



Health Literacy in Children

Rosemarie Felder-Puig



www.ifgp.at



What is health literacy? Some definitions

Health Literacy is linked to literacy and entails people's **knowledge, motivation and competences** to access, understand, appraise, and apply health information in order to **make judgments** and **take decisions** in everyday life concerning **healthcare, disease prevention and health promotion** to maintain or improve quality of life during the life course" (Sorensen et al., 2012).

Health literacy is defined as 'the degree to which individuals have the **capacity** to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate **health decisions**' (Committee on Health Literacy, 2004).

Health Literacy is the wide range of **skills and competencies** that people **develop** to seek out, comprehend, evaluate and use health information and concepts to **make informed choices**, reduce health risks and increase quality of life" (Zarcadoolas et al., 2005).

Why is health literacy important?

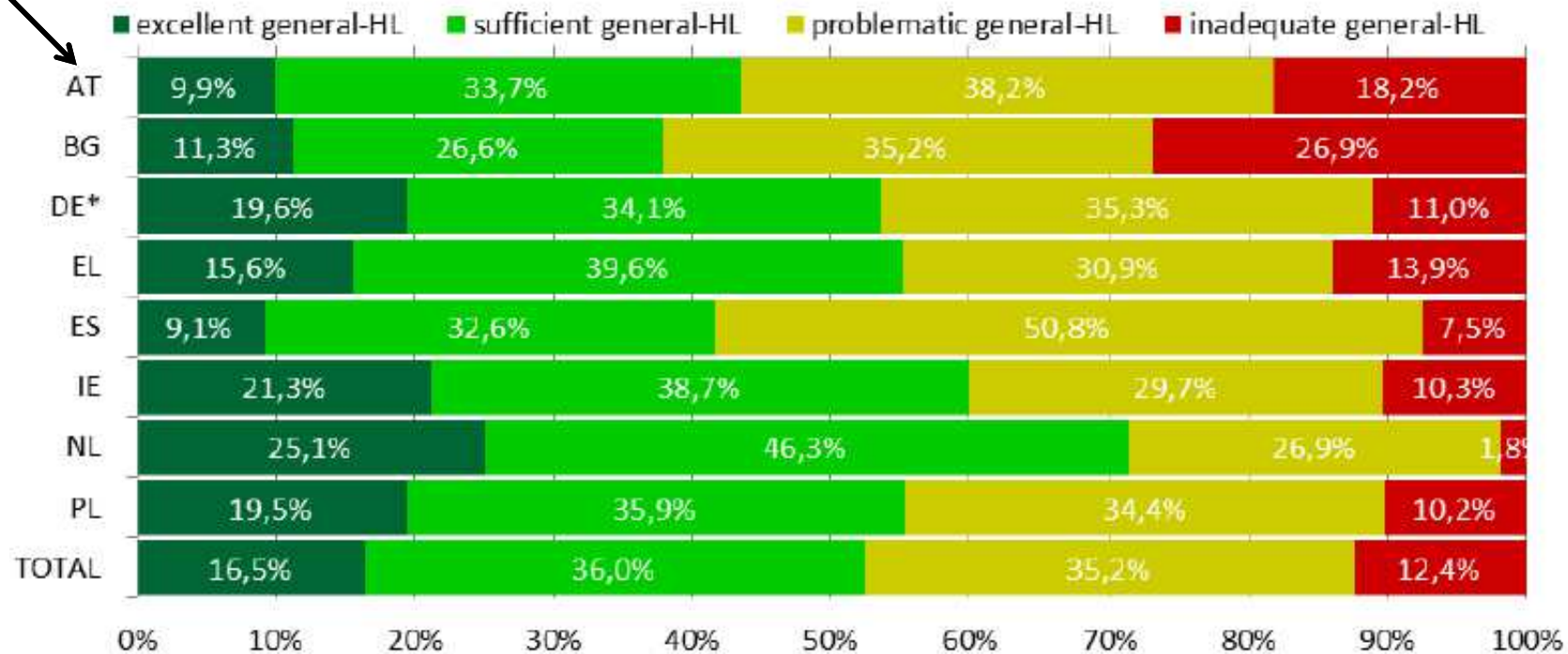
Health literacy is a better predictor for health status than the traditional sociodemographic determinants (age, income, education) (Speros, 2005; Wu et al. 2010).

The improvement of the population's health literacy will or may lead to better health outcomes and less health inequity (Nutbeam, 2000; Freedman et al. 2009; Peerson & Saunders, 2011).

The improvement of the population's health literacy will save costs for the health care system (Haun et al. 2015; Mantwill & Schulz, 2015)

Why has health literacy lately become so important in Austria?

Primarily, due to the results of the European Health Literacy Survey (HLS-EU)



Consequence of the HLS-EU study in Austria

Establishment of the Austrian platform for health literacy (direct translation used for HL: „health competence“)



3 distinctive goals that are supported with a number of projects and financial funds:

- To make the health care system and its institutions more „health-literate“
- To improve the health literacy of the Austrian population, specifically of vulnerable groups
- To integrate health literacy in the training of health care and health promotion providers



To improve the population's health literacy has become one of 10 major health aims in Austria

What is health literacy in children and adolescents?

~~*Health Literacy is linked to literacy and entails people's **knowledge, motivation and competences** to access, understand, appraise, and apply health information in order to **make judgments** and **take decisions** in everyday life concerning **healthcare, disease prevention and health promotion** to maintain or improve quality of life during the life course" (Sorensen et al., 2012).~~

The concept used for adults cannot be transferred to children

What is health literacy in children and adolescents?

Bröder et al. *BMC Public Health* (2017) 17:361
DOI 10.1186/s12889-017-4267-y


BMC Public Health

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Open Access

Health literacy in childhood and youth: a systematic review of definitions and models



Janine Bröder^{1*} , Orkan Okan¹, Ullrich Bauer¹, Dirk Bruland¹, Sandra Schlupp¹, Torsten M. Bollweg¹, Luis Saboga-Nunes², Emma Bond³, Kristine Sørensen⁴, Eva-Maria Bitzer⁵, Susanne Jordan⁶, Olga Domanska⁶, Christiane Firnges⁶, Graça S. Carvalho⁷, Uwe H. Bittlingmayer⁵, Diane Levin-Zamir⁸, Jürgen Pelikan⁹, Diana Sahrai¹⁰, Albert Lenz¹¹, Patricia Wahl¹¹, Malcolm Thomas¹², Fabian Kessl¹³ and Paulo Pinheiro¹

The authors found 12 definitions and 21 models but most of them were suitable only for youth or secondary school students

A generally accepted model of health literacy in children below 10 is still missing

Considering the children's stage of development

What may be possible at what age?*

Some examples

Type of skills	Age 4	Age 10
Document literacy skills	---	understand child-oriented information about bike-helmet use
Oral literacy skills	communicate with an adult about health behaviours (e.g. tooth brushing, physical activity)	describe ways to prevent common childhood injuries and health problems
Numeracy skills	recognize the relative value of health choices (e.g. with regard to food portion sizes)	identify the characteristics of healthy versus non-healthy foods
Systems navigation skills	---	describe how the media can influence health behaviours

*from Sanders LM et al. (2009): Health Literacy and Child Health Promotion, Pediatrics 124: S306-S314.

What we know and what we do not know

We know that even young children are health conscious, are interested in health-related matters and are able to recognize basic health concepts

What we do not know or know only very little of:

- ❖ How do young children interact with health messages and how do these messages become meaningful to them in everyday lives?*
- ❖ How do young children, in their everyday lives, make sense of health-relevant information?
- ❖ Which health literacy skills should children and adolescents have at what age?



What do we know about the association of health literacy and child health outcomes?



Health Literacy and Child Health Outcomes: A Systematic Review of the Literature

Darren A. DeWalt and Ashley Hink

Pediatrics 2009;124:S265

DOI: 10.1542/peds.2009-1162B

Results of a systematic review

- Adolescents with low health literacy generally have worse health behaviours
- Parents with low health literacy have less health knowledge and show behaviours that are less advantageous for their children's health
- Children whose parents have low health literacy often have worse health outcomes

Health literacy promotion in settings

Key messages

It is important to develop health literacy skills early in life

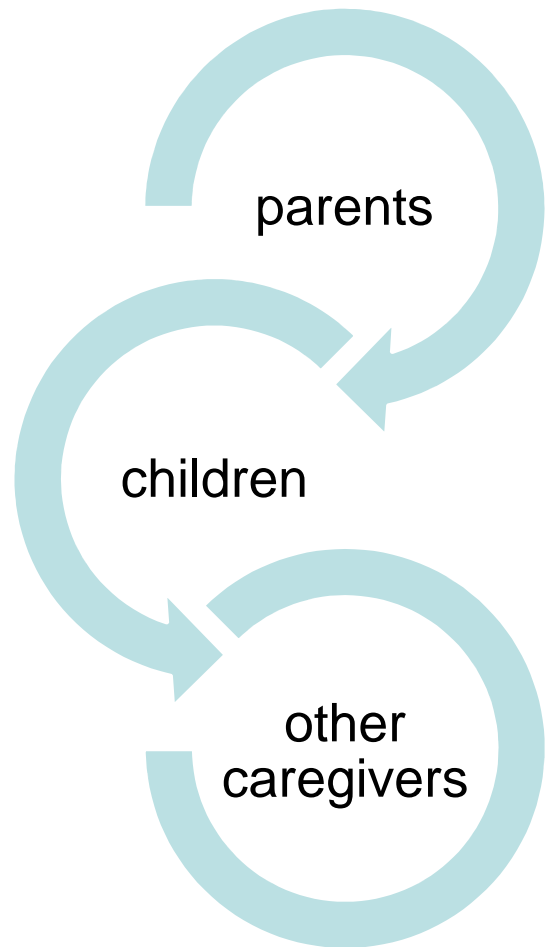
The promotion of health literacy should be mainly delivered in the education sector



WHO report of 2016



To improve health literacy and health chances in children, interventions should be targeted at:



In developing and implementing interventions to improve health literacy and raise health chances, always consider at least:

- ✓ the children's developmental status
- ✓ the families' sociodemographic (and cultural) background
- ✓ that children learn best when being offered role models and incentives
- ✓ (the children's gender)

What do we know about the association of health literacy and childhood overweight and obesity?

Health literacy & childhood overweight

Research* shows that

- parents with low health literacy are more likely to have an inaccurate perception of their child's weight,
- parents with low health literacy are less able to understand food labels, identify appropriate portion sizes, and mix infant formula correctly,
- parental obesity and low parental health literacy are the two factors most associated with child obesity,
- overweight adolescents often have low health literacy.

The US Surgeon General has identified health literacy as „as one of the largest contributors to the nation's epidemic of overweight and obesity“.

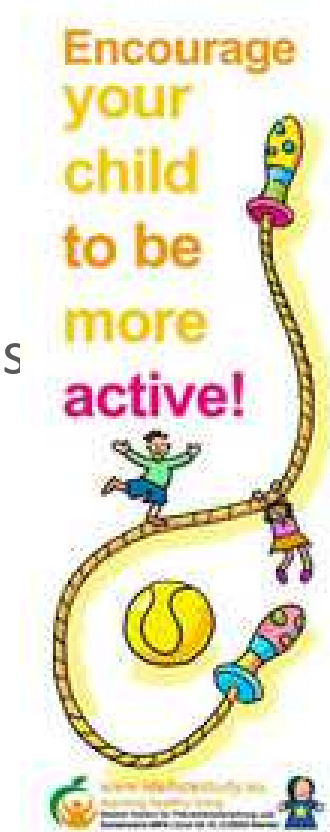
*see e.g.: Sanders LM et al. (2009): Health Literacy and Child Health Promotion, Pediatrics 124: S306-S314; Chari R et al. (2014): Association between health literacy and child and adolescent obesity. Patient Education and Counseling 94: 61-66.

Primary prevention of childhood overweight & obesity (1)

Summary of recommendations based on evidence from the literature*

1. Integrate education with supportive environmental change in school and child-care settings: children should be taught about healthy eating and physical activity while being provided with healthy food and lots of opportunities for physical activity

2. Include both nutrition education and physical education in school and child-care settings and also provide parents with this education



*Hoelscher DM et al. (2013): Interventions for the prevention and treatment of pediatric overweight and obesity. J Acad Nutr Diet 113: 1375-94.

Primary prevention of childhood overweight & obesity (2)

Summary of recommendations based on evidence from the literature*



3. Build in parent engagement for younger children: Parents should not only receive information but also be given guidance and at-home activities to aid in the progression of a healthier lifestyle

4. School and child-care based interventions show better results when **coupled with community efforts that reinforce healthy eating and activity as well as consistent messaging**

Primary prevention of childhood overweight & obesity (3)

Summary of recommendations based on evidence from the literature*

5. Policies that limit food availability, especially in schools, may be promising

6. Since children are inundated with messages promoting consumption of high-energy foods, it is important to **intensify and sustain the dose of nutrition education**



*Hoelscher DM et al. (2013): Interventions for the prevention and treatment of pediatric overweight and obesity. J Acad Nutr Diet 113: 1375-94.

Investing in the promotion of health literacy of children, their families and their educators in kindergarten and school in combination with evidence-based and setting-oriented overweight prevention strategies are sincere public health requirements

However, stakeholders must be aware that interventions must be intense in order to be successful