Health Literacy

Anya had an ear infection and her family took her to the emergency room. They were nervous and upset. The doctor spoke quickly and they had a hard time understanding him. When the family got home, they were not sure how to follow instructions for her medications and care. They struggled to fill out insurance forms and make sense of their bills. What could have made their experience easier?

It is likely that Anya’s parents struggled because they are lacking in health literacy. The term health literacy means being able to find necessary health information and services. It also means being able to understand and use appropriate health resources. Parents and guardians should know enough about health to be confident in caring for themselves and their children.

Almost half of all adults in a national study had difficulty understanding “everyday” health information, such as patient forms, test results, and health care provider instructions. For North Carolinians with limited reading skills or limited English proficiency (LEP), low health literacy is a huge obstacle. They may not understand what causes diseases and how to treat diseases. Most health related materials are written with western culture in mind, at a tenth grade level or higher.

Health literacy requires basic math skills to understand what health indicators such as body mass index (BMI) levels mean, and more complex skills to figure out costs and insurance plans. Having health insurance allows families to have better access to consistent health care. They can build trusting relationships with a health care provider over time. Consistent care from trusted health care providers usually leads to better health outcomes.

When a person has low health literacy they often experience
- little or no preventive health care
- more hospital visits and higher health care costs
- poor health and higher death rates.

Children depend on their families to help them stay healthy. Families depend on health professionals to help make that possible. Using plain language helps families increase their health literacy.

Within the childcare setting, early educators can watch for signs of confusion and unmet health care needs. They can share health resources that include pictures and language that is easy to understand. They can refer families to local health care providers. Open communication builds families’ confidence. When families need help, educators have the opportunity to go over the resources and answer questions that come up.

Families help early educators by sharing specific knowledge about their child’s health. If a child has asthma, the family may be able to help staff learn to care for their child. This way, educators will feel more at ease when following the child’s health plan. They may also be more comfortable when other children have similar health plans.

Health information can be difficult for anyone to understand. As families make efforts to become more literate about health issues, early educators can take small steps to assist them.
“My teddy bear ate too many chips at the teddy bears’ picnic. Her tummy hurts.” says Sam. “You better take her to the doctor.” Ida suggests. Three year old Ida understands that doctors help people who are sick. Ida is becoming literate about health. What can early educators do to help build Ida’s health literacy?

Nutrition and Physical Activity Many early educators start with basic health information, such as healthy eating habits and active physical play. Go to www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers for downloadable resources, additional activities, and information.

- Introduce children to all five food groups using the Healthy Eating for Preschoolers poster.
- Encourage children to try new foods. Let children help prepare their own snacks.
- Ask children to identify the food groups on their plates. Be sure to talk about milk as well. Focus on the general idea of a balanced diet rather than specific amounts.
- Identify the idea of hungry and full. Start children with small portions. They can come back for seconds if still hungry. Encourage them to stop eating when they are full.
- Add foods from all the food groups to the kitchen area in dramatic play. Children can become chefs and prepare delicious and nutritious meals for their friends, dolls, and stuffed animals. Extend the activity by having placemats with choosemyplate graphic on them. This reminds children to serve balanced meals.
- Serve water at snack time and limit sugary drink options.
- Plan a minimum of 1 hour each day of active play. Activities should be vigorous enough that the children breathe faster. Dancing, running, playing catch, riding trikes, skipping, and hopping are examples. Active play can be done indoors and outdoors.

Health Hygiene Teach children about how germs spread and cause illness. Help children learn what to do to avoid getting sick.

- Teach and reinforce proper hygiene habits such as:
  - wash hands properly and when needed
  - not to eat each other’s food
  - dispose of leftovers carefully
  - throw away food that has fallen on the floor
  - wipe runny noses and then wash hands
  - cough and sneeze into their elbows
  - brush teeth at least twice a day
  - tell an adult when they feel sick or get hurt
- Talk with children about what they do each day to stay healthy, such as washing hands, brushing teeth, eating fruits and vegetables, etc.
- Put up posters to show the correct steps and times for handwashing. Talk about the steps as children learn them. The posters serve as reminders for everyone, including staff, to wash their hands.
- Suggest that children talk with their families about the health tips they learn in child care. This type of sharing gives children confidence in themselves and what they have learned.

Being aware of health issues from an early age helps children become healthy adults. Teaching children to take care of themselves is a big step in building health literacy.

Health Professionals Visiting the doctor, dentist or other health care professional may be a new or scary experience for some children. Early educators can help introduce children to health professionals and what they do. By adding props in dramatic play and block areas they allow children a safe place to explore what they think will happen at their visits to the doctor or dentist. Adding books about visits to health professionals and the hospital help children see what to expect.

- Read My Friend the Doctor by Joanna Cole. Take the opportunity to discuss visiting the doctor with the children during circle time. Ask them ‘Who has been to the doctor? Why were you there? What was it like?’ This way, children who are anxious can learn about health care visits from their peers. Focus on the idea that children visit the doctor to stay healthy. Come up with questions children can ask the doctor or nurse on their visit.
Do to Build Health Literacy?

- There are many other health related professions besides “doctor” that can inspire children’s play. Add dress up clothes that look like different health professionals. Improvise scenes where children act as nurses, nutritionists, x-ray technicians, etc.
- Turn the dramatic play area into a dentist office by adding plastic dental tools, white coats, big teeth, teeth mirrors and toothbrushes. Have children act out going to the dentist. This type of game helps children work through their fears.
- Include health professionals and ambulances to the accessories in the block area. Have children work together to build a hospital out of blocks or other materials. The ambulance can bring injured people to the hospital.
- Invite a health professional to speak with the children about what they do. Have the speaker encourage children to ask questions when they visit their health care professional. Ask the speaker to bring some of the tools he or she uses, such as stethoscopes, otoscopes, reflex hammer, or blood pressure cuffs. These objects will be more familiar when children visit a health professional.

Host a parent meeting and invite a health professional to talk with families about their child’s health care visit. Encourage families to feel free to ask their health professional questions until they are fully understand what is being said. This is critical when their child needs treatment for a health condition.

Health Resources
Early educators are encouraged by the national standards 1.6.0.1-1.6.0.3 found in Caring for Our Children to work with a child care health consultant (CCHC). CCHCs are health care professionals, most often nurses and health educators. They have expert information to offer based on their knowledge of child health and their experience with families. CCHCs can help provide guidance as directors establish and review health policies, help facilities manage and prevent infectious diseases, support facilities as they carry out individual health care plans for children with special health care needs, offer health education to staff and families, connect families to community health resources to work with a child care health consultant (CCHC). CCHCs are health care professionals, most often nurses and health educators. They have expert information to offer based on their knowledge of child health and their experience with families. CCHCs can help provide guidance as directors establish and review health policies, help facilities manage and prevent infectious diseases, support facilities as they carry out individual health care plans for children with special health care needs, offer health education to staff and families, connect families to community health resources.

To find a CCHC, visit www.healthychildcarenc.org or call the NC Child Care Health and Safety Resource Center at 800-367-2229.

Web resources provide a wealth of health information that is understandable for educators and families.

- www.healthychildren.org has health and safety information from the American Academy of Pediatrics.
- www.kidshealth.org is part of The Nemours Foundation’s Center for Children’s Health Media. It has information in English and Spanish. It provides families with perspective, advice, and comfort about a wide range of physical, emotional, and behavioral issues that affect children and teens in language that readers can understand and use.
- www.healthychildcarenc.org has health and safety information for North Carolina’s early care and education community. It includes links to other useful websites.
- www.nchealthystart.org/public/childhealth has information and applications in English and Spanish for free or low cost children’s health insurance. People are more likely to have regular health care when they have health insurance.

Early education programs that have lending libraries for families may want to include these health books in their library.

- What To Do If Your Child Gets Sick by Gloria G. Mayer and Ann Kuklierus, is available in English and Spanish. It is written in easy to understand language. It describes more than 50 common childhood health problems, what can be done for them at home, and when to call a healthcare provider.
- Caring for Your Baby and Young Child, 5th Edition: Birth to Age 5 by the American Academy of Pediatrics, covers basic care through age 5. It outlines the signs of physical and emotional growth, and includes a health encyclopedia.

The following children’s books help children become more health literate.

- Franklin Goes to the Hospital by Paulette Bourgeois
- Germs Are Not for Sharing (Board Book) by Elizabeth Verdick
- It’s Check-Up Time, Elmo! (Sesame Street) by Sarah Albee
- Super Blake and the Cavity Monster by Tracy Bickhaus
- The Busy Body Book: A Kid’s Guide to Fitness by Lizzie Rockwell
- What to Expect When You Go to the Dentist by Heidi Murkoff

References for pages 1-3:


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May is Better Hearing and Speech Month, established by the American Speech – Language – Hearing Association (ASHA). More than 5 million children in the U.S. have a disorder that affects their ability to communicate. By becoming familiar with the signs of communication disorders adults can help detect problems early on. With early intervention, children with communication disorders can develop to their full potential and live healthy, productive lives.

**Speech and language** problems can present at birth or be caused by illness and injury.

They include many difficulties, such as:
- stuttering
- trouble saying certain words or sounds
- slow development of vocabulary, concepts and grammar
- voice disorders

Most children who struggle with speech and language can be helped. Most problems can either be eliminated or children can learn strategies to help them communicate. ASHA certified speech pathologists help find the right treatment or technology.

**Hearing loss** is another communication disorder. Sometimes it is present at birth. Other times it happens due to chronic ear infections or exposure to loud noise. The earlier the hearing loss occurs, the more it will affect the child's development.

Signs that a child has hearing loss include when the child:
- does not always respond to sound
- has delayed language and speech development
- does not follow directions or respond when called
- often misunderstands and wants things repeated

When early educators notice these signs in a child, they should share their observations with the family. The family can discuss their concerns with the child’s health care professional or see a certified audiologist.
Especially for Families

Please copy and send home.

What Does That Mean?

“These instructions that came with my child’s medicine are confusing! How often is ‘as needed?’” “Strep throat is contagious? The child care center says Ricardo has to stay home!” “Jimmy is just cutting teeth. But he’s so hot and cranky. Should I take him to the ER?” “The nurse was talking so fast that I can’t remember what she said.” At some point, most families experience the need for additional health information and guidance. Decisions about daily care and medical emergencies can arise. More than the ability to read about health issues, health literacy is the ability to find, understand, and use health information.

Being health literate helps families
- talk about health problems with health care professionals
- ask questions until they understand needed health information
- read and understand health insurance forms, informed consent, and public assistance applications
- read prescription bottles and understand warning labels about side effects or complications from medications
- know when to seek treatment for their child
- understand how to follow treatment directions
- manage healthy lifestyle decisions for their child

Diagnosis and treatment information for sick children can be overwhelming. Having a trusted friend or family member present to listen and record information can be helpful. These people can also ask questions about information that is unclear or confusing. They can write down the key points to remember. Families who understand what the health care professional is saying can make better choices for their children.

When there are language barriers additional resources are needed. Interpreters who are trained to share medical information can help the family understand health issues. They can also help health care professionals understand the family’s concerns. They can translate and interpret content and information in brochures, documents, and consent forms. Sharing information in plain language, using pictures, and allowing plenty of time for questions, offer people with low literacy a way to access the information. Families who understand the information that has been shared are aware of the potential benefits and consequences of health related decisions.

In addition, families might need help finding online resources that are trustworthy. The article Evaluating Online Health Information, in the March/April, 2011 edition of Healthy Childcare®, offers families useful tips: www.healthychild.net/HealthandYou.php?article_id=554. The health care professional can help determine whether the information applies to the family’s specific health concern.

Resources for Families
- Health care professionals can be a trusted and valuable resource for families. Working with one health care professional or practice over time helps establish a trusting relationship. The family members and the doctor, nurse and other staff get to know each other. They learn to listen carefully and ask questions to clarify information. Knowing the family’s health history can help families and health care professionals decide on procedures that the family can follow to treat an illness or injury.

- Other parents, family and friends can share valuable experiences and resources. Families can discuss any suggestions they receive with their health care professionals. Together they can see how the ideas and referrals can benefit the child and family.

- Books, magazines and online resources may provide more information than a family can use. It is sometimes hard to find the information that is useful. Ask your health care professional to recommend resources. Family and friends may also have suggestions.

Reference:
Fostering Emotional Literacy in Young Children

What is emotional literacy?
Emotional literacy is the ability to “read emotions” in one’s self and others. It means being able to identify, understand, and respond to emotions in a healthy manner. Adults are called upon to use their emotional literacy skills every day. These are the skills that help adults recognize their feelings when someone pulls out in front of them while driving or when dealing with a parent who is upset. An adult’s ability to control responses in these types of situations is based on his or her ability to read and respond to emotions – their emotional literacy.

The same is true for children. Children learn to deal with emotions at their own pace. Adults can help children begin to understand that all emotions are valid. They can focus on teaching children to identify emotions. Then they can help children learn positive ways to respond to emotions.

Why is emotional literacy important?
Research studies have found that children with emotional literacy skills are less lonely and less impulsive. They are more focused. They tend to be more successful in school and life. These children usually have fewer fights and tolerate frustration better.

Being emotionally literate helps prevent many challenging behaviors. Adults can teach children how to read emotions and how to express emotions in acceptable ways. They can help children develop a “feeling word vocabulary.” Giving each feeling a name allows children to talk about their personal experiences. When children are able to label their emotions, they are on their way to becoming emotionally competent.

What can early educators do in their classroom?
Early educators can teach children how to identify, understand, and express emotions appropriately. The following strategies will help promote emotional literacy in the young children:

Express feelings One way to help children learn to label their emotions is to model healthy emotional expression.

For example, an early educator who knocks over a pitcher of milk might say, “Oh boy, this is frustrating. I’d better take a deep breath and clean it up.” When an adult talks out loud about a feeling, children hear the word for the feeling and see how the person expresses that feeling.

Label children’s feelings Children often need to learn the words for their feelings. Early educators can provide the labels for children’s emotions. As their feeling vocabularies grow, children learn to identify feelings in themselves and others. Children experience a wide range of emotions throughout the day. Early educators support children’s emotional literacy when they pay attention to children during emotional moments and label feelings for the children. For example, a boy’s grandmother surprises him by picking him up at child care. The boy screams, “Grandma!” and runs up to hug her. The teacher says, “You look so happy and surprised that your grandma is here!” The child then connects the words “happy” and “surprised” to the feelings he is experiencing.

Play games, sing songs, and read stories with new feeling words Early educators can enhance children’s emotional literacy skills by offering activities that feature feeling words. For example a feeling check-in chart helps children pick the right facial expression for their feeling. Playing feeling bingo or feeling charades and making feeling collages help children expand their feeling vocabulary while they play. Songs such as If You’re Happy and You Know It easily adapt to any new feelings and actions children might suggest. Books and dramatic play offer opportunities to identify a variety of feelings and explore different ways to express those feelings.

To learn more about these strategies, contact your regional behavior specialist, or the statewide project manager, Smokie Brawley, at 704.376.6697 x 371, sbrawley@childcareresourcesinc.org.

Adapted by Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors from CSEFEL What Works Brief #21 www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/
Water regulates the Earth's temperature. In the human body, water regulates temperature, carries nutrients and oxygen to cells, cushions joints, removes wastes, and protects organs and tissues. To keep a body running smoothly and maintain health, drink plenty of water throughout the day. Plan activities with young children and celebrate water, water, everywhere...

**Infants:** Pour a small amount of water on a tray. Sit next to an infant and place the tray next to the infant. As the infant pats the water, talk about how it feels. Is it cold? Slippery? Create "Magic Sensory Bottles". Fill plastic bottles with distilled water, glycerin drops or small amount of baby oil, food coloring, sequins, and sparkly, plastic beads. Screw lids on tightly. Secure with glue or duct tape. Shake, rattle and roll the bottles. Point out items that move and catch the light. Supervise play closely.

**Toddlers:** Put water in individual tubs. Create air bubbles with a wire whisk. Watch the bubbles pop. Where do they go? Bubbly water is perfect for bathing baby dolls. Rub a dub, dub!

Have children use water to paint the sidewalk or side of the building. Offer sponges, paintbrushes, and rollers. Step in water and make footprints.

Place ice cubes made with drinking water in two zip-closure bags. Help children place one bag in the sun and the other in the shade. Which one melts first? Pour the water into cups for drinking.

**Preschoolers:** Give each child straws and two cups of water. Encourage them to drink the water until one cup is half full and the other cup is half empty. Do the same activity, changing the focus to counting sips of water. How many sips of water are in a cup? If children aren't counting yet have them use tally marks.

When it rains, go outside and watch the rain come down. Collect rain in containers at the end of a gutter, under a tree, and other places. Measure how many inches have fallen at each place. Are they the same?

Reuse materials, such as plastic bottles and cups, to create a “Water Wall”. Invite children to experiment with how water behaves when poured into the funnels and pipes. Watch the water cascade down in streams, drips, and flows. For more ideas and to see examples, visit: [www.letthechildrenplay.net/2011/02/planning-new-water-wall-for-water-play.html](http://www.letthechildrenplay.net/2011/02/planning-new-water-wall-for-water-play.html).

**Life’s Fluid…….Water!**

- Between 70-80% of a child's body is water.
- The human brain is 75% water; a living tree is 75% water.
- The average person can live for about one month without food. She can only survive about a week without water!
- There is always the same amount of water on Earth. The water moves around in a continuous water cycle. A drink of water today could contain molecules that dinosaurs drank!
- Most tap water contains fluoride that helps strengthen teeth and protects against cavities.

**Children's Books on Water**

**All the Water in the World**
by George Ella Lyon 2011

**Splash!**
by Roberta Grobel Intrater 2002

**The Thirsty Moose**
by David Orme 2005

**The Water Hole**
by Graeme Base 2004

**Water. Up, Down, and All Around**
by Natalie Rosinsky 2002

**References:**

Kids Health. *Why Drinking Water is the Way to Go*.

National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education. *Water & 100% Juice*.

Schiller P. *Start Smart: Building Brain Power in the Early Years*.
Summer Safety

- Keep infants 6 months of age and younger out of direct sunlight.
- Even in the shade cover infants’ skin and heads.
- Use very small amounts of sunscreen with at least SPF of 15 to exposed skin such as hands.
- Keep children well hydrated. Frequently offer drinking water to children.
- On hot and humid days, limit vigorous outdoor activity to 15 minutes at a time.

Before going out

- Check the Air Quality Index http://xapps.ncdenr.org/aq/ForecastCenter.
- Check the UV Index forecast at www.epa.gov/sunwise/uvindex.
- 30 minutes before going out apply sunscreen with at least SPF of 15.
- Plan to play outdoors before 10 AM and after 4 PM on hot days.
- Put on wide brimmed hats and lightweight long sleeved shirts and long pants.
- Put on shatter proof sunglasses with 99+% protections from UV rays of the sun.