

Excerpts from **School Literacy: The Real ABCs**

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Learning does not necessarily occur in schools or as a result of instruction; it occurs in the split-second initiatives that children take with others as they try to attend, engage, interact, communicate, and reason.

Before children can learn reading, writing, and arithmetic, they must possess "school literacy"--that is, they need to know *how to learn*. School literacy comprises four elements: attending and focusing, establishing positive relationships, communicating, and being able to observe and monitor oneself. Most infants and children (regardless of their individual rates of learning) have the potential to go through a series of stages in which they acquire these critical abilities.

Attending and Focusing

The ability to *attend and focus* is the first requirement for being able to learn. It is the ability to take in information with the senses and to focus attention on that information without becoming overstimulated, bored, or confused.

An important element of a child's ability to attend is his or her unique style of processing information, a style that is defined by both constitutional and maturational factors. For example, a child who doesn't listen to the teacher may be overreactive to a high-pitched voice and find the teacher's tones upsetting. Alternatively, a different child may not be able to follow the sequence of visual images that the teacher creates on the chalkboard. The unique perceptual characteristics of each child must be considered in relation to each of the four basic abilities that constitute school literacy.

If a child is overreactive to sound and has a hard time following the sequence of sounds or words, how should we expect him or her to react to a busy, noisy classroom? How should we expect children who are sensitive to touch and need large amounts of space around them to react to "circle time"? And how should we expect the active learner who needs to move around to react to hours of sitting still?

Relating to Other People

The second basic of school literacy is the ability to *relate to other people* in a warm, trusting way. This capacity is fundamental to any learning relationship. Students who are aloof, withdrawn, suspicious, angry, or expecting to be humiliated will not be able to trust or even to "hear" what the teacher is saying. Such students may decide that they can rely only on their own thoughts or experiences. Distrustful of adults and other children, they effectively march to their own drummers. Lost in their own sensations, feelings, and thoughts, they become further and further alienated from external reality and the world of logic and objectivity. Of course, most students do not follow this extreme pattern. Nonetheless, few observers would disagree that most early learning occurs as a part of relationships and that some degree of trust in these relationships is essential.

Communicating With Others

The third basic ability, *communication*, builds on the first two. One must first attend and relate to another person before one can communicate. Communication is a complex process, unfolding in a sequence of stages.

Gestural Communication

Information is first shared with gestures--a smile, a frown, or a pointing finger; later, words are employed. Complex emotional themes are also first communicated through simple gestures. Consider how nods of the head, smiles, and verbal tones let a toddler know of approval and acceptance or rejection and annoyance. Children who skip this level of gestural communication (or whose learning at this stage is dysfunctional) lack a basic sense of the workings of human relationships. Children who have a hard time interpreting other children's gestures tend to have difficulty relating to peers.

Interestingly, the ability to express and read gestural cues is well developed by the age of 18 months. At this age, children can comprehend many of life's most important emotional patterns, such as limits, acceptance or rejection, safety or danger, and approval or disapproval--all from facial expressions, movements, and sounds. Children with good receptive and expressive gestural abilities who enter school at age 5 will generally be cooperative and attentive, picking up the nonverbal cues and figuring out what to do in class. But children who don't have a sense of these nonverbal basics, although they may understand many words, may at times behave in seemingly random, unfocused fashion. They may, for example, misread the teacher's overwhelmed look and think, "Boy, I'm exciting her."

Two-way communication, of which the gestural level is the first of a number of levels, can be thought of as opening and closing circles of communication. Amy points to the teacher's desk; with a curious look the teacher silently asks, "What do you want?" Amy can then "close the circle of communication" by pointing more clearly to the teacher's sparkling key chain. Alternatively, she can fail to close the circle if she does not respond to the teacher's gesture but instead looks out the window while twirling her hair or jumping up and down. Once the first step in communication succeeds, more "circles" can be added, but without that first connection, further logical communication--and, later on, logical thinking--is impossible. The only way for a child to learn to open and close circles of communication is through practice with adults or other children in situations involving an active exchange of gestures and ideas. It doesn't matter whether a word or a simple gesture is being communicated between teacher and child or between child and child. Reciprocity is the key. Two-way communication, along with relating and attending, is therefore the foundation for all the higher levels in the learning process.

Communication With Symbols

A child who has learned simple, gestural two-way communication can move on to the next level: communication with symbols--that is, with ideas. Fantasy, creative thought, and problem-solving abilities all depend on the use of symbols. Initially, symbols are employed quite simply: a child who says, "I want that pencil," instead of just grabbing it, is using symbols. "I want" replaces the child's impulse or desire; "the pencil" represents the object of the desire. The use of symbols to convey intent is quite different from the purely descriptive use (i.e., "That's a chair").

Later, symbols can be used to represent more sophisticated concepts and as part of more complex emotional interactions.

Logical Ideas

Eventually, a third level of communication is reached, in which logical, reality-based ideas emerge. The child is now able to make connections between different categories of ideas and thoughts: "I am angry today because you didn't come and play kickball with me," or "I'm frustrated because I can't learn the math," or "If I take away two apples from four apples, I will have two apples left," or "In the story, David took the thorn out of his dog's paw, and therefore the dog was happy and David felt good." The ability to know the difference between fantasy and reality, to understand the consequences of one's actions, as well as to solve basic math problems or to comprehend a story is an expression and application of the ability to make connections between ideas.

Self-Observation

An even higher level of communication and the final basic skill is the ability not only to communicate logically with another person but to communicate with oneself at the same time via *self-observation*. Children must not only perform a task; they must be able to observe themselves in the process. Children who have achieved this sophisticated ability monitor and evaluate their own thoughts and actions and use the data to make adjustments. For example, such a child, when asked to color a worksheet, might say, "Gee, I'm coloring inside the lines sometimes and outside the lines sometimes. If I do it this way, the color stays inside the lines, and if I do it that way, I color on the lines. I will try to do it the first way." A child who is at risk is more likely to daydream while coloring and to experience nothing more than a session of busywork, or, worse, confusion.

The Real ABCs

When children communicate their ideas, get a response from someone else, and then build on that response, they begin to form the elaborate categories of ideas that support logical thinking and understanding. This interactive learning requires a lot of feedback, particularly in the early years of life. As students age, they can wait a week or a month for a response (to a term paper, for example), but in the early years immediate feedback on a child's use of gestures, logic, and ideas is essential.

We often make the mistake of thinking that children are learning when they seem busy at their desks. Only if children are able to observe themselves and experiment on their own are they learning by themselves. An easy way to think about those early steps in the learning process is as "the real ABCs." *A* equals attention, *B* equals better relationships, and *C* equals communication, including gestural, symbolic, and self-observing capacities.