sense of value by reading their creations and sharing them with family and friends. For early learners, magnetic letters on the fridge are a great way to learn about letters, words and sentences.

#### ◆ Take advantage of authentic writing opportunities

When writing is original, it becomes meaningful; when it becomes meaningful, the value is realised and enhanced. Here are some ideas around creating authentic writing experiences for your child:

- Write lists - their birthday party lists, grocery lists, beginning of the year stationery lists
- Recording important events on calendars (coordinating literacy and numeracy skills)
- Writing invitations
- Sending out birthday cards and thank you cards
- Goals for the year - creating vision boards
- Journals
- Recipes - creating recipes or writing recipes they have tried



- Write songs that express their feelings or experiences
- Creating family comics
- Persuasive writing to convince parents to change their minds about certain things

#### ◆ Poetry and Nursery Rhymes

Children love poetry and rhymes. Not only is it fun and engaging, but there is much skill gained in rhyme and rhythm. Through poetry, children learn about figurative language features, such as metaphors, onomatopoeia and personification. Educational research points out that rhythm and rhyme play a significant role in the acquisition of early literacy skills. Sharpening a child's listening skills, through verse, children can almost predict the next words to follow.

- ◆ Create a warm and unpressured time to read

School-going children usually bring books home from school each day that are level appropriate. These are usually books that children have read at school. Re-reading these books with you after school is extremely valuable in strengthening your child's reading skills. Create an environment where children feel comfortable to read, one where they

feel supported when they make mistakes, and they can enjoy sharing their reading with you. If you notice your child is tired, then switch it up by reading one page, and he/she reads the other.

#### ◆ Summarise

Asking your child to summarise what he/she has read succinctly is a valuable skill. Encourage your child to summarise the texts they read in his/her own words, highlighting the key points or events that took place. By asking questions, parents can show their interest in their child's literacy journey.

#### ◆ Vocabulary

There is no doubt that as your child progresses in literacy, he/she will discover new vocabulary. It is essential for children to pay attention to new words and to seek out the meaning of unknown words as this is a way to grow his/her bank of vocabulary. Referring to a dictionary is a helpful skill.

#### ◆ Puppets, Poems and Plays

Children enjoy playing with puppets, creating plays and shows. Create opportunities for children to stand up before small and large audiences where

he or she can recite a poem, present dialogues or participate in fun plays at home. Being able to present to an audience develops confidence in children and their oral abilities.

This article has pointed to why literacy needs to be supported outside of school and has provided several practical ideas for parents to implement at home with their children. Literacy is an important tool to empower individuals in their lives. It affects their lives in many ways.

*As Kofi Annan once quoted,*

**“ Literacy is, along with education in general, a basic human right.... Literacy is, finally, the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realize his or her full potential. ”** PALMARY

#### About the Author

*Clare is an author and educator, living locally in Christchurch. She has written books for both educators and children. She has a Bachelor of Arts (Sociology and Legal Studies), Bachelor of Arts Honours (Sociology), Masters of Social Science, Bachelor of Education, Certificates in both TEFL and TESOL and is currently undertaking her PhD in Education.*