

# Right from the start: Literacy and families <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Article available upon request <sup>[2]</sup>

Excerpts from the articles:

Summer is often a time when many of us look forward to reading a growing stack of books, whether in the back yard, on vacation or at a cottage. As you read this issue of Transition, bear in mind how privileged you are. Recent research indicates that roughly 40% of Canadians lack the reading and writing skills needed to succeed in today's economy. More shocking is that about 90% of seniors lack the skills necessary to deal with the health information they need. The links between literacy and poverty are well-known, as are those between literacy and health. Further, these high numbers threaten the foundations of democracy, founded as it is on an educated and informed public. The first article, 'How Literacy Supports Families', is an interview with Donald G. Jamieson of the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (CLLRNet). Understanding how literacy supports families requires us to recognize that literacy is fundamental for people to develop their full potential in our society. To see the real impact of literacy, we need only look at those who lack literacy skills. Their lives tend to be much more marginal, more troubled and more dependent. Dr. Jamieson discusses a number of the factors that low literacy brings, from dependence on social assistance to criminal activity. And since families are foundational social units, these impacts are felt in families. The opposite is also true, that families with higher literacy skills do far better at and come closer to reaching their potential. Carole Peterson, an expert on building the precursors to literacy, has written a useful article for anyone whose lives include the joy of young children, especially parents. She discusses a number of ways of interacting with young children that greatly enhance their later ability to break the code for reading, and then to move from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." First and foremost, children need to hear words. So parents need to talk to their children right from the start because hearing words builds children's vocabulary, as well as teaches language structures. More importantly, Peterson has developed an innovative approach to engaging young children in talk by building their ability to tell stories about events in their own lives from as early as two years old. She includes a helpful list of ways to foster children's narrative skills. The third pillar for this issue is an article on best-practices in family literacy programs across Canada, co-authored by Janet Shively, a long-time expert in family literacy based in Nova Scotia, and Maureen Sanders, Executive Director of the Centre for Family Literacy in Edmonton. They have identified five statements of principle that underlie excellence in family literacy programs, illustrating each with examples and quotes that show these principles in action. These start with the strengths of families in their communities and extend to the need for professional training and assessment to ensure that programs are successful in their goals. At the end of this section, I have included a page of resources for those readers who would like to learn more about literacy, including research, advocacy, databases, national programs and resources for practice. Information about what is going on in your community can be accessed through the databases and several of the other resources listed.

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** curricula and pedagogy <sup>[4]</sup>

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