

A young girl with dark, curly hair is the central figure of the image. She is wearing large, white and green AVID headphones and is smiling while looking down at a tablet device. The background is a soft-focus indoor setting. On the right side of the image, there are several concentric, light blue curved lines that resemble sound waves, adding a dynamic audio-related visual element.

# The Audio Advantage in Early Literacy

HOW THE CORRECT TOOLS EMPOWER  
CHILDREN'S LEARNING

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# Executive summary

Early literacy is the cornerstone of lifelong learning, yet many children face significant challenges in gaining the skills they need.

Exposure to books, storytelling, and verbal interactions is critical for young children, but not all receive the same level of support. This disparity can lead to significant setbacks that are difficult to overcome as kids progress through their educational journey.

Without a strong foundation in literacy, children are at risk of falling behind, which can lead to frustration, lack of confidence, and academic challenges.

Early support and intervention are crucial.

When schools, parents, and home programs work together, they create a support system that enhances a child's literacy development. Collaboration is key.

When these efforts are not aligned, children may miss out on formative literary experiences that build a strong foundation.

Research consistently shows that foundational literacy skills are strong predictors of later academic achievement. Children who start kindergarten with solid literacy skills tend to perform better academically throughout their school years.

However, children who start kindergarten with a significant word gap face challenges, even with early interventions. As time goes by, closing this gap becomes increasingly difficult.

Audio resources play a pivotal role in early childhood education by addressing gaps that traditional learning methods may not cover.

For many children, access to quality audio content can mean the difference between falling behind and keeping up

with their peers. Audio provides a rich linguistic environment that stimulates cognitive development.

Audiobooks, songs, and interactive learning tools model fluent reading, introduce complex language structures, and make learning engaging and effective.

## 76%

### VOCABULARY BOOST

Children using audiobooks had a 76% improvement in vocabulary retention compared to print-only learners.<sup>1</sup>

Delivering audio effectively and safely requires the correct tools. Headphones designed specifically for early learners are essential to create an immersive learning environment while protecting hearing health. With over 1 billion young people at risk of hearing loss due to unsafe listening habits, features like volume limiting, comfort, fit, and durability are non-negotiable.

To simplify the selection process, this white paper includes a helpful checklist to guide parents, educators, and program leaders in choosing the right headset for early learners. It outlines key criteria—from built-in volume control and kid-safe materials to audio clarity and ease of use—ensuring that every child has access to safe, high-quality tools that support literacy and independent learning.

By prioritizing early literacy and equipping children with the correct audio solutions, we can help every learner build a strong foundation for lifelong success.

<sup>1</sup> Wolfson, Gail. (2008). "Using Audiobooks to Meet the Needs of Adolescent Readers." American Secondary Education, 36(2), 105-114.



# Building a foundation for success: the importance of early literacy

*“Parents should begin reading aloud to children at birth. It feeds the child’s hungry brain with data for language development, speaking, and early word reading.”*

*—Richard Gentry, Raising Confident Readers, 2011*



Early literacy isn't just an educational milestone—it's the foundation for all future learning. Kids who lack a strong start can struggle to keep up with their peers, which can lead to frustration, lack of confidence, and ongoing academic challenges. These early setbacks can have long-term consequences that are difficult to overcome.

Between the ages of zero to three, the brain develops faster

than at any other time in life. Nurturing literacy during these critical early years is essential.<sup>2</sup>

Early exposure to books, storytelling, and verbal interactions significantly shapes language and comprehension abilities. These foundational skills not only support learning to read and write but also enhance cognitive functions like memory, attention, and critical thinking.

However, not all children receive the same early language support.

Children from underserved communities, in particular, are at a higher risk of starting school without the literacy foundation they need. A lack of foundational literacy skills can create a gap that is difficult to close.

Teachers can identify literacy needs early and create interventions to help close this gap. But, these interventions must happen quickly.

If children with reading difficulties receive help in Grade 1, 90% can reach grade-level reading. However, when support is delayed until age nine or later, 75% continue to struggle throughout their school years.<sup>3</sup>

Missing this early window of intervention risks leaving children behind, making it increasingly challenging for them to catch up. ***With the correct tools, resources, and support, these struggles can be prevented.***

## PARTNERING FOR LITERACY: THE POWER OF WORKING TOGETHER

Early literacy skills thrive through collaboration. We know the best way to develop foundational literacy skills successfully is when schools, parents, and home programs work together. When these efforts aren't aligned, children can miss out on important literary experiences, making it harder for them to build a strong foundation.

Schools offer structured learning environments and provide access to a variety of educational resources. These include literacy materials, such as books, e-books, and audiobooks, all tailored to different reading levels and interests. Schools also employ trained educators and incorporate technology to enhance learning. Without consistent reinforcement at home, these benefits might not be fully realized.

Parents should be encouraged to engage in daily conversations, reading, and singing with their children to build on what they've learned in school. These simple activities significantly build vocabulary and language skills.

Research indicates that children who are read to frequently, at least three times a week, are nearly twice as likely to be among the top performers in reading skills compared to those who are read to less often.<sup>4</sup>

Home programs, like library story hours, can support this combined effort by providing more opportunities for children to engage with books and language. Libraries and schools can collaborate to offer storytimes and literacy programs. Parents join the effort by supporting their children's participation.

Schools and parents can come together further through school-hosted workshops. Here, parents can receive education and practical tips on how to support early literacy.

By setting shared reading goals and regularly updating parents on their child's progress, schools and home programs can create a unified approach to literacy.

***Every child deserves the opportunity to develop skills that will carry them through school and beyond.***



## DATA-DRIVEN INSIGHTS

Research consistently shows that early literacy skills strongly predict later academic achievement.

Children who enter kindergarten with a solid foundation in literacy tend to do better academically as they grow older.<sup>5</sup> Studies also highlight the long-term benefits of early language development, including improved educational outcomes and increased opportunities for future success.

Students make the most progress in reading from kindergarten through first grade, improving by about 13 points every six months.

But without early intervention, this progress slows down drastically, with progress dropping to about 6 points every month in second grade and further to about 4 points every six months in third grade.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of building a strong foundation in the early years is clear.

Studies found that 57% of children who don't master the alphabet by the start of kindergarten are likely to score below basic reading levels in fourth grade. This gap can have long-lasting effects, limiting their academic potential well into the future.

Additionally, 85% of children who don't develop phonological awareness (the ability to recognize and work with sounds in spoken language) by the end of first grade are likely to struggle in fourth grade.<sup>6</sup>

These numbers highlight why early literacy programs are so crucial—they help kids build the skills they need to succeed later.

# 57%

of children who don't master the alphabet by the start of kindergarten are likely to score below basic reading levels in fourth grade.

# 85%

of children who don't develop phonological awareness by the end of first grade are likely to struggle in fourth grade.

*By focusing on early literacy, educators and parents can help children develop the reading and writing skills that nurture early learners.*

2 <https://teacher.scholastic.com/products/face/pdf/research-compendium/early-literacy.pdf>

3 <https://www.spriglearning.com/30-more-compelling-statistics-in-early-learning-early-literacy-edition/>

4 <https://literacyproj.org/2019/02/14/30-key-child-literacy-stats-parents-need-to-be-aware-of/>

5 <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2007/11/school-readiness>

6 [https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Early-Reading-Skill-Dev-2023-01\\_508.pdf](https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Early-Reading-Skill-Dev-2023-01_508.pdf)



# The benefits of audio in early childhood learning



Audio resources are a crucial supplement to early childhood education, offering a rich linguistic environment that enhances cognitive and language development. These tools help children fully develop their language and literacy skills.

By incorporating audio into daily activities, educators can introduce children to a broader range of vocabulary, improve their listening skills, and model fluent reading. It not only exposes children to a rich linguistic environment but also provides immersive experiences that traditional methods may not fully achieve.

With impactful contributions to language and literacy development, vocabulary building, pronunciation improvement, and understanding language patterns, audio's part in developing literacy skills is clear.

## LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Research shows that early literacy skills are foundational for positive academic outcomes. Children who develop strong literacy skills in early childhood are better prepared for reading and writing.<sup>7</sup>

Audio resources can play a pivotal role in early childhood education by filling in gaps that traditional learning methods may not address. For many children, access to quality audio content can mean the difference between falling behind and keeping up with their peers.

Integrating audio into daily activities exposes children to a rich linguistic environment that contributes to cognitive development. This exposure can be particularly helpful to those who may not have access to language-rich environments at home.

Storytime with audiobooks and educational songs provides children with models of fluent reading and introduces complex language structures. 49.6% of teachers believe that audiobooks support children's cognitive development.<sup>8</sup>

Listening to clear and accurate pronunciation in audiobooks and educational programs helps children learn proper speech patterns, which can improve their pronunciation. Children who need additional help with these skills can benefit from additional language models.

Interactive learning through educational games and apps with audio prompts further engages students, making learning fun and effective. Disengaged learners have the chance to experience the benefits of these tools that other modes of learning might not provide.

These resources provide important opportunities to develop phonological skills that are foundational for reading.

Regular engagement with audio content helps children grasp the nuances of language, including grammar and syntax.

Using headphones can elevate the language learning experience by fully immersing students in audio content while helping them block out distractions and maintain focus. This concentrated environment enhances listening skills, supports clearer pronunciation, and boosts overall language proficiency—making headphones a valuable tool for deeper engagement and more effective learning.

### **FLUENCY MODELING AND EXPOSURE TO ADVANCED CONTENT**

Fluent reading isn't just about the ability to read aloud; it's about reading with confidence and comprehension. By providing children with models of fluent reading and exposing them to complex language structures, audio resources lay the foundation for strong reading skills and cognitive growth.

Listening centers in classrooms allow students to hear a variety of educational content. Audiobooks model appropriate pacing, intonation, and expression for children, which are essential for developing oral reading fluency.

# 67.9%

**of teachers believe that audiobooks can aid children with learning difficulties.**

Exposure to these fluent reading models can significantly enhance children's ability to read aloud with confidence and accuracy. By listening to audiobooks, children understand how fluent reading sounds, helping them mimic these patterns in their own reading.

Listening to stories and educational content that use advanced vocabulary, intricate sentence structures, and complex narratives fosters critical thinking and higher-level language skills.

Audio provides children access to texts that may be above their individual reading level, exposing them to more sophisticated language patterns.





This exposure helps children develop a deeper understanding of the narrative structure and stimulates their imagination—both needed in building reading comprehension and overall literacy.

### COMPREHENSION AND COGNITIVE SKILLS

Audio content helps children understand narrative structure by exposing them to well-constructed stories.

Listening to these narratives fosters imagination and encourages children to visualize the story elements, characters, and settings in their minds. This mental visualization enhances their ability to comprehend and remember stories, building a foundation for advanced reading and writing skills.

Regular exposure to audio content, such as stories and educational programs, helps improve children's focus and attention. They learn to concentrate on the content as they listen, enhancing their auditory processing skills.

The retention of information is strengthened through repeated listening, aiding in the development of memory skills essential for learning.

Children develop empathy and emotional intelligence when they listen to stories featuring diverse characters and emotional experiences with rich whole-group discussions that follow.<sup>9</sup>

They learn to understand and share the feelings of others, which is crucial for social interaction. Group listening with discussions around audio content helps kids develop social skills by teaching them to express their thoughts and feelings while learning other's perspectives.

### SUPPORT FOR DIVERSE LEARNERS

Audio resources are particularly beneficial for diverse learners, including struggling readers, second language learners, and children with learning disabilities.

These tools are invaluable because they break down the barriers that text decoding often creates, making learning more inclusive and accessible. 67.9% of teachers agree that audiobooks aid children with learning difficulties.<sup>10</sup>

This broad accessibility ensures that every child, regardless of their learning challenges, has the opportunity to engage meaningfully with educational content.

Preparation for learning begins long before a child enters a classroom. From birth, infants start to hear and process the sounds around them.

These early interactions with literacy materials and adults lay the foundation for developing language, reading, and writing skills.<sup>11</sup>

*An immersive audio environment can significantly enhance listening skills, improve pronunciation, and boost overall language proficiency.*

However, the richness of this exposure varies greatly depending on their environment.

In language-rich environments, children are surrounded by a variety of words and phrases, while those in less stimulating environments may encounter a “word gap”—a disparity that can have long-lasting effects on their language development.

Research has found that children from professional families typically hear 30 million more words than children from families on welfare. This significant disparity in language exposure can affect vocabulary growth, language development, and future learning.

The words a child knows and uses by age three can strongly predict their language skills and reading comprehension abilities at ages 9-10. Early vocabulary is a strong indicator of future success in language and reading.<sup>12</sup>

The word gap is a significant challenge to student literacy and learning outcomes. However, there are ways to overcome it.

Audio exposure can help bridge the word gap for those in early childhood.

***Research shows that exposure to rich and varied language through stories and educational programs can significantly expand a child's vocabulary and improve their language skills.***

This is crucial as children from diverse backgrounds, including those from low-income families or non-native English speakers, often enter school with smaller vocabularies.

Audio content helps struggling readers and children with learning disabilities engage with material that might

otherwise be challenging. It allows them to enjoy stories and learn new information without the frustration of decoding text.

For second language learners, audio content aids in understanding pronunciation and language patterns. When paired with headphones, the experience becomes even more impactful. Headphones create an immersive audio environment that minimizes distractions and allows learners to focus deeply on pronunciation, rhythm, and vocabulary. This concentrated exposure not only sharpens listening skills but also accelerates language fluency and confidence in real-world communication.

Listening to stories can be a soothing activity, especially for children who find reading difficult. This practice supports mental well-being while providing a positive and enjoyable way to experience literature and learning.

***By integrating audio resources into early learning, educators and parents can provide children with the tools they need to develop strong comprehension and cognitive skills in an increasingly audio-driven world.***



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7 <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/fostering-early-literacy-in-ece-settings-principles-practices-and-progression/>

8 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376301166> Using audiobooks in elementary education a study of teacher perspectives

9 <https://www.ibsaafoundation.org/en/blog/the-power-of-reading-aloud-in-the-cognitive-and-emotional-development-of-children>

10 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376301166> Using audiobooks in elementary education a study of teacher perspectives

11 <https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/what-we-know-about-early-literacy-and-language-development/>

12 [https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2003/hart\\_risley](https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2003/hart_risley)

# Protecting young ears: how to provide a safer audio experience

More than 1 billion young people globally are at risk of permanent hearing loss due to unsafe listening habits.<sup>13</sup> This alarming statistic underscores the importance of prioritizing hearing safety, especially for young people.

Young children are particularly vulnerable to noise-induced hearing loss resulting from exposure to loud sounds, particularly over prolonged periods. Without the proper precautions, the tool intended to enhance learning could inadvertently cause irreversible damage.

***In early childhood learning environments, it's essential to prioritize hearing safety.***

Children can experience noise-induced hearing loss if they

do not use headphones correctly, as nearly 60% of hearing loss results from preventable causes.<sup>13</sup>

The problem isn't that parents and educators don't want to protect young ears. It's that they may not be fully aware of the dangers or lack access to the safest equipment.

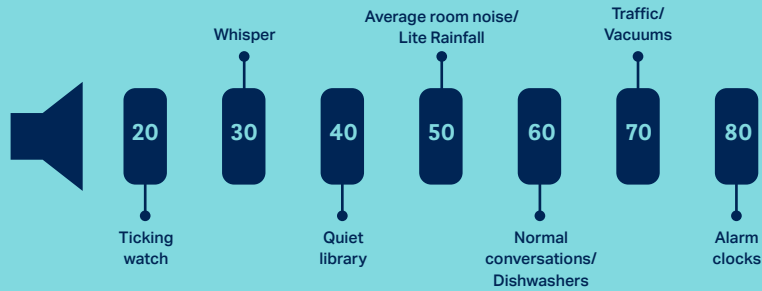
Educators and parents should encourage moderate volume levels and regular breaks from headphone use to protect young ears.



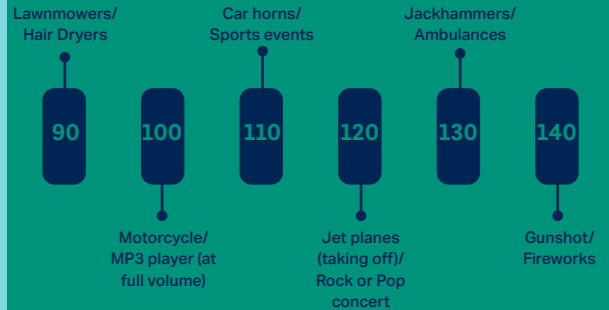


## Noise Levels

### SOUNDS AT OR BELOW 85 dB ARE SAFER LEVELS



### SOUNDS ABOVE 85 dB ARE HARMFUL



Monitoring the duration and intensity of listening sessions is crucial.

### ENSURE EFFECTIVE VOLUME CONTROL

Some school headphones can reach dangerously high volumes, exceeding 100 decibels, which can cause hearing damage quickly. It's crucial to use headphones with volume-limiting features to prevent noise-induced hearing loss.

Headphones designed for children should cap sound levels at 85dB or lower, as recommended by hearing health experts.<sup>14</sup> Without this feature, children could be unknowingly exposed to volumes that far exceed safe levels.

Provide headphones with built-in volume controls that automatically limit sound output to offer a safer listening experience for early learners..

### LIMIT SOUND LEAKAGE

Sound leakage occurs when audio escapes, often due to the design of the headphones. This can be distracting in quiet environments and often leads listeners to increase the volume on their headphones to compensate, posing risks to their hearing health.

Closed-back, over-ear headphones that fit well can help contain the audio within the headphones, preventing the need to increase volume to overcome external noise. These headphones protect the listener's hearing and minimize disruptions to others.

### MODELING AND SUPERVISION

Children learn by example, so educators and parents must model safe headphone use. Demonstrate how to set the volume at a safer level and emphasize the importance of taking regular breaks from listening.

Active supervision during listening sessions ensures that children are using headphones correctly and at safe volumes. Without this support, children could unknowingly harm their hearing, leading to long-term consequences.

Regular check-ins help maintain safer listening practices and allow for immediate adjustments if needed, safeguarding children's hearing while they enjoy the benefits of audio learning.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/deafness-and-hearing-loss>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.enthealth.org/be\\_ent\\_smart/noise-induced-hearing-loss-in-children/](https://www.enthealth.org/be_ent_smart/noise-induced-hearing-loss-in-children/)

# Enhancing the learning experience



Headphones can be a powerful tool for promoting focus in a learning environment. But, if they aren't carefully chosen, they can quickly become a source of distraction.

Poorly designed headphones—those that are uncomfortable, difficult to use, or lack durability—can frustrate children. When this happens, they end up working against their intended goal, leading children to lose focus rather than stay engaged.

## **MANAGE DISTRACTIONS AND PROMOTE FOCUS**

It's important to remember that not all headphones are created equal.

If the headphones are not user-friendly, comfortable, or durable—factors that teachers often emphasize as critical—students may be more distracted than focused.

Poor sound quality, uncomfortable fit, or complicated controls can cause students to fidget with their headphones instead of focusing on the lesson. Engagement and learning outcomes suffer.

When properly designed, headphones help create an immersive audio environment that blocks out external

# *When the correct tools are in place, children can focus on what's most important: learning and growing.*

noise, enabling children to concentrate more effectively on educational content. This focus is crucial, especially in a world where children are constantly bombarded with distractions.

***By reducing distractions and enhancing the clarity of instructional audio, headphones can significantly improve focus and engagement, making them a valuable asset in early learning.***

## **USER-FRIENDLY AND CHILD-CENTRIC FEATURES**

For young children, ease of use is critical when it comes to headphones. Teachers and parents value headphones that are simple to operate, comfortable to wear, and durable enough to withstand daily use.

Features like adjustable headbands, chew-resistant cords, and an intuitive design aren't just nice-to-haves; they're essential for ensuring children can use headphones independently. Without these features, they may spend more time struggling with their equipment than engaging in their learning.

By selecting user-friendly headphones, educators and parents can support a seamless and enjoyable learning experience for children.

When the correct tools are in place, children can focus on what's most important: learning and growing.

## **COMPATIBILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY**

In educational settings, audio devices must work seamlessly with various equipment, whether it's tablets, computers, or other digital tools. When compatibility issues arise, they can cause frustration for both students and educators.

Compatibility ensures that children can easily connect their headphones to the devices they use daily, allowing for uninterrupted learning and consistent audio quality across different platforms.

An inclusive learning environment requires accessibility for all. Features like adjustable headbands, cushioned ear cups, and clear audio transmission are important for ensuring that all children, regardless of their physical abilities, can comfortably and effectively engage in their education.

These considerations help support a diverse range of learners, ensuring everyone can participate fully in audio-enhanced learning experiences.

***Thoughtfully addressing both safety and functionality creates an audio environment that protects young learners and supports their educational experience.***



# Create a sound foundation with the correct audio tools



**Early literacy is the bedrock of lifelong learning, essential for building a child's confidence and learning outcomes. Schools, parents, and home programs lay the foundation for these skills long before a child enters a classroom.**

However, not all children receive the same opportunities, and those who fall behind early often face significant challenges later on.

Through collaborative efforts and innovative tools like audio resources, we can bridge the gaps that traditional methods might leave unaddressed.

Audio supports language development and makes learning more accessible and engaging for diverse learners. By

prioritizing safer listening practices, we ensure these resources can be used effectively without compromising a child's health.

Now is the time to take action.

***By investing in early literacy and the correct educational tools, we empower our youngest learners.***

# Checklist for choosing the correct headset for kids

When it comes to selecting the correct headset for a child, it can feel overwhelming with so many options available. But don't worry—we've got you covered.

This checklist guides you through the essential features to look for, ensuring that your choice meets the child's needs and supports their safety and learning. By considering these factors, you can feel confident in your decision, knowing you're choosing a headset perfect for early learners.



## ✓ SAFETY FEATURES

Does the headset have a built-in volume control to keep the sound levels below 85dB?

Is it made of easy-to-clean surfaces to help reduce the spread of germs?

Is it made with non-toxic, kid-safe materials?

## ✓ DESIGN AND COMFORT

Is it lightweight and designed to be worn comfortably for extended periods?

Is it tailored to the child's age group for optimal fit and function?

Is the headband adjustable and secure?

## ✓ DURABILITY

Is the cord chew-resistant so that it reduces the risk of damage and potential choking hazards?

Are the materials used sturdy and durable enough to withstand daily use?

Is the cable designed with strain relief to reduce breakage?

## ✓ AUDIO QUALITY

Does the product focus on clear audio delivery that supports literacy and language learning?

Is the sound quality excellent for enhancing comprehension and engagement?

## ✓ USABILITY

Is the design intuitive and easy for children to operate independently?

# About AVID Products and WonderEars™ AP-400 Headsets

AVID Products is a trailblazer in audio innovation with a legacy rooted in enhancing educational experiences through sound. For decades, AVID has been at the forefront of developing audio solutions that are effective, safe, and engaging for learners of all ages.

Our dedication goes beyond just creating products; it's about shaping environments where sound supports listeners and creativity.

The WonderEars AP-400 Headset is the embodiment of this mission.

Engineered specifically for early learners, WonderEars is designed to offer a safer listening experience. With volume-limiting technology that caps sound at 85dB, these headsets protect delicate ears from the risks of noise-induced hearing loss while delivering top-notch audio quality that promotes literacy and language development.

WonderEars prioritizes both safety and durability. The adjustable headband ensures a snug fit, while chew-resistant cords handle daily wear, making them perfect for any setting. With clear audio, WonderEars delivers precise sound, fully engaging early learners.

Designed for ease of use, they empower children to use the headsets independently, boosting both confidence and focus.

These headsets are more than just a tool—they're an essential part of creating a dynamic and immersive learning experience.

We believe that the correct audio solutions can make a world of difference in education. WonderEars AP-400 Headsets are a testament to our commitment to innovation, safety, and excellence, supporting the next generation of learners as they explore, discover, and grow.