

The Montana Early Literacy Project Overview

“Books tell the stories of human events and the human condition and not simply the facts . . . Literature does more than change minds. It changes people’s hearts. And people with changed hearts are people who can move the world.”

Gillespie, Powell, Clements, & Swearingen, 1994

This manual describes the Montana Early Literacy Project, its Model and components, and its replication in a variety of early childhood settings: special and general education preschools, Head Start classrooms, and specialized childcare centers. Using five components, the Model demonstrates how to develop literacy and language skills in young children with and without disabilities. The manual also provides strategies for emerging literacy and language development. Features at the end of the manual include a variety of appendices, references, and resources. The intent of the manual is to be informative and practical. An overview of the Montana Early Literacy Project, its Model, and description of its five components are described in the following narrative.

The Montana Early Literacy Project

The Montana Early Literacy Project began on November 1, 1996, at two demonstration sites: CO-TEACH Preschool located on The University of Montana campus and Cherry Valley Elementary School located on the Flathead Indian Reservation. The Montana Early Literacy Project developed a Model for fostering emerging literacy and language skills in young children with diverse abilities. The project Model is currently being replicated at four sites in Montana: Head Start, Missoula; Awesome Discoveries Daycare, Polson; Missoula County Public School Preschool Program (MCPS), Missoula; and Smart Start Preschool, Polson.

Young children with disabilities often face challenges learning cognitive and communication skills and are at risk of experiencing later difficulty learning to read and write.

The Montana Early Literacy Project, Division of Educational Research & Service, The University of Montana

Research recognizes a strong connection between language development and learning to read and write. Activities that foster language skills, an awareness of language structure, and experiences with print promote literacy and language development. Young children with diverse abilities can learn early literacy and language skills that give them a strong foundation before formal reading and writing instruction begins in elementary school. Professionals must join with family and community to help build a solid foundation of communication and early literacy competence in children.

The purpose of the Model is to build early literacy and language skills in young children with disabilities by developing partnerships with families, schools, and community members and by using developmentally appropriate services that are individually and culturally sensitive. The Model recognizes and expands upon everyday literacy events and existing routines of classroom and home environments to build literacy and language directly into children's daily experiences. Included in the Model are materials and instructional strategies that can be used by early childhood service providers and families to assist young children with disabilities to acquire the skills necessary for later literacy acquisition. Additionally, the Model provides teaching and staff support with the knowledge necessary to implement these comprehensive services.

The Five Key Components of the Model

The Montana Early Literacy Project developed a Model for fostering emerging literacy and language skills in young children with diverse abilities. The Model incorporates five key components that describe how to develop literacy and language skills in young children with and without disabilities. Component One identifies developmentally appropriate thematic units, interventions, and activities that embed literacy and language throughout children's existing routines during the school day. Component Two provides a method to identify early literacy and

language needs of individual students and to write Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and objectives that meet those needs. Component Three provides strategies to foster family participation in literacy and language activities, both at home and at school. Component Four addresses means of providing inclusive, respectful, and culturally sensitive literacy services that celebrate individual differences of children and their families. It also focuses on the understanding and appreciation of the cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions of Native Americans in Montana. Component Five provides teachers, support staff, and families with the knowledge and skills necessary to implement the Model.

Seven thematic Literacy Tubs that incorporate each of the five Model components have been developed: Native American Stories; Alike and Different; The Very Hungry Caterpillar; Rainbow Fish; Itsy Bitsy Spider; Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes; and Wheels on the Bus. The Literacy Tub activities are implemented at the project demonstration and replication sites and are available for check out by schools, families, and childcare facilities across the state of Montana.

The Montana Early Literacy Project promotes the belief that literacy is one of the primary avenues by which individuals gain access to full community participation and attainment of personal potential. The time to develop early literacy and language skills in young children is now. The authors hope the content of this manual meets our readers' needs.