

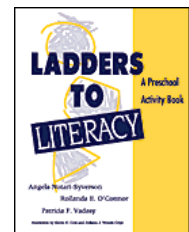
Florida Center for Reading Research

Ladders to Literacy: A Preschool Activity Book

What is Ladders to Literacy?

Ladders to Literacy is a preschool program that focuses on developing early language and literacy skills within the daily routine of the existing curriculum. Its underlying premise is that children functioning at different levels and coming from diverse cultural backgrounds can benefit from this program by scaffolding the instruction. The program is designed to teach print awareness, metalinguistic awareness and oral language skills to typically developing children as well as children with disabilities or those at risk of reading failure. The *Ladders to Literacy* manual contains all the components of the program, including its theoretical framework, lesson plans, assessment checklists, and home activities for parents and children.

There are approximately 20 activities in each of the three units of focus: Print awareness, metalinguistic awareness (i.e., phonological awareness), and oral language. By mid-year, the teacher is expected to have included half of the activities in each area, although the actual implementation depends on the teacher's educational philosophy, classroom routines, and resources. For the teacher to become familiar with the instructional strategies, the program suggests choosing activities that can be included easily in the current classroom routines and that require a minimum of preparation time. Some activities require more preparation time and can be included weekly, monthly, or on a one-time basis. Most of the activities are designed for large groups and follow a similar format.



Each unit begins with the theory and research that support the early literacy skills of print awareness, metalinguistic awareness, and oral language. Within each activity are the main purpose, list of materials, description of the activity, and three examples of how to vary the teacher-child interaction. The teachers use the program's observational checklist to determine what tasks and teaching strategies in the lesson are developmentally appropriate for each child. With this information, teachers scaffold the instruction by applying more open-ended questioning and feedback to children who need less support and more explicit instruction to children in need of more support. To illustrate, during a lesson on learning letter sounds, children who need less support may be asked to identify a letter and the sound it makes whereas a child in need of more support may be asked to repeat the word and sound from the teacher's model. For each activity the teacher is expected to provide all the materials, select the instructional sequence, and determine the level of support to give each child.

The observational checklist also is used to monitor progress, although the evidence for such support is based more on intuition than empirical evidence. Additional assessments that offer a valid and reliable method to screen and monitor progress are not provided with this program.

How is *Ladders to Literacy* aligned with Current Reading Research?

Ladders to Literacy addresses the three components critical to the development of early language and pre-reading skills: Oral language, print knowledge, and phonological awareness. The activities lack a systematic approach in that they can be implemented in any order and any time of year. Furthermore, without a scope and sequence or a specified plan for daily instruction, it is possible for some components to not be included.

The oral language section contains a collection of activities that provide conversational topics intended to facilitate language development. Using storybooks, pictures, objects, and films, teachers lead the children in labeling and describing objects or events by using questions intended to expand on the child's utterances. This approach may be effective in some contexts and situations; however, the large-group setting offers fewer opportunities for reciprocal conversations. Current research suggests that the "quality of conversation in the classroom and the amount of one-on-one or small-group interactions that children engaged in were highly related to language measures" (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998, p.148). With the exception of one lesson in which children create a "word web," there is no direct teaching of vocabulary in the program. To promote vocabulary, teachers help children guess the meaning of a word by giving them verbal and visual cues; however, no framework exists for integrating play and content learning centers, storybook reading, and field trips to promote expressive and receptive vocabulary.

Print knowledge activities are designed to help children construct meaning by answering the teacher's questions about environmental print, conventions of print, letter names, and letter sounds. In addition to books, teachers use newspapers, menus, recipes, signs, messages, and writing experiences as learning tools. Within the print awareness section, most of the activities provide opportunities to create messages and label pictures or charts, although there is one activity for learning the letters in one's name by using cutout letters and one activity for storybook reading. All activities in the curriculum typically include multiple tasks. For example, in the description of the "Shared Storybook Reading" activity, some of the 14 different objectives include: identifying the title, recalling important issues, predicting outcomes, dramatizing the story, and reading along in the children's little books. The complexity of this lesson is compounded by the support strategies that focus on letter names and sounds instead of the objectives of the activity. Multiple tasks or objectives within an activity assume that teachers have the knowledge to isolate the skills being taught as well as to know what skills need to be pre-taught.

The unit on metalinguistic awareness offers a broader, more comprehensive awareness of language in general to address the skills of children functioning at lower levels. This aspect of the unit includes activities on appropriate grammatical structures; however, phonological awareness activities are the primary focus of this unit. Using a play format in each lesson, the children have opportunities to identify environmental sounds, repeat words or phrases in songs and nursery rhymes, manipulate phonemes in games of alliteration, and blend and segment words. Often, these skills are combined in one lesson. For example, in the "Syllable Puzzle" activity, children draw and cut-up picture cards for multisyllabic words, blend and segment words, and change syllables or the initial phoneme to make up new words. For the lesson on teaching letter sounds, the most common sound of the letter is introduced each week by having children create word lists and name pictures of objects beginning

with the new letter. Additional instruction could, but does not, include beginning with continuous sounds before introducing the more difficult stop sounds and reviewing previously taught letters. At the end of each lesson is a home link for family involvement. The sample activity is designed to reinforce the skills taught at school although the parent's guide recommends selecting the activity according to what will fit into their daily schedule. Parents likely need more guidance on the selection of activities to be effective in supporting skills developed at school.

Professional development for *Ladders to Literacy* consists of a one- or two-day on-site seminar that focuses on how to use the curriculum in an inclusive preschool classroom. The training is presented by one of the authors, Dr. Notari-Syverson, and is available for an extra cost by contacting Brookes Publishing Company. Additional assistance is available via phone or electronic mail.

Research Support for Ladders to Literacy

The *Ladders to Literacy Activity Book* was published in 1998 after five years of developing and field-testing the curriculum in a variety of preschool programs. Available research on this program comes from three research studies conducted by the authors of the program.

Two of these studies compared groups of kindergarten children who received *Ladders to Literacy* to a group of children who received only the core curriculum (Notari-Syverson, O'Connor, & Vadasy, 1996, 1998). Although some data suggested significant differences on the children's language and literacy outcomes after exposure to the curriculum, the design of the studies (i.e., the lack of an appropriate control group for one subset of children) makes it impossible to interpret the reported gains as the result of exposure to the *Ladders to Literacy* curriculum. These studies used the kindergarten version of the program; therefore, it is unclear if the test results are applicable to children using the preschool program.

In a one-year study conducted within the five-year development project, preschool children who received *Ladders to Literacy* were compared to those who did not receive *Ladders to Literacy* (Notari-Syverson, O'Connor, & Vadasy, 1997). In this study, no significant differences on outcome measures were reported. Consequently, at present there is no unambiguous evidence supporting the efficacy of the *Ladders to Literacy* curriculum.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *Ladders to Literacy*:

- The instructional game format is engaging for children.
- The program can be implemented in a variety of settings for children with and without disabilities.
- Teacher's manual offers background knowledge in early literacy skills involving oral language, phonological awareness, and print awareness.
- Differentiated instruction is facilitated through the scaffolding or teaching strategies provided in each lesson.

Weaknesses of *Ladders to Literacy*:

- There are no current data to support the effectiveness of the program.
- There are no data concerning the reliability and validity of the assessments used in the program.

- A framework for integrating the activities into the core curriculum and a systematic approach to implementing all activities is lacking.
- There is no cumulative review of skills built into the program.

Which Florida districts have schools that implement Ladders to Literacy?

321-633-1000	Brevard	Manatee	941-708-8770
954-765-6271	Broward	Monroe	305-293-1400
352-726-1931	Citrus	Putman	386-329-0510
772-564-3150	Indian	Seminole	407-320-0006

For More Information

<http://www.brookespublishing.com/store/books/notari-3173/>

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Notari-Syverson, A. (1999). *Supporting early literacy development in young children with disabilities: A comprehensive interactive emergent literacy curriculum for preschoolers*. (Final report to the U.S. Department of Education). Washington Research Institute, Seattle, Washington.

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