ALA Editions purchases fund advocacy, awareness, and accreditation programs for library professionals worldwide.
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For JX, who will always be my baby corn.

—KM

For my babies, Ashleigh and Sean, who are almost all grown up, and Ava, Maya, and Henry, who have years to go.

—CMK
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WEB Flannelboard patterns, craft patterns, and worksheets are available online at alaeditions.org/webextras.

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Developing Brains, Developing Literacy

Whether you’ve been presenting baby storytimes for fifteen years or fifteen minutes, you probably already know that the first five years of life are key for brain development and early literacy. Many public libraries have instituted baby and toddler programs, but finding exciting materials for baby storytime that go beyond Mother Goose can be a challenge. Enter Baby Storytime Magic—a treasure trove of new and exciting ideas for baby programs featuring age-appropriate book recommendations, fingerplays, bounces, flannelboards, American Sign Language activities, and more, all of which revolve around themes from a baby’s world. Throughout the chapters that follow, you will find these items arranged by type of material, with a thematic index to provide maximum access. Each entry is accompanied by a literacy bit, a suggested script for explaining to caregivers the benefits of the activity and how to use it at home. Visit www.alaeditions.org/webextras to download full-sized patterns for all flannelboards and stick puppets.

Involving Caregivers in Baby Storytimes

Baby storytimes differ from storytimes for other age groups because the target audience is not the child, but the caregiver. After all, some of the tiny creatures who enter our storytime rooms cannot see farther than a foot or so—just far enough to see the loving grown-ups who tend to their needs. Learning in early childhood happens in the
context of relationships, and so it is our job to foster those relationships in our programs, providing caregivers with tools and techniques to develop language and literacy in their charges. As Sue McLeaf Nespeca (1994) puts it, “The baby attends so the adult can practice!”

And many adults need the practice, because the interactions that build a foundation for literacy do not always come naturally. Caregivers may not know how to interact over a picture book or share a fingerplay with a baby, or may not realize why those interactions are important building blocks to language and not simply distractions to keep baby busy. The most effective baby storytime presenters share early literacy information in an engaging way and model fingerplays, songs, and books to use with babies so that caregivers can pick up and extend these techniques in everyday interactions. That is why we have included the literacy bits with each entry in this book. Each bit is designed to be shared before or after the entry it is paired with, in order to give adults concrete examples of early literacy information in action.

In your programs, encourage adult-child interaction by inviting caregivers to sit on the floor or on a chair with the children. Build in interactions through tickle rhymes, choral reading, or fingerplays. Sometimes you may need to direct this interaction explicitly—for example, by asking caregivers to pull children onto their laps as you begin lap bounces.

Be careful, however, not to lecture caregivers about what they should or shouldn’t be doing. Parents in particular are under enough pressure in our society, after all, and if they made it to a storytime, they’ve already shown that they value early literacy enough to attend! Provide resources, modeling, and enthusiasm for literacy development—but not judgments.

Baby's Developing Brain

Because the brain is still developing in the first five years of life, this period is vital for a child’s cognitive, emotional, and social development. The pathways between the brain’s nerve cells, called synapses, develop during this time. One thousand trillion synapses form in the first eight months alone! A child’s experiences during this time have a huge impact; the synapses that receive the most stimulation become stronger, while those with little or no stimulation are pruned away. The brain adapts to the input it receives, and around twelve months of age, the pruning process speeds up, deleting connections that have not received repeated stimulation. This means that by providing young children with engaging, quality language and communication experiences in the first year, we lay the foundation for later learning and literacy.

Many wonderful books focus extensively on the stages of early childhood development; see appendix A for recommended titles. Here we offer a condensed list of developmental milestones to give storytime programmers a broad overview of basic child development. Children may vary widely depending on their environment, family history, and special needs. Individual children may also develop at different rates in different areas.

**Birth to Three Months**

Babies at this age are just beginning to discover the world. They can see faces in their immediate line of vision, but no farther away. In fact, babies are attracted to faces, and their most important task at this age is to develop a trusting relationship with the primary caregiver. Babies are drawn to the sound of the human voice and will generally go quiet at the sound of a familiar one. They will coo and gurgle, but do not yet understand that sounds have meaning. By the end of this period, babies typically can hold up their heads and enjoy playing with their hands and fingers. They will also copy simple movements and facial expressions, laying the foundation for communication and social awareness. At this stage, the brain is forming mental connections quickly and is organized to take in all sounds.

**Three to Six Months**

Babies begin to interact with the world more by turning toward sounds, smiling, laughing, crying to express emotion, and babbling with single sounds, such as “buh” or “mah.” They begin to develop hand-eye coordination (for example, by seeing a toy and then reaching for it). They can now see and track things in their environment and can lift their heads unsupported. They recognize familiar people by sight and like looking in mirrors and looking at faces. By the end of this stage, most babies can pass objects from one hand to the other and can roll from front to back or back to front.

**Six to Nine Months**

Babies begin to string sounds together in their babbling (for example, “mamamama” instead of just “mah”) and become interested in copying sounds and gestures made by others. In this stage, babies start to become aware that something exists even if it is hidden, leading to interest in games like peekaboo. At just eight months of age, babies begin to understand words or signs out of their usual context. By this time, most babies can also sit up independently, recognize familiar faces and sounds, and touch, shake, or drop objects. Most babies will begin to crawl during this time and will pull themselves up to a standing position around the end of this period.

**Nine to Twelve Months**

At this age, babies may interact with others more—putting out an arm or leg to help with dressing, making sounds to get attention, or even speaking simple words. A baby’s individual personality begins to show, and he or she may show preference for certain toys, books, or people. At this age, babies can respond to simple requests. Their babbling begins to sound more like spoken language, even if the words are still incomprehensible. They continue to explore things in their environment in new ways, perhaps...
by throwing or banging. Most babies take their first steps and say their first word or two during this time.

Twelve to Eighteen Months

At this age, babies interact with others even more and often become curious about other children. They like to hand things to other people, show affection, and point, sign, or talk. At this age, children may begin to explore their environment alone but generally still like to have a caregiver close by. By the age of eighteen months, most children can say several individual words and use them to communicate basic needs and wants and can also follow simple, one-step commands such as “Give me the book.”

Eighteen Months to Two Years

Children develop more independence and become very interested in other children. They do not quite know how to play with other children yet, so they may play beside them instead. They love to copy older children and adults. At this age, children may assert their growing sense of independence by becoming defiant. By age two, most children can say simple two- to four-word sentences, follow two-part directions, and point to objects or pictures when named. They begin to sort shapes and colors and may engage in pretend play. They may also begin to use one hand more than the other. Physically, children at this age develop very quickly, learning how to kick a ball, run, climb, walk up and down stairs, and stand on tiptoe.

Key Early Literacy Skills

When it comes to early literacy, the most important point to understand (and to emphasize to the caregivers in your programs) is this: early literacy does not mean early reading! Perhaps a more accurate term would be pre-literacy. Early literacy refers to the skills developed in early interactions with caregivers that lay the foundation for language and literacy. Multiple studies show that children who receive direct teaching of reading and writing before they are developmentally ready for it experience higher levels of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and other learning disabilities (Johnson 2007). In contrast, children who are exposed to a healthy variety of experiences with language and books are more likely to develop key skills that will help them with literacy, communication, and school readiness.

As adults, we often take for granted the many small skills and bits of knowledge that make up successful reading: the facts that books have covers and contain pictures and text, that books must be held right side up for reading, that print runs from left to right and top to bottom (at least in Western culture!), and that written and spoken language are different from each other (Odean 2003). By illuminating these building blocks for caregivers, we give them the tools to introduce and reinforce early literacy concepts in their interactions with the children in their care.
The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development identifies six key early literacy skills:

1. **Print motivation** refers to a child’s interest in printed materials of all kinds: books, signs, labels, name tags, magazines, and so forth. As children develop the understanding that words provide information, stories, and communication, they become more motivated to learn to read and understand the messages the words convey.

2. **Phonological awareness** is the ability to hear and manipulate smaller sounds within words. When babies babble in single or multiple syllables, they are experimenting with the sounds they hear others making. These sounds are the building blocks of speech. Phonological awareness also involves learning to hear how words are similar to and different from one another (for example, by understanding that two words rhyme because their end sounds are the same).

3. **Vocabulary** means knowing and understanding (and eventually using) words. The more children interact with caring adults, the more their vocabularies will develop. The best vocabulary development happens in context—for example, when a caregiver describes what a child is experiencing. A caregiver who says, “Look, the doggie is panting! His tongue is hanging out of his mouth and he is breathing heavily,” gives his or her child a rich language experience by labeling what the child is seeing and introducing new words in a concrete context, which builds stronger brain connections than introducing words in isolation. Reading books is a vital way to develop vocabulary because books generally contain more varied and specific vocabulary than caregivers and children use in their day-to-day lives.

4. **Narrative skills** concern the ability to describe things and tell stories. Through listening to books and stories, children internalize sequencing, story structure, and the idea that a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

5. **Print awareness** encompasses the nitty-gritty skills of reading, such as noticing print, knowing how to hold a book and turn pages, and knowing how to follow words on a page. Again, babies begin to internalize these skills with repeated exposure to reading stories with caregivers.

6. **Letter knowledge** means knowing the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they make in spoken English. Though fluent readers often forget it, there is no natural connection between the written letters and their corresponding sounds in English or any other language; there is no logical reason why the letter b represents the sound at the beginning of the word bake—except that it does. This means that learning the letters and the sounds that go with them must happen through exposure and repetition (Ghoting and Martin-Diaz 2005).
Putting It All Together

When you as a programmer have a basic understanding of developmental stages, you can use that information not only to select and present the best materials in your baby storytimes but also to help caregivers understand their children’s development and how best to foster it. When you make explicit connections between rhymes and books and the early literacy skills they support, you give caregivers the tools to enhance babies’ development every day, not just on library day!
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