

The Investor's Case: Early Language & Literacy



What the Science and Research Tell Us...

- In our first years of life, our brains form more than [1 million new neural connections](#) per second. We experience a “language explosion” between 18 and 24 months, when our neural circuits for communication are exceptionally malleable.
- Our brain pathways for language and literacy [become significantly less flexible](#) as we age. It’s far more effective to influence a child’s brain architecture in its first 5 years than to rewire its circuitry in adulthood.
- Conversations between caregivers and children fuel the brain’s biological growth. The quality of these exchanges is even more important than the number of words children hear.

Why It Matters...

- Children’s exposure to talking and reading by age 3 predicts their academic ability in elementary school and beyond.
- Disparities emerge early and grow with time. Gaps in children’s [language processing and vocabulary](#) appear before 18 months. By kindergarten, the average middle-class child has engaged in 1,700 hours of [picture book reading](#), while a typical low-income child has experienced only 25.
- 3rd grade reading ability is often considered the [most important predictor](#) of high school graduation and career attainment. And yet, only 1/3 of children in the U.S. achieve 3rd grade reading proficiency every year.
- The odds are disproportionately [stacked against](#) children growing up in dual-language households, who represent more than 1 in 3 U.S. children today.

What “Good” Would Look Like...

- Our goal is to ensure that all children develop healthy language and literacy skills from birth. For babies, this means turning their heads towards sounds and beginning to babble; for toddlers, asking questions and reciting words to favorite books; and for preschoolers, inventing stories and sounding out simple words.
- Language-rich environments offer daily talking, singing, and reading activities, adult responsiveness to children’s needs and interests, and access to developmentally and culturally relevant reading materials.
- To help parents and educators create language-rich environments, we must strengthen their capacity to scaffold children’s learning and reduce financial stress and other barriers.

Strategies for Scaled Impact...

Low-cost, accessible, tech-enabled tools that facilitate parent, caregiver, & educator engagement across diverse settings

Strategies that leverage big data and AI to personalize literacy development, including for children with learning differences

Place-based approaches that meet families and communities where they are (e.g., doctor’s office, grocery store)

Dig Deeper: Early Language & Literacy

Key Terms

- **Scaffolding:** temporary supports that adults provide to help children develop skills and grow increasingly independent overtime
- **Conversational turn:** a responsive back-and-forth exchange between a child and an adult that helps build healthy brain architecture; also known as “serve and return”
- **Malleability:** the brain’s ability to change and adapt in response to experience; also called “plasticity”

Key Research Studies

- Hart & Risley’s discovery of the 30 million word gap
- How early language experience strengthens processing and builds vocabulary
- The long-term benefits of bilingualism for working memory and cognitive flexibility
- How reading promotes healthy parent-child relationships

Field Leaders

- Campaign for Grade Level Reading mobilizes cross-sector constituencies to boost reading proficiency in low-income students
- Reach Out and Read incorporates books into pediatric care and encourages families to read aloud
- First Book provides new books and learning materials to children in need
- Teaching Strategies creates digital resources to promote preschool literacy

Promising Innovators

- FIND offers tech-enabled literacy coaching and assessment for parents, and LENA Grow does the same for child care and early ed providers
- Platforms like Caribu and Háblame Bebé reduce geographic and linguistic barriers to reading
- Waterford UPSTART and Every Child Reads use behavioral and learning sciences to promote sustainable at-home reading routines
- Visit our Venture Index for more innovators in this space!

Key Funders

- Campaign for Grade Level Reading
- William Penn Foundation’s Strong Start, Strong Readers
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- *To learn more, check out this national database of early language & literacy funders!*

Sample Metrics & Tools

METRICS

- Vocabulary size & growth
- Ability to speak clearly with conventional grammar
- Recognition of relationships between letters & sounds at kindergarten entry

ASSESSMENT TOOLS

- Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3)
- NIH Toolbox Oral Reading Test (ORT) and Picture Vocabulary Test (PVT)

Want to learn more? Check out Promise’s full resource library!
Feedback on our materials? Share your thoughts with us!