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PROMOTING EARLY LITERACY IN A HEALTHCARE SETTING

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Introduction:

Hello! My name is Emily Cheung, and I am a first-year medical student at McMaster University. This podcast was created with Dr. Mel Lewis, a pediatrician in Edmonton, in conjunction with Peds Cases and the Canadian Pediatric Society. It aims to summarize the recent 2021 Canadian Pediatric Society (CPS) statement written by Dr. Shaw on promoting early literacy in the healthcare setting.

Objectives:

After this podcast, listeners will be able to:

1. Define early literacy and its importance in healthy development
2. List the benefits of speaking and storytelling, reading, and singing in early literacy development
3. Recommend strategies for parents and caregivers that reinforce the benefits of speaking, reading, and singing
4. Develop strategies to promote early literacy in a healthcare setting

Case Study:

Let's start with a case study to put things in context.

You are working in a community clinic. A mother, recently emigrated from the Dominican Republic, has brought her 4-month old baby girl, Maria, for a routine well-baby visit. After a discussion about the baby's feeding and growth, you casually inquire, "Have you had a chance to start reading with Maria yet?" Mom tells you that she wants her child to learn the best English possible and she tries to speak only English around her baby. However, she reveals that she is not very confident in English, and her partner is even less confident and spends much less time interacting with the baby. So, she was thinking of buying a set of educational language videos she saw advertised online and wants your opinion on it.

You wonder about a baby's ability to learn language: to speak, and read, and write. You question what strategies are effective at promoting this development. You consider how

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you might encourage parents and caregivers to engage these strategies during visits to your clinic.

Early Literacy

Early literacy, also known as emergent literacy, refers to the knowledge and attitudes that children construct about reading and writing *before* they can actually read and write. Examples of early literacy skills can include knowing how to hold a book and the appropriate way to flip pages, paying attention when being read to, or imitating actions and sounds from a story being told.

Early literacy skills are thus the building blocks for learning to read and write. In fact, these early skills can predict later literacy ability, even after factors like IQ and socioeconomic status are considered.

The impact of early literacy becomes even more significant when we look at the relationship between literacy and health. Literacy has a stronger correlation with long-term health outcomes than both occupation and income. Those with lower literacy are more likely to experience adverse outcomes, such as chronic illness and poor physical and mental health, than those with higher literacy.

Early literacy skills begin developing over the first 3 years of life. This means that literacy is an important focus for early guidance and education in parents. When advice about promoting early literacy comes from a healthcare provider, parents are more likely to follow it and use the recommended resources and practices with their children. This leads to richer and more frequent family engagement in literacy practices.

These types of family interactions are essential for young children to gain early literacy skills. The best way for learning these foundational skills is through face-to-face interaction with parents and caregivers in an environment that is caring, engaging, and full of language in all forms and variations. What that means is an environment that includes not only books, but also speaking, telling stories, and even singing with babies and children.

As we move through this podcast, you will come to appreciate how meaningful adult-child interactions with each of these different mediums of language can foster the development of critical early literacy skills.

The Benefits of Speaking and Storytelling

Let's first dive into the importance and benefits of speaking and telling stories to young children.

Everyday experience with spoken language is crucial and has an enormous impact on language and literacy development. This is true beginning even before a child is born. While in utero, an infant can hear their mother's voice and thus the language she speaks. And just a few hours after birth, a newborn baby can tell the difference between their

mother's language and other rhythmically distinct languages. This ability to discriminate between almost all sounds in all languages is typically present in every infant at birth. However, it diminishes over the first few months of life as babies begin to pay attention only to the sounds of languages they are exposed to. By the time they are 6 to 12 months old, a baby's brain has undergone physical changes that reflect their language experiences—neuronal connections that support languages a baby regularly hears are strengthened, while connections that are not regularly used are eliminated.

This refinement of the brain's capabilities establishes a foundation for further language development, allowing an infant to become a native speaker of their mother tongue. Infants exposed to more than one language will become a native speaker in all the languages they regularly hear. Learning one language provides a solid foundation for learning another, because language skills that are internalized into the architecture of the brain are transferable between languages.

Children in multilingual households may divide their time and attention between the different languages they hear at home, so they may end up hearing fewer words in each language compared to children who live in a single language household. However, when you consider all the words a child knows in each language they are learning, their vocabulary is generally the same or even larger than that of kids learning one language.

Nevertheless, growing children's vocabularies isn't solely about the time and amount of words heard, the key lies in the presence of interactive conversations. This could include speaking to each other, asking and answering questions, but it also extends beyond just speech. When a baby babbles and you respond with a smile and a hug, when a baby makes a funny gesture and you catch their eye and laugh in response – each time, you are engaging in what is called a "serve and return" interaction. This type of turn-taking not only helps foster a strong relationship between parent and child, but it also contributes to both early literacy skills and children's future language and cognitive skills.

The benefits of "serve and return" interactions are enhanced through personal storytelling. Personal storytelling involves conversing with young children about experiences you have together. When parents and young children collectively build a narrative about a shared event, it involves many social aspects of language - tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, movement. These features all help a child to understand stories better than when they are being read to. Shared storytelling also strengthens family bonds and brings an element of the child's own culture into the experience, further bolstering children's comprehension and learning.

As such, parents and caregivers should be encouraged to speak, as often and as much as possible, to their young children about shared experiences they have had in the past or will have in the future. Using repetitive phrases, interesting words, and sound effects will provide openings for children to get involved in telling parts of the story. Repeating this over and over will help children learn, internalize, and master these stories.

The Benefits of Book Sharing

Now let's talk a little about books. When it comes to reading and sharing books together, the benefits are numerous and expansive. When adults read to children frequently, it helps children learn to love reading, no matter how old they are. Moreover, shared reading promotes development in linguistic, cognitive, and socioemotional domains.

Shared reading is a predictor of language development. Research has shown that frequent shared reading between parent and child is positively associated with vocabulary and oral comprehension. This association holds true even when the language used at home is different from the language a child uses at school.

Shared reading is also arguably the best family activity for stimulating children's cognitive development. It promotes the development of cognitive skills that underlie children's ability to become aware of and manage their own learning in school.

Shared reading can also enhance prosocial behavior in children, facilitating successful interpersonal interactions later on in life.

Remarkably, young children are not the only ones who benefit from shared reading. Parents who engage in shared reading experience less maternal depression and stress, a greater sense of competence and self-esteem, and a greater responsiveness to their children.

Almost all these valuable benefits rest on reading aloud frequently with children, beginning early in life, and infusing those shared reading experiences with engaging conversation. This is where the importance of incorporating "serve and return" interactions really shine through.

To parents and caregivers, talk to your children and ask them questions while you read aloud together. Invite your children to act out what's happening in the stories or pictures. Make connections between the stories and your real lives, drawing parallels to experiences you and your children have had together. Take time to point out the pictures and laugh at the funny moments. Most importantly, enjoy the process!

Try to build these book sharing moments into your daily routine. Settling in to read bedtime stories with your child is a natural way to incorporate literacy activities into everyday life and create an opportunity for different family members to bond with your youngest children.

Finally, given today's age of technology, many wonder about the relative benefits of sharing e-books compared to print books. Although the literature surrounding this is quite nuanced, the main takeaway purports that if parents and children are engaged and actively

paying attention, sharing print books is better than e-books at promoting early literacy development and bonding between parent and child. For a more in-depth discussion, you can check out the PedsCases podcast titled “Screen Time in Young Children” where Dr. Ponti, chair of the CPS Pediatric Digital Task Force, and Dr. Jackman, a pediatrician at the Alberta Children's Hospital, discuss ebooks and share more about the impacts of screen time in young children.

The Benefits of Singing

Singing marries rhythm and rhyme, setting it against a melodious backdrop where pitches rise and fall in a pleasing way. The simple and repetitive nature of many children's songs make various aspects of language more accessible to young children, promoting the learning of new vocabulary, sentence structure, rhyming, and a sense of story. Most notably, it is the connection between pitch, highlighted by the musicality of songs, and phonological awareness, which is the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds in spoken language, that underlie the development of early language skills in young children.

When children learn to sing songs or lullabies, it helps prepare their brains for learning to read and write. They practice holding and recalling patterns of sounds from their minds. This enhances oral fluency, builds phonological memory (memory of the spoken parts of words and sentences), and phonemic awareness (the ability to hear and manipulate individual sounds in words).

What is unique about singing, and music in general, is that it places all this learning within a meaningful context. Activities that incorporate both singing and reading have been found to be motivating and relaxing, and therefore, more engaging to both parents and children. The creative and expressive nature of music facilitates active engagement in literacy promoting activities, like play and storytime.

Because of this, music serves as an incredibly accessible gateway into learning new languages. Singing not only provides a safe space and more comfortable environment for children to practice using language, but it also provides a melody that can help carry children through the challenges of new words and sentence structures as they “go with the flow” of the song.

For the parents and caregivers or children who might not enjoy read-alouds, singing songs together presents a great alternative for promoting literacy. Adults can add gestures and movements, such as dancing along or using fingers to mime actions like in the song “itsy-bitsy spider”, to create more expressive and playful opportunities to communicate.

Promoting Early Literacy in the Healthcare Setting

Having heard much about the benefits of speaking, reading, and singing with young children, you might be wondering how best to encourage parents to engage in these activities in your role as a healthcare provider.

Family-Centered Approach. A key to doing so is taking a family-centered approach, working with families and building on the strengths of each individual family, their culture, and the community around them. Take time to listen and learn how each family communicates, as well as what their expectations and goals surrounding their child's language and literacy development are.

You can then assess how comfortable a family may be to engage in different literacy promoting activities, moving the focus away from perceived deficits, like a parent's lack of confidence in the language their child uses at school, to their strengths, like a parent's mastery of their mother tongue. Daily book sharing can be encouraged in all families as it can be easily modified to fit within family routines and to create new opportunities for more parent-child interaction and relationship building. For those who feel they lack the confidence or skill to read aloud, they can be encouraged to sing, talk, and tell stories with their children. This is also an opportune moment to recognize and build on the role of other caregivers and family members, including fathers, non-breastfeeding parents, and older siblings.

As you continue to deepen your relationship with these families and their communities, broaden your view and explore how broader family networks and community groups can help support your young patients' literacy development. Be aware of what exists in the community, so you can connect families with external resources like programs at the local library, early childhood centers, or community centers for books, parent education, and more.

Integration into Daily Practice. The second essential element of literacy promotion in healthcare is its integration into every day, routine practice. One way of doing so is to create a clinical setting that is rich with language. Fill your waiting rooms or exam rooms with books, posters, writing utensils, and any other tools or games that can help promote communicative interactions between adults and children.

In terms of clinical practice, begin literacy promotion early! In visits with young families, you can promote literacy even before children are born by explaining, in clear and simple terms, how language develops and why that is important to their child's future health and development. Moreover, in routine well-baby visits, you can connect literacy milestones with developmental milestones. For example, asking if a baby can sit independently to hold a book. This can be a useful tool not only for assessing physical development but also for opening a conversation to promote healthy literacy development. Another such method involves incorporating books into these visits, using it as an assessment tool or as a model for how book sharing can help babies build relationships with both books and caregivers. Finally, you can ask about stressors or barriers that may prevent parents from spending that quality, interactive, one-on-one time with their children. And as you and your patients navigate these challenges together, one must remember to recognize and respect that there are many different forms of literacy and many ways to promote its development. The

solutions and strategies that work for each family will be unique to their family network, culture, and community.

Case Study Review

Returning to our case study:

Back in your office, you address Maria's mother's question about educational language videos. You explain that it is not so much content, but rather, interactions, that best promote language development in young children. Simply having Maria watch a video would not provide her with as many "serve and return" interactions as talking, playing, or singing with her would. You might also mention that for infants under 18 months of age, screen time is not recommended.

You then emphasize that these interactions need not be in English, even if her goal is to help Maria develop into a native English speaker. Learning one language will help Maria learn another because these early language skills Maria is gaining will carry over to different languages. Highlighting the benefits and opportunities of living in a multi-lingual home is critical not only for literacy but also for forming family relationships and preserving cultural identity.

You encourage Maria's mother to spend time reading aloud, telling stories, talking about what happened in their day, and singing songs with Maria in whichever language she is most comfortable doing so. Maria's mother eagerly tells you that her family loves singing Spanish lullabies around the house. You think this is an amazing opening for Maria's mother to create opportunities for Maria to participate too, by repeating the same songs to allow Maria to learn them and clapping her hands to the rhythm. You encourage her to invite her partner and other family members to also get involved in this practice as proficiency in English is not a prerequisite to promoting Maria's language development. Maria's whole family is encouraged to engage in these "serve and return" interactions with Maria as often as they are able.

Finally, you wrap up the session by informing Maria's mother that the local library in their neighborhood has Spanish and Spanish-English bilingual storybooks that they can borrow, as well as a parent-and-baby song circle that is offered for free twice a month.

Key Learning Points

In summary:

1. Early literacy is the knowledge and attitudes that children construct about reading and writing *before* they can actually read and write, developing over the first 3 years of life. These early literacy skills are correlated with later literacy and cognitive skills, as well as longer-term health outcomes.
2. Meaningful adult-child interactions revolving around speaking, reading, and singing foster the development of critical early literacy skills. These "serve and return interactions" should center engagement and active participation on the part of the

adult and the child in any language or form of language activity comfortable for all participants.

3. Integrating a family centered approach into everyday clinical practice will allow healthcare providers to promote literacy within healthcare settings. This involves understanding the families you work with, their culture and community, and beginning literacy promotion early, with young families and young infants.

Thank you for listening!

References

Shaw, A. (2021). Read, speak, sing: Promoting early literacy in the health care setting. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 26(3), 182-188.