

**Position  
Statement**



# Literacy

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## **Acknowledgements**

### **PROJECT OFFICER**

**WILLIAMS, Cori, PhD, CPSP.**

Associate Professor,| School of Psychology and Speech Pathology, Faculty of Health Sciences, Curtin University, WA

### **SPEECH PATHOLOGY AUSTRALIA**

BALDAC, Stacey (Practice Document Coordinator and Editor)

LEDGER, Meg (Councilor, National Professional Standards Coordinator, commenced May 2010)

MULCAIR, Gail (Chief Executive Officer)

## Table of Contents

1. ORIGINS OF THE PAPER .....	4
2. BACKGROUND .....	4
3. THE POSITION OF SPEECH PATHOLOGY AUSTRALIA .....	5
4. CONCLUSION .....	7
5. REFERENCES .....	8

## **1. ORIGINS OF THE PAPER**

The position statement has been developed to inform parents, educators and government of the critical role of speech pathologists in the development of literacy. Speech pathologists also work with adults with acquired literacy disorders; however this is beyond the scope of the current statement.

Critical developments in literacy take place in the preschool and school years, and literacy development continues across the lifespan. A significant proportion of Australian children have difficulty in acquiring literacy. Terms used to refer to literacy difficulties include dyslexia and specific reading disability. Difficulty in the acquisition of literacy impacts on literacy levels, educational attainment and employment prospects into adulthood (Conti-Ramsden, Durkin, Simkin & Knox, 2009).

The important role which speech pathologists are able to play in working with developmental literacy disorders is not widely recognised. Across Australia, the provision of speech pathology services to school aged children is inconsistent and inadequate. The availability and nature of services differs from state to state, and little support is available for children in the secondary school years. Recognition of the contribution that speech pathologists are able to make to literacy development is crucial to improvement of literacy standards in Australia. Speech pathologists have a particularly important contribution to make in working with children with complex communication disorders whose ability to communicate verbally is severely compromised.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

Literacy has been acknowledged as a basic human right (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2005). Definitions of literacy have changed with developments in technology and thinking. A recent definition states:

“Students become literate as they develop the skills to learn and communicate confidently at school and to become effective individuals, community members, workers and citizens. These skills include listening, reading and viewing, writing, speaking and creating print, visual and digital materials accurately and purposefully within and across all learning areas.”  
(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010)

For the purposes of this paper, literacy refers to reading and writing skills.

Literacy is a crucial life skill which allows us to interact, communicate and learn about the world through use of an increasing range of media. Individuals may experience difficulties in developing literacy, or may acquire literacy difficulties through injury or disease at any stage of life. Some individuals experience lifelong difficulties with literacy.

Literacy difficulties affect many children. In Australia national testing is undertaken of children in years three, five, seven and nine in the areas of reading, writing, spelling and grammar and punctuation. The proportion of children who achieve below the minimum standard varies with the testing area and the year of testing. Results of testing of year nine students in 2010 showed that 9.3% scored below the minimum standard for reading, 12.8% for writing, 12.4% for spelling and 9.2% for grammar and punctuation. Almost half the adult population (15 – 74 years) of Australia may have literacy difficulties (Australian Council for Adult Literacy, nd).

Language and literacy are closely related (Catts, Hogan & Adlof, 2005; Stothard, Snowling, Bishop, Chipchase, & Kaplan, 1998). The development of literacy depends on language skills (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001) and literacy drives the continued development of language skills (Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998).

The development of literacy is supported by knowledge of the sounds of language, vocabulary, the ways sentences are put together, and the ways longer texts (such as stories) are constructed. Language skills evident in the pre-school years predict reading skills in later years of schooling (Adlof, Catts, & Lee, 2010; Catts, Fey, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2002). Different aspects of pre-school language skill predict reading skills at different times. Phonemic awareness (understanding of sounds in words) and knowledge of the alphabet predict early decoding skills (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 2001), but make less contribution to reading in later years. Knowledge of syntax (sentence structures) and comprehension of oral language is important for reading comprehension in older children (Adlof, Catts & Little, 2006).

Speech pathologists have skills and knowledge which allow them to assess, facilitate and improve skills in the areas of oral language (speaking and listening), reading and writing. Speech Pathologists have knowledge and expertise in the complex relationship between language and print literacy. This knowledge and expertise is crucial to efforts to address the literacy difficulties of Australian children.

### **3. THE POSITION OF SPEECH PATHOLOGY AUSTRALIA**

The following statements articulate the position of Speech Pathology Australia (the Association) on the role of speech pathologists in the area of literacy difficulties in children. The position statements have been informed by current best evidence, international position statements and consensus opinion.

#### **3.1 It is the position of Speech Pathology Australia that speech pathologists have specialist knowledge of oral language (speaking and listening) and the relationship between language and literacy in development.**

Speech pathologists have knowledge of language development across the lifespan, an understanding of the relationship between oral language and literacy development and of the processes underlying reading and spelling. This understanding includes knowledge of the different components of language and how these relate to literacy. Speech pathologists have specialist knowledge of phonemic awareness skills, vocabulary development, sentence structures, the ways texts are structured and listening comprehension. They understand the ways that these components contribute to the development of reading and writing skills over the course of development.

#### **3.2 The Association strongly endorses the critical role of speech pathologists in prevention, identification and management of literacy difficulties in children, including children with complex communication needs.**

Speech pathologists work with parents and other professionals to develop preventative approaches which will help to minimise the likelihood of literacy learning difficulties in children at risk of poor outcomes. Groups who may be at risk include children with language learning disorders or a family history of literacy difficulties, and children from low socio-economic, Indigenous Australian and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Children with complex communication difficulties have particular needs in the area of literacy development, and require specialist speech pathology input.

Speech pathologists recognise that early identification of language difficulties in early childhood and the use of strategies to foster language development may lead to improved literacy, academic and life outcomes (Adlof, Catts & Lee, 2010). They understand that language skills impact on literacy in different ways at different stages of literacy development (Botting, Simkin & Conti-Ramsden, 2006), and recognise the specialised literacy needs of children with severe and complex communication

disorders. Speech pathologists are able to contribute to literacy development across the school years. Speech pathologists work directly with children to analyse and assess their language and literacy skills and identify areas for development. They are able to plan and implement intervention for each child, taking into account the needs and capacity of that individual. Speech pathologists adopt a scientific approach, considering the evidence available in the literature, and using their understanding of the processes underlying reading and spelling as they apply to individual children.

Speech pathologists are able to work with teachers to modify the language demands on children with language difficulties, and optimise their learning within the classroom (Nippold, 2010). They consult with parents, educators and other professionals to develop and implement long term, sustainable plans for ongoing support of literacy development, taking into account the specific needs of individual children.

**3.3 The Association strongly supports the involvement of speech pathologists in the provision of education and consultancy services to parents, professionals, university training courses and the broader community in order to improve understanding of the relationship between language and literacy difficulties.**

Speech pathologists consult with others to plan and implement approaches that will support literacy development in identified groups. This may include providing information for public health initiatives, providing information for parents and planning activities to be implemented by others.

Speech pathologists contribute specialist knowledge as members of educational teams in developing or adapting curricula to support literacy development. They recognise that literacy skills are critical across the curriculum, and are not limited to the English language area.

The Association believes that speech pathologists are able to contribute specialist knowledge of the relationship between language and literacy within pre- and in-service training for early childhood educators, teachers and childcare professionals. This specialist knowledge will inform approaches to the development of literacy in all children.

**3.4 Speech Pathology Australia believes that speech pathologists with expertise in the area of literacy development should play a role in the development of organisational, local and federal government policies and protocols for childhood development in the areas of language and literacy.**

Speech pathologists have an important role to play in advocating for the rights of individuals and groups known to face difficulty in the development of literacy skills. This role is filled through the involvement of speech pathologists in the framing of policy to support development of language skills which are known to contribute to literacy outcomes. Speech pathologists have the skills and knowledge to provide valuable input to policies addressing the development of curriculum in early childhood and in the school years.

**3.5 Speech Pathology Australia strongly supports the participation of speech pathologists in research in the area of literacy difficulties.**

The Association asserts that speech pathologists bring a unique perspective to research on literacy development in all children. Speech Pathology Australia recognises the need for research addressing the prevalence of language-related literacy difficulties, and for further research to evaluate the success of intervention programs. Such research is crucial to the improvement of literacy skills in Australian children. The Association is confident that speech pathologists have the knowledge and skills needed to carry out research to contribute to the evidence on literacy difficulties in children.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this paper is to inform parents, educators and government of the critical role of speech pathologists in the development of literacy. This role is not well recognised in the current Australian context. The paper has outlined speech pathologists' knowledge in the area of language and literacy development, and the ways this knowledge may be used in prevention, assessment and treatment of literacy difficulties in children. Speech pathologists work directly with children and families or in collaboration with other professionals such as teachers and child care professionals. Speech pathologists have the capacity to play an important role in the education of childcare workers and teachers, and in the framing of policy related to child development.

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