



Nemours Children's Reading BrightStart! Early Literacy Survey

A National Survey by Nemours Children's Health

May 6, 2025



Executive Summary

Introduction

Nemours Children's Health is committed to advancing Whole Child Health — our vision to go beyond offering the best in medical care to help every child reach their full potential. This includes preventative approaches to early literacy, mental health, housing, nutrition, and other aspects of health. About 85% of what affects a child's health takes place in their home, school, and community, so we are partnering across sectors — especially with schools and early learning centers — to give every child a healthier future.

Literacy is an area that underscores Nemours Children's longstanding commitment. For 20 years, Nemours Children's has led efforts to improve early literacy through its Nemours Children's Reading BrightStart! initiative. Why would a pediatric health system invest so deeply in reading? Because literacy is essential to lifelong health.

About 90% of a child's brain develops before age 5, when children begin building critical emergent literacy skills — like print awareness, language comprehension, and early writing. Without these skills, many fall behind and never catch up. Kids who are not reading on grade level by first grade have just a 10% chance of catching up by fourth grade.

A [*study*](#) from Nemours Children's researchers published in the Journal of Learning Disabilities indicates that early assessment and as-needed intervention significantly improves the likelihood that children enter kindergarten ready to read. Small-group interventions in preschool can boost foundational skills and better prepare children for the challenges ahead. Pre-K is a powerful window for intervention. Finding gaps early and supporting emergent literacy can change a child's trajectory, improving school readiness, boosting confidence, and setting the stage for success in health, education, and life.



Research Methodology

To better understand how early literacy instruction plays out in classrooms, Nemours Children's commissioned a national survey through The Harris Poll. Conducted online from Jan. 28 to Feb. 5, 2025, the survey gathered insights from more than 300 teachers certified in grades K-3 in the U.S.

For additional information on the research method, including weighting variables and subgroup samples sizes, please contact the Reading BrightStart! team at nemoursbrightstart@nemours.org.



Key Survey Findings

The findings reveal an urgent need for stronger support for early literacy:

- **Literacy Gaps in Early Grades.** Teachers see the challenges firsthand. On average, teachers reported only about half of incoming K–3 students come to school with grade-level reading skills. More than 80% of teachers report concern about the literacy skills of children as they enter their classroom. Phonics skills and phonological awareness are a particular concern. Ideally, these skills are well established by first grade since they are foundational elements upon which other literacy skills are built. However, the majority of first grade teachers surveyed cited phonics and decoding (61%) and phonological awareness (58%) as areas of struggle for their students.
- **Instructional Time and Tools.** Teachers dedicate about 50 minutes each day to literacy instruction, but more than 30 of those minutes are spent on screen-based activities. Interactive, hands-on approaches — like small-group or one-on-one interventions — are far less available. Only about half of teachers have the option to use these methods, and even then, they typically get just 30 minutes or less to use them.
- **Barriers to Success.** While many teachers make the most of the tools available, fewer than one in four are very satisfied with their school's literacy-building curricula and other resources. About 2 in 5 say the materials they use lack engaging content and sufficient time for meaningful instruction. Many also report that materials aren't adaptable to individual student needs and that they haven't received adequate training to use them effectively. These limitations make it difficult to fully meet the diverse literacy needs of young learners. Additionally, veteran teachers with 10 or more years of experience were much more likely (86%) than less experienced teachers (57%) to recognize the importance of phonological awareness and the impact on a child's reading experience. Phonological awareness is the number one predictor of future reading success, and without this knowledge, teachers may be focusing their efforts in the wrong areas.
- **The Way Forward.** Teachers know what's missing — and they see a clear path to better outcomes. More than 90% believe that screen-free, multisensory instruction could make a significant difference in their classrooms, giving children the hands-on engagement they need to thrive. But teachers can't do it alone. A strong majority say that improving literacy also depends on active support from parents and caregivers. In other words, the solution isn't just about more instructional time — it's about building a broader ecosystem around each child that fosters reading success at home and in the classroom. Teachers, especially newer teachers, should have access to high-quality curricula, as well as the training and professional development needed to support literacy instruction in their classrooms. Schools should partner with parents and families, giving families information and resources to increase adult-child reading and other literacy-building activities.



How Nemours Children's Is Helping

Recognizing that early literacy is a crucial determinant of long-term health, Nemours Children's launched Reading BrightStart! in 2005 to support young children at-risk for reading failure, promoting reading success.

To build a strong reading foundation for children from birth to age 5, Nemours Children's Reading BrightStart! offers a collection of research-based products, resources, and services:

- Unique and highly effective **curricula** for infants through first graders
- **Training** to prepare educators to use the curricula and general topics related to building early literacy skills in classroom settings
- A **family literacy website** [Nemours Children's Reading BrightStart!](#) to assist families in building a strong literacy foundation for children. The family literacy website includes:
 - A **free preschool** [reading screener](#) for families of kids ages 3 to 5. The screener makes it easy for parents to check their child's reading readiness skills and then delivers a plan that helps families keep kids on track.
 - **At-home activities** sorted by age and skill level that support literacy development in a fun and engaging way.
 - **Book recommendations** with tips on how to read aloud to children. Related activities help reinforce pre-reading skills.
 - **Parenting articles** from our experts to help put children on the path to reading success.

Reach

Since its inception, Reading BrightStart! has:

- Reached children, families, and educators in **38 states**.
- Trained more than **5,000 early childhood educators** in effective literacy practices.
- Enabled more than **20,000 parents** to assess their child's reading readiness skills and take early action.
- Supported more than **295,000 children** in building essential reading skills.

Impact

These efforts have yielded significant outcomes. Repeated, rigorous studies involving 3,300 children who had fallen behind in early literacy skills have shown that two-thirds of them caught up with their peers after receiving support via the Reading BrightStart! preschool curriculum.

