## Teacher checklist: Early literacy predictors for young children on the autism spectrum

This checklist is designed for use by early education teachers working with children on the autism spectrum in their pre-school (4-5years) and foundational years of formal education (5-6 years) (Prep in Queensland). It can be used to appraise children’s early literacy skills in order to determine those at risk of later reading challenges.

Please note: this checklist is designed as an informal assessment measure and, as such, success on these measures does not guarantee later reading ability. However, recent research completed by the authors (Westerveld, Paynter, O’Leary, & Trembath, 2018) found that average performance on the included tasks predicted early reading success for young, verbal children on the autism spectrum. Developmental expectations provided in the table below are derived from this research and strongly reflect developmental ranges suggested by formal measures of early literacy performance (e.g., Invernizzi, Sullivan, Meier, & Swank, 2004).

**How to use this checklist**

Complete the specified activities at the beginning of the year to measure the child’s early literacy and oral language abilities. If any concerns arise from the assessment results **please refer the child to your local speech pathologist.** Teaching staff are not expected to design or implement intervention strategies, and further assessment by a speech pathologist may be required. Referral to a speech pathologist is recommended to maximise the child’s academic success.

**Tips for working with young children on the autism spectrum**

* Use short, simple instructions
* Allow the child sufficient time to respond, this may be longer than required for typically developing children.
* Provide adequate scaffolding until you are sure that the child understands the task.
* Allow for breaks between tasks when necessary.
* Provide verbal or tangible reinforcements for attempting each task. This might include: verbal praise, high-fives, games, bubbles, stickers etc.
* Use visuals and visual schedules to assist the child’s understanding wherever possible.

**Task descriptions**

Letter-sound knowledge

This assessment examines the child’s ability to label the speech sounds corresponding to the 26 letters of the English alphabet. Children are not yet expected to have knowledge of digraphs (e.g. /ch/) and diphthongs (e.g. /oi/). This area can be assessed using an informal test of letter sound knowledge.

First sound awareness (phonological awareness)

First sound awareness examines the child’s ability to label the initial sound in words. This assessment is therefore used as an informal measure of phonological awareness. Significant scaffolding is provided

to ensure that the child is aware of the task expectations. The child is given a correct score if he/she is able to name the initial sound.

Name writing

A child’s early attempts to write their own name is linked to a developing knowledge of print concepts and the alphabet. Difficulties forming distinguishable letters in the preschool and early school years may arise from immature fine motor skills, limited interest in literacy-related activities, and/or delayed knowledge of letter formation.

Vocabulary

The child’s understanding and use of words can be informally assessed during a shared book reading activity. During this task it is recommended that examiners investigate both frequently and infrequently encountered words. Frequently encountered words are those that the child hears and uses every day, for example *school, car, ball, pretty, wet, happy, clean*. In contrast, infrequently encountered words (Tier 2) are more sophisticated words that occur more often in books than in general conversation, for example *miserable, scorching, drenched, exhausted, humiliated.*

This can be achieved by:

1. Asking the child to point to/identify labelled words (e.g. where is the…, can you find one that is fast/running/purple, show me who released the balloon)
2. Noting words the child is using during the shared book reading session
3. Asking the child to define words in the story (e.g. what is a….)
4. Asking the child to discuss what he/she can see if the pictures

Attending

By 4 years of age, most children should be able to sit and engage with a story for a least 5 minutes. Difficulties attending could suggest underlying problems related to understanding of language (receptive language), hearing, the presence of developmental disorders (e.g. ADHD) or behavioural difficulties.

Understanding story elements

Children with autism often present with a relative weakness in story comprehension and retelling. A child’s understanding of story elements can be assessed by asking the child questions about the story (who was the story about, what happened in the story, what was the problem, how did they fix it, what happened at the end of the story?). The child can be asked to retell the story (without pictures) and the child’s story can be assessed for inclusion of story elements (characters, setting, problem, actions, resolution, ending).

Making predictions

By 4-5 years children should be displaying emerging reasoning skills, including the ability to make predictions about possible outcomes based on existing knowledge. This skill can be assessed through a shared book reading task in which the child is asked questions such as “what do you think the book is about?” “what will happen next?” and “how could they fix the problem?”. Children should be able to think of a plausible outcome to at least a few of these questions and express this in a short sentence (e.g. get a new balloon).

**Child’s name: ­­­­­­­­­­­­\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Stage of schooling: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Date of birth:** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **Date of assessment:** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Task | Developmental expectations at prep entry | Child’s Score | Interpretation(e.g. age appropriate, below expectations)  |
| Print-related skills |  |  |  |
| Letter-sound awareness | At least 7 letter sounds correct.  |  |  |
| First sound awareness | At least 6 first sounds correct.  |  |  |
| Name writing | Attempts to write his/her name with some distinguishable letters.  |  |  |
| Vocabulary |  |  |  |
| Uses frequently encountered words | Uses a variety of * nouns (e.g. *common objects, names of familiar people*)
* pronouns (*he, she they*)
* verbs (*go, run, jump, eat)*
* adjectives (*big, small, fast, slow, common colours*)
* prepositions (*in, on, under*)
* question words (*who, where, why*)
* connecting words (e.g. *and, because, but, if*).
 |  |  |
| Understands frequently encountered words | Able to point to most frequently encountered words, when requested, in a shared book reading session |  |  |
| Uses infrequently encountered words (Tier 2) | Starting to use more sophisticated verbs, and adjectives (e.g. purchased, exhausted, drenched, vanished).  |  |  |
| Understands infrequently encountered words (Tier 2) | Developing ability to follow directions which incorporate Tier 2 vocabulary (e.g. point to the items he purchased).  |  |  |
| Attention and Comprehension |  |  |
| Attending | Able to sit and attend to a book for at least 5 minutes.  |  |  |
| Understanding story elements | Able to answer at least 3 questions related to:* Who the story is about
* What happened in the beginning of the story
* What the problem was
* How the problem was fixed
* How the story ended
 |  |  |
| Making predictions | Provides a plausible prediction of events of at least 1 sentence (does not need to be correct) in an unfamiliar story.  |  |  |
| Story telling |  |  |  |
| Story retell | Emerging ability to retell a simple story which includes at least 6 of the following; * Simple introduction
* Mentions the main theme in the retell or title
* Labels the main character/s
* Mentions at least some of the supporting characters by name or title (e.g. brother)
* Starting to provide a rationale for the characters behaviour e.g. goes out because she is bored.
* Events are sequenced logically, 1-2 events may be missing.
* At least 1 mention of a resolution for the story’s problem.
* Some mention of the way the story ends e.g. they were all happy.
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**Recommendations:**