



Why Do We Need a Planned Language Approach?

[[I]t has become clear that the process of learning to read does not begin when a child enters school, but instead starts very early . . . (McCardle, Scarborough, & Catts, 2001, p. 230).



Language competency is crucial to children’s school success. **Planned Language Approach (PLA)** ensures that decisions about program policies, curriculum, and instruction are based on key language development research, prenatal to adult. PLA also takes into consideration the vast cultural and linguistic diversity of children in the United States, as reflected in Early Head Start and Head Start enrollments.

- Language development begins before birth. Children exposed to more than one language *in utero* separate the two languages from each other and actively process both (Byers-Heinlein, Burns, & Werker, 2010).
- “Infants and toddlers can grow rapidly in features of linguistic and communicative competence like phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and grammar . . . each of which has been shown to predict school readiness and later school achievement” (Aber, 2012, p. 8).
- Language development, specifically the level of vocabulary development between birth and age three, significantly correlates with reading ability and school achievement in third grade. Equally important, children’s outcomes are supported through the amount and types of language input that their environments provide (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Research provides a clear picture of the multiple aspects of early language development that support children’s ability to learn to read. Research has also identified the specific predictors of future reading ability and how they influence school success.

- Learning to read is fundamental to school success. It is also a profound developmental challenge for children. Many children are at risk for reading difficulties and failure (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).
- Reading proficiency in third grade has a significant relationship to high school graduation and dropout rates (Hernández, 2011).
- Of fourth graders in public schools, *66 percent* were reading *below proficient levels in 2013* (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).
- There are large differences in how family environments support children’s literacy development (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). There are also significant differences among ethnic groups in how frequently families read to their children (Yarosz & Barnett, 2001).
- The major challenge children face in the early elementary grades is learning to read. Currently, this challenge is unsuccessfully met by a very high proportion of the children Head Start is meant to serve (Snow & Pérez, 2004).

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