

Total Literacy:

An Arts-Based Guide
to Building Early Literacy Skills
For Parents, Home School, and Early Childhood



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Introduction/Rationale

Welcome to Total Literacy, an arts-based approach to the world that prepares children for school, personal and interpersonal expression, and literacy. The child's world should be one of wonder, exploration, and discovery. The adult's job is to provide visual, aural, kinesthetic and language experiences with a childlike sense of wonder. For many adults, this creative way of operating in the world may have been forgotten, or pushed to the back of a hurried and intense mind.

Total Literacy is joyful, but it is also research based. It has been common suspicion for generations that the arts build better brains. Today technology can measure this relationship. Arts experiences build brain areas rich with interlocking neurons, ready to receive and process information. The more experiences a child has, the larger each brain region grows, and the more connections form between areas.

There are multiple ways in which humans understand and communicate. Total Literacy provides experiences in the languages of sound, image, gesture/movement, and words. Total Literacy activities also provide experiences that explore the natural environment, and build a sense of self, relationships, and community.

Why should you do this with your child?

Every child has the right to grow up complete, in an enriched environment that naturally builds the capacity to understand. These experiences open the doors to a lifetime of learning and success, creativity and self-expression. Some children will receive these opportunities and others will not. Research is clear about the relationship between these types of activities and success in school applying broadly to success in life.

You will use these activities to give your child a powerful and positive start. In addition, you will gain joyful moments that build a sense of well-being and cement positive adult-child relationships. Why do this? For gains that last a lifetime.

The activities in this book address focus areas through multiple languages. Each language is unique, and provides a different way of knowing. If the child learns an idea such as high and low through sound, image, movement, and words; then s/he will know this idea in four different ways, finding the similarities and differences between these ways of knowing. A deep and flexible understanding will grow, creating a broad root system to support all learning as it branches out. Understandings that are linked by strong, common roots become the foundation of a great student.

The brain seeks complexity to learn, and out of the rich environment you provide, your child will choose familiar and comfortable information first, then focus on a learning opportunity. Children want to learn, and will work intently to understand those ideas for which they are ready. It is only when learning experiences are inappropriate that children resist.

“A child’s work is play.” Mixing of languages occurs during dramatic play, as the child identifies problems, then explores, brainstorms, tries out new ideas, and develops academic, social, and emotional skills. The child combines what is known with what is new, repeating and varying the activity again and again, discovering new combinations and solutions. If understanding is a big puzzle, the sound, image, movement, and word language provide the clues for construction. Piece by piece, in any order, the child’s world is a unique combination, and keeps growing as long as you make the space.

In the end, high school students with four or more years of drama experience have the highest average SAT scores of any sub-group. Students with four or more years of arts experiences score approximately 50 points higher on verbal and quantitative SAT tests. The more years, the higher average scores. While this is not a reason for doing arts-based activities, the strong brain networks and deeper understandings translate into excellent test scores for most children.

The more immediate “why” is the child’s entry into a state of “flow” when engaged in meaningful exploration of ideas. Time stands still, and learning is its own reward. Joyful learning in an enriched environment leads to lifetime learners.

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