

Empowering Tomorrow's Thinkers: Media Literacy in Early Childhood Education

ONE HOUR TRAINING



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Introduction

Envisioning a world where individuals use media ethically and effectively requires cultivating curiosity and imagination, particularly in the realm of early childhood education. While media literacy has traditionally focused on adolescents and young adults, educators are now exploring ways to engage toddlers and preschoolers in this crucial skill. This article navigates through key disputes among early childhood professionals, shedding light on diverse practices in media literacy education.

Learning Objectives:

1. Define media literacy in early childhood education and explain its importance in fostering critical thinking and healthy media habits.
2. Identify different types of media messages (e.g., entertainment, advertising, news, social media) and analyze their purpose, audience, and perspective.
3. Recognize stereotypes and biases in children's media and explore ways to promote diversity and inclusivity in media exposure.
4. Apply practical strategies for integrating media literacy into everyday interactions, such as using storybooks, discussions, and creative activities to encourage critical thinking.
5. Support families in navigating media choices by providing guidance on co-viewing, setting media boundaries, and accessing reliable resources for media literacy.

Materials Needed:

- Printed training manual
- Pen/Pencil
- Access to online resources (optional)



Media Literacy Defined

Media literacy, at its core, expands traditional literacy to encompass all contemporary communication forms—digital media, printed materials, music, and more. Just as traditional literacy requires decoding written symbols, media literacy involves interpreting a variety of symbol systems, from images and videos to sounds and interactive content. It is not merely about understanding how to navigate digital platforms but also about developing the critical thinking skills necessary to evaluate messages, recognize biases, and assess credibility.

Beyond comprehension, media literacy includes emotional awareness, ethics, and discernment. Young children are constantly absorbing messages from their environment—whether through storybooks, advertisements, or digital games—and these messages shape their perceptions, beliefs, and interactions with the world. Teaching media literacy at an early age fosters the ability to question, reflect, and make informed decisions rather than passively consuming content.

Media literacy engages with complex cognitive processes such as epistemology and metacognition. It encourages children to think about how they know what they know, distinguishing between opinion and fact, reality and representation. By integrating media literacy into early childhood education, we empower children to become thoughtful, responsible, and engaged participants in an increasingly media-saturated world.



Why Media Literacy Matters in Early Childhood

How Young Children Interact with Media

Imagine a toddler watching a colorful cartoon, captivated by the characters and their adventures. Now picture a preschooler swiping through a digital storybook, completely absorbed. Young children interact with media in ways that feel natural and effortless. They don't question why a commercial is showing them a toy or how a YouTube video keeps playing automatically—they simply absorb what's presented. Their developing brains are wired for learning, making them especially receptive to media messages. But without guidance, they may accept everything they see as truth.

Think about a time when a child repeated something they saw or heard from a show, game, or book. How did they interpret it? Did they fully understand it, or did they take it literally?

The Impact of Media Messages on Early Development

Media is a powerful teacher—sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. When children watch educational programming, listen to engaging audiobooks, or explore creative apps, they build language, problem-solving, and social skills. But media can also introduce stereotypes, unrealistic expectations, and confusing messages about the world.

For example, many children's movies portray princesses as delicate and superheroes as strong. Without conversations about these portrayals, children may develop rigid ideas about gender roles. Similarly, advertisements cleverly designed for kids can make them want things they don't need, without realizing they're being influenced.



The Importance of Teaching Discernment and Awareness

Children naturally trust what they see. If a character in a story says, "Eating this snack will make you run super fast!" they might believe it. That's why teaching discernment—helping children question and evaluate media—is essential.

As educators and caregivers, we can teach children to think critically with simple strategies:



Ask questions! Instead of just watching or reading, engage them:

- "Why do you think the character made that choice?"
- "Does this happen in real life, or is it just for fun?"
- "What do you think the creators want us to feel or do?"

By encouraging these conversations, we're not just helping kids navigate media—we're empowering them to think for themselves.

Hands-On Activity:

Find a popular children's commercial, book, or TV show clip. Write down three guiding questions you could ask a child to help them think critically about it.



Key Concepts in Media Literacy

Recognizing Media Messages

Media is everywhere, but not all media serves the same purpose. Some content is meant to entertain, some to inform, and some to persuade. Helping children recognize different types of media messages is the first step in building media literacy.

Types of Media Messages:

- Entertainment: Cartoons, movies, storybooks, video games
- Advertising: Toy commercials, product placements in shows, online ads
- News & Information: Kids' news programs, educational videos, fact-based books
- Social Media & Digital Content: YouTube videos, influencer content, interactive apps



Think About It:

A cereal commercial with a fun mascot and catchy song looks different from a bedtime story, but both contain messages. One is designed to sell something, the other to engage and teach.

Understanding Representation in Media

Media shapes the way children see themselves and others. From books to TV shows, the characters they see influence their understanding of race, gender, abilities, and cultural norms. If children only see heroes who look one way or hear stories from a single perspective, their worldview becomes limited.

Spotting Stereotypes & Biases

- Are characters diverse in race, gender, and ability?
- Do female and male characters have equal roles?
- Are certain groups always shown in the same roles (e.g., boys as adventurers, girls as caretakers)?

Promoting Diversity & Inclusivity

Caregivers can introduce books, shows, and games that reflect different cultures, family structures, and abilities. Encouraging discussions about representation helps children think beyond what they see.

Encouraging Inquiry and Critical Thinking

Children are naturally curious, and media literacy gives them the tools to ask important questions. Instead of passively consuming media, they learn to analyze and reflect.

Guiding Questions to Ask Kids:

- *Who created this?*
- *What is the message?*
- *Why was it made?*
- *How does it make you feel?*
- *Is this real or make-believe?*



Building Curiosity & Skepticism

Children should feel comfortable questioning media instead of accepting it at face value. Encouraging “thinking out loud” during screen time or reading helps them develop these skills.

Interactive Exercise:

Watch a short, age-appropriate commercial or animated clip. Pause at key moments and ask:

- *What do you think they want us to believe?*
- *Would this happen in real life?*
- *Why do you think they chose these colors, sounds, or characters?*

By practicing these techniques, children become more aware of the messages they receive every day.



Practical Strategies for Teaching Media Literacy

Media literacy doesn't have to be a separate lesson—it can be woven into everyday interactions with young children. By using familiar materials like books, drawings, and conversations, educators and caregivers can naturally guide children in thinking critically about media.

Using Storybooks & Illustrations for Discussion

Storybooks are a powerful tool for teaching media literacy. Children's books often contain messages about emotions, social norms, and cultural values. By asking thoughtful questions, caregivers can encourage children to reflect on the stories they hear.

Encouraging Children to Create Their Own Media

When children make their own media—whether through drawings, storytelling, or role-playing—they learn how messages are constructed. Creating their own stories helps them see how authors and media creators make choices about characters, settings, and messages.

Activity:

Ask children to draw a picture or tell a short story about a superhero, a family, or a special adventure. Then ask:

- *Why did you choose this character?*
- *What message does your story share?*
- *How would someone else tell this story differently?*

Engaging in Conversations About Characters, Plots & Emotions

Children naturally connect with characters in books, movies, and shows. Talking about a character's choices and emotions helps children develop empathy and a deeper understanding of media messages.

Discussion Starters:

- *How do you think this character feels?*
- *What would you do if you were in their situation?*
- *Do you think this story could happen in real life? Why or why not?*

Building Healthy Media Habits

Modeling Mindful Media Consumption

Children learn by observing adults. If they see caregivers mindlessly scrolling on a phone or watching TV without engaging, they may develop similar habits. Being intentional with media use—such as watching together, asking questions, and setting limits—teaches children to approach media thoughtfully.

Setting Age-Appropriate Media Boundaries

Not all media is created for young children, and not all screen time is beneficial. Establishing clear boundaries helps create a balanced approach to media use.

Guidelines for Healthy Media Use:

- Prioritize interactive media (e.g., educational games, story apps) over passive viewing.
- Encourage co-viewing and discussion rather than solo screen time.
- Balance screen time with other activities like outdoor play, reading, and creative projects.

Encouraging Active Engagement Over Passive Consumption

Not all screen time is equal. Watching a show passively is different from discussing it, playing an interactive game, or making connections to real-life experiences.

Ways to Encourage Active Engagement:

- Ask children to predict what will happen next in a story.
- Pause a video to discuss what a character is feeling or thinking.
- Relate media content to real-world experiences (e.g., “Remember when we saw a fire truck like the one in this show?”).

By making media a conversation rather than a passive activity, children develop critical thinking skills that will serve them well in a media-rich world.

Supporting Families in Media Literacy

Media literacy is most effective when reinforced at home. Parents and caregivers play a crucial role in shaping how children engage with media, yet many feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of digital content available. By equipping families with strategies and resources, we can help them foster a thoughtful and intentional approach to media use.

Helping Parents Navigate Media Choices

With so many apps, shows, and games marketed to young children, parents often wonder: *What's actually beneficial?* Instead of focusing only on screen time limits, families can consider the quality of media.

Guidelines for Choosing Quality Media:

- ✓ Educational Value – Does it encourage learning, problem-solving, or creativity?
- ✓ Engagement – Is the child actively thinking, responding, or creating, rather than just watching?
- ✓ Representation & Messaging – Does it promote diversity, kindness, and real-world connections?
- ✓ Ad-Free or Minimal Ads – Does it avoid excessive advertising or product placement?

💡 Tip for Parents: Use trusted resources like Common Sense Media or PBS Kids to find age-appropriate content.

Activity for Families:

Encourage parents to watch a short clip of their child's favorite show and evaluate it using the checklist above. What strengths or concerns do they notice?



Additional Resources

To further support media literacy in early childhood education, here are additional resources for educators, parents, and caregivers. These tools provide guidance on selecting quality media, fostering critical thinking, and engaging children in meaningful discussions.

Websites & Organizations

- Common Sense Media (www.commonsensemedia.org) – Reviews and ratings for children's media, plus tips for parents and educators.
- PBS Kids for Parents (www.pbs.org/parents) – Articles, activities, and media recommendations for young children.
- Zero to Three (www.zerotothree.org) – Research-based guidance on early childhood development, including digital media use.
- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) (www.aap.org) – Recommendations for healthy screen time and media use in young children.

Books for Educators & Parents

- "Media Literacy in the K-12 Classroom" – Frank W. Baker
- "The Art of Screen Time: How Your Family Can Balance Digital Media and Real Life" – Anya Kamenetz
- "Raising Humans in a Digital World: Helping Kids Build a Healthy Relationship with Technology" – Diana Graber

Books for Children

- "Arthur's TV Trouble" – Marc Brown (Introduces kids to advertising and persuasion)
- "Unplugged" – Steve Antony (A story about balancing screen time with real-world experiences)

Interactive Tools & Apps

- Khan Academy Kids (Educational games and storytelling for young learners)
- Sesame Street Games (Interactive media that encourages learning and social skills)
- Toca Boca Apps (Creative digital play experiences)

Sources

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Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____
Last Four SSN: _____ Date Completed: _____

Multiple Choice Questions

1. What is the primary goal of media literacy in early childhood education?

- a) To completely eliminate screen time for young children
- b) To help children critically analyze and understand media messages
- c) To encourage children to watch more educational programs
- d) To teach children how to use social media at an early age

2. Which of the following is NOT an example of a media message?

- a) A commercial for a new toy
- b) A bedtime storybook
- c) A child's handwritten letter to a friend
- d) A cartoon show on television

3. How can educators promote diversity and inclusivity in children's media exposure?

- a) By only allowing children to watch shows that feature their own culture
- b) By selecting books, shows, and games that represent different cultures, abilities, and family structures
- c) By avoiding discussions about media content altogether
- d) By limiting children's media exposure to only educational content

4. Which of the following is an effective strategy for building healthy media habits in young children?

- a) Allowing unlimited screen time to encourage independent learning
- b) Modeling mindful media consumption and setting age-appropriate boundaries
- c) Letting children decide when and how much media they consume
- d) Avoiding all forms of digital media in early childhood settings

5. Why is co-viewing media with children beneficial?

- a) It allows caregivers to control what children watch at all times
- b) It encourages children to rely on adults for all media-related decisions
- c) It helps children develop critical thinking skills by discussing media content together
- d) It ensures that children only engage with educational media

Completed trainings can be submitted to: connect@thenurture.net
