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## Early Childhood Reading

MRA Early Childhood Task Force

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# EARLY CHILDHOOD READING

Two-year olds explore their expanding world through touch, taste, and a persistence of "What that?" questions. Three-year olds compare their speed down a slide with that of a wooden block and decorate a sign for a cardboard carton doctor's office with barely identifiable illustrations of syringes, tongue depressors, and an abundance of squiggles for the "doctors' names." Four-year olds work to protect the letters of their names and listen intently to a story about ducklings. Five-year olds make up their own songs about green frogs and repeat their phone numbers with lightning speed. Six year olds share the excitement of a trip to the planetarium, find words, and whole books they can read themselves, and write stories in pictures and words. All are learning things that will help them read; all are learning in different ways and at different rates.

The Early Childhood Reading Position Statement reflects interest in encouraging opportunities for young children to learn in environments that are responsive both to their needs for exploration, language development, creativity, and physical and social growth and to their needs for acquiring specific thinking and reading skills. The statement was developed by a task force of MRA members whose interests include both early childhood education (ages 0-8) and reading. Discussion focused on a number of factors regarding early childhood programs which include reading instruction. We agreed that the early childhood years extend from birth through age eight (grade three). We noted that teachers of young children need encouragement and support as they develop rationales for child-centered programs. There are pressures from parents and community and from within the school itself for formal development of academic skills programs beginning well before first grade. However, while there are many concepts that can and perhaps should be a part of children's learning as early as their second or third year, we agreed that these learnings are more consistent with the style and developmental level of young children as well as more supportive of emerging reading ability and enjoyment if they are concrete, informal and flexible, play oriented, and supportive of development of language and thinking skills. Our discussion seemed especially appropriate at a time when the proportion of children enrolled in pre-first grade programs is growing, the variety of commercial educational materials for young children is expanding, and cutbacks in school budgets are necessitating priority setting to maintain quality.

The statement is designed to serve as a basis for discussion for both those who work with young children and those persons and organizations whose policy making concerns influence program goals and activities. Flexible, child-centered programs are, of course, more difficult to organize and implement than prepackaged ones. The teacher must constantly be aware of child development and the reading process in order to be ready to guide learning of concepts and acquisition of skills. Therefore, the MRA Early Childhood Task Force hopes to extend its work for another year in order to provide specific help for persons who develop programs and work with young children. There is interest in making available references, resources, ideas, and other information, perhaps through the MRA Newsletter or Journal, or as a monograph.

## MRA Early Childhood Task Force

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