

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Impact of COVID-19 on Language and Literacy in Canada

August 2021

*An RSC Collection of Essays*

One of the most significant achievements of a young baby's life is the emerging ability to understand and use language to communicate. Language is an inherently social phenomenon—its meaning and power stem from how it is used by members of a community to convey thoughts, ideas, feelings, and to identify tangible elements in the environment. Due to the inherently social nature of language, children rely on information provided by parents to learn the words and rules of their native language.

In older children, youth, and adults, we tend to think of language in the context of an even broader term, literacy. While broader definitions of literacy are sometimes used to indicate fluency in the use of the many skills needed to succeed in society, in this report, unless specifically noted, we define literacy as a person's ability to read and write. Early literacy is linked to better educational attainment levels, improved employment opportunities, and increased earning potential. Moreover, early literacy paves the way for adult literacy later.

Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the lives and well-being of individuals and communities all over the world. The series of papers collected in this report explore and review the impact of the pandemic on various aspects of language and literacy development. Originally invited as individual contributions, the papers have been organized into four themes for the purpose of this report:

1. Achieving Language and Literacy
2. Multilingualism in Language and Literacy Development
3. Challenges to Language and Literacy Brought on by COVID-19
4. Language Use During COVID-19

Each theme is prefaced with a brief introduction to the topic, followed by the papers themselves. We conclude this report with a compilation of a number of key recommendations directed toward parents, teachers, educators, and policy makers. The wide range of topics covered by these collected papers reflect the many ways that language and literacy have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Recommendations

Woven through the articles included in this report are recommendations for supporting the language and literacy development of our population. Here, we summarize 16 recommendations for different stakeholders.

## **Caregivers & Communities**

Language and literacy development begins at home, in infancy, and in caregiver-child interactions. Broadly, we recommend that caregivers continue to support their children's language and literacy development by:

1. Providing rich, one-on-one, back-and-forth social interactions, whether these be in-person or virtually;
2. Establishing a healthy reading and writing routine, and keeping children engaged during these activities by, for example, elaborating on the words and how their meanings connect to tell a story;
3. Monitoring screen time and learning about apps recommended by teachers and researchers for language development;
4. For children in multilingual households, where it is important to the family to maintain the languages, ensuring that caregivers speak and communicate in both/all languages from an early age.

## **Educators**

Outside the home, childcare workers and teachers play an important role in developing children's language and literacy skills. During the pandemic and beyond, educators can support children's language and literacy development by:

5. Continuously monitoring the language and literacy development of children with diverse language experiences;
6. Connecting and collaborating with parents about their children's progress;
7. Providing education on digital literacy to all children so that they can use digital tools safely and productively;
8. Using features of online learning to support learning, e.g., breakout rooms, screen shares and the like.

## **Researchers**

Researchers can work toward creating new knowledge and programs to support children's language and literacy skills. We recommend that they do so by:

9. Fostering collaborations between academics, clinicians, and teachers, so that new knowledge can be applied to practice directly;
10. Fostering collaborations between academics and industry partners in developing high-quality, evidence-based educational apps;
11. Developing new research programs that address questions raised by the pandemic, including investigating the effects of screen time, face masks, and online learning on language and literacy development;
12. Collecting data from more diverse populations.

## **Community Organizations & Policymakers**

Community organizations and policymakers have the responsibility to introduce policies that will support early language and literacy skills. Our broad recommendations include:

13. Equipping people with critical thinking and research skills to identify, question, and evaluate information that they are receiving;
14. Promoting positive attitudes toward bilingualism and increasing the availability of second language and heritage language programs in public schools;
15. Dealing with the critical shortage of licensed childcare spaces, for example through the provision of universal childcare;
16. Reducing inequities that disadvantage sections of our population and rethinking policies around language access.