



The Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists

**Information Brief for the
Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (CLLRNet)
National Strategy for Early Literacy Initiative**

Submitted by

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Phonological awareness is a skill that is well recognized and documented as elementary to reading acquisition. Banks and Bernthal define phonological awareness as “an umbrella term that refers to one’s ability to identify the discrete linguistic units (words, syllables, phones) that the speech signal comprises”. Children need to have reached an awareness level that sounds make up syllables and words, and words make up sentences in order to begin to attach meaning to symbols relating to sounds to begin to read. Many children pick up these skills naturally through nursery rhymes, stories and preschool songs heavy with rhyming content. Various tests have been developed to measure children’s skills in this area and there is also a variety of programs and materials to help children develop phonological awareness skills. Speech-language pathologists have foundational knowledge and training in the language, phonology, literacy link. They have frequently developed programs and worked on phonological awareness with preschool and school aged children who present with language and phonological and articulation delays and disorders, but also with kindergarten children as a preventative measure. Establishing early intervention programs in pre-literacy skills for Canadian children as part of the preschool and elementary curriculum would help to improve the oral and written literacy skills of our children and youth.

The Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists (CASLPA) supports and empowers our members to maximize the communication and hearing potential of

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the people of Canada. Our vision is to be the national voice and recognized resource for speech-language pathology and audiology in Canada.

Our 5,400 members work with adult and paediatric clients with communication challenges and support those who interact with them regularly such, as parents, caregivers, teachers and other professionals in a variety of settings. Thirty-one percent (31%) of the 1, 231 speech-language pathology (S-LP) respondents to the 2008 CASLPA membership survey reported that they worked for a school board, the highest single reported work setting. Service from speech-language pathologists is not mandated by school boards and because of high student/S-LP ratios, speech-language pathologists often have to be creative in the delivery of their services, ranging from consultation only to direct services. Speech-language pathologists could be a valuable resource to school curriculum and literacy teams. Speech-language pathologists have been encouraged by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) in their 2001 position statement “to play a critical and direct role in the development of literacy for children and adolescents with communication disorders, including those with severe or multiple disabilities. S-LPs also make a contribution to the literacy efforts of a school district or community on behalf of other children and adolescents.” Audiologists can also be employed in an educational setting and work not only with children with hearing loss other auditory difficulties, but also in making recommendations for optimal acoustic environments for learning.

Early childhood and early intervention communication programs have become more common in Canada, spurred over the past 10 years with research on neural development, the importance of the parent-child bond and critical periods for learning, published by Mustard and McCain in 1999. Much of the important work of these early identification programs is preventative, not just for children at risk for communication problems but for all children and

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families. Speech-language pathologists could be a valuable resource for curriculum planning for pan-Canadian early childhood education programs to ensure that phonological training is included. Universal infant screening programs are being established in many provinces, and this will enable early detection of hearing loss and subsequent measures of intervention to avoid barriers to language and literacy development.

As Canada is rich with language diversity and cultures, efforts must be made to have phonological training materials and parent training materials available for preschool children in many languages so that children will enter the school system with an awareness of rhyme, sound and rhythm.

The following are recommendations from the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists to the National Strategy for Early Literacy:

- That a national databank of phonological awareness programs and materials be developed so that preschool and elementary educators will have access to a broad variety of choice of materials in various languages.
- That speech-language pathologists be included and/or consulted by teams developing curriculum for early childhood education programs to ensure that phonological awareness, language and phonological development training is included. One possible option is a partnership between CASLPA and the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCCF) to develop best practices statements.
- That literacy teams be established in each school board to be responsible for gathering and disseminating information on literacy tests, programs, materials and current research, presenting workshops, and tracking changes in literacy scores. Core to this concept is having the expertise of a speech-language pathologist on the team as they have the unique

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background and skills in language and literacy development. The collective efforts of school boards to have teams of experts dedicated to literacy development and training could have a profound effect on improving literacy skills of children and youth.

- That phonological awareness materials and tips for parents be developed in various languages to stress the first language/literacy link. The tip sheet could be disseminated through health units, cultural specific community organizations, preschool programs and maternity centres. Such information accessed by parents could reinforce the parent/child bond, first language usage and cultural validation and lead to early acquisition of preliteracy awareness and skills.
- That audiologists be involved in the development of guidelines for an educational team approach to the identification, assessment and management of children with hearing loss, auditory neuropathy and auditory processing disorders.
- That research documenting the outcomes of children at risk for literacy development, including children with speech and language difficulties, hearing loss and auditory processing disorders be encouraged and supported in order to develop instructional literacy practices based on the best available evidence.

References:

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