How to help children learn



- **Try to see things from their point of view.** Understanding how children see the world will help you to help them as they learn.
- **Let children be children.** A skilled five year old grows from a busy four year old, a curious three year old, a cuddled two year old, an adventurous one year old and a communicative baby.
- **Be a playful companion.** You can enjoy childhood with the children as well.
- **Feelings matter** – both the children's emotions and your own are part of any situation with young children. It is very helpful to be aware of your own moods as well as the children's when enjoying yourself with them and during difficult moments.
- **Don't expect to be perfect.** Everyone does something they don't mean sometimes. Children can be forgiving as long as we are thoughtful most of the time and are ready to say sorry when we should.

The road to reading

Jillian Harker

Reading is fun. It's also a key skill that helps us to learn and to live our lives – so starting to read is an exciting and important stage in children's development. As with so much of their learning, children practise many of the skills they need for reading over a long period, starting years before they actually try to make sense of printed words. They do this through a variety of activities, some of which might seem to have little or nothing to do with books.

Speaking and listening

To become expert readers, children need to be good at having conversations. Simply talking with children plays a vital role in getting them ready for reading. As they try out new words, they build up a store of vocabulary which prepares them for many words they will meet later in print. By talking to lots of different people, they become familiar with the sounds and rules of language. You can help by talking with children as you go about everyday activities:

- tell them the words for unfamiliar objects
- use lots of describing words as you explore things together
- be happy to answer questions.

Pretend play

Children are great imitators. Seeing adults read for enjoyment or for a purpose makes children want to be able to read too. This doesn't mean that they always have to see us reading books – looking up numbers in a telephone directory, reading labels in the supermarket and checking bus timetables are just as important. Children who see reading as part of everyday life and who have plenty of opportunities to play at pretend reading will be well prepared when they come to do the real thing. You can help by providing lots of things around the house that help children play at reading before they can actually make sense of print. For example:

- put out an old telephone directory by the play phone, leave recipe books next to the play dough and keep DIY manuals with construction sets
- keep a pile of newspapers and magazines so that children can play at 'grown-up' reading
- encourage children to pretend reading bedtime stories to their toys.

Looking at detail

By the time children start learning to read they need to be able to notice small details, and to see similarities and differences. This is important because many of the letters used in writing English look very similar: if you add a line crossing the letter 'l' it becomes the letter 't' – and the letter 'd' looks like the letter 'b' backwards.

There are lots of ways that young children learn to notice these details. When fitting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, hunting for a particular object in a busy picture or crawling around the garden following the progress of an ant, they are learning to concentrate and to pick up on small differences. You can help by encouraging children to look carefully at the world around them.

- Share picture books and talk about what you see in them.
- Provide 'spot the difference' activities.
- Take time to stop and look carefully at things on a walk: the pattern of veins on different leaves, perhaps, or the path of a crack in a wall.

Rhyme

Hearing and saying rhymes is great for learning to read. Sharing rhymes with young children helps them listen to the patterns of language. Children first begin to notice that certain words have the same sounds at the end (rhyme). Later they notice that many words share a pattern in the way they are spelt. Understanding these links makes learning to read much easier. You can help by making sure that children hear a lot of rhymes. The rhythm found in poetry is also helpful as there is a rhythm to reading.

- share nursery rhymes, making them fun by adding actions and body movements
- read rhyming stories
- play games such as 'I spy with my little eye something that rhymes with …'

Remembering

To become readers children need to remember the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they represent. They must remember the meanings of words and the sense of what they have just read. You can help by playing games with children which help them to concentrate and develop their memory skills.

- encourage them to remember and talk about the events of the day
- play 'I went to market and bought…', taking it in turns to add something to the list
- help children to develop a memory of what they see through pairs games, when you turn over two cards to see if they match.

Enjoying books together

Babies can join a library at any time. Libraries offer storytime sessions for children of all ages. You may also find books at car boot sales for just a few pence. Wash soft baby books thoroughly if you buy from a boot sale and carefully sponge down hard-back books. It's also fun to swap books with friends. You can design a personal book using digital family photos.

Babies and toddlers

It's never too early to start sharing books. Cuddling up close with babies or sitting them on your knee as you share a book will make a close bond between you and help them to link books with enjoyable times. Talk about what you see on

a page and ask questions – it doesn't matter that you need to answer the questions yourself at this stage. As you do this, you help babies develop listening skills and prepare them for talking later on about the books they enjoy. By simply watching as you turn the pages of a board or bath book, babies also learn how books work – that we start at the front and work through to the back when reading a book in English.

Encourage toddlers to choose a favourite book for you to look at together. Let them hold the book and turn the pages. Find time to talk about the book afterwards and make links, whenever possible, with other things they enjoy. If you share a book about a park, for instance, you can remember your own trips to the local park. What do you do there? What do you see together? What does it feel like to be on the swings?

Good books to share with babies and toddlers are:

- picture books with large, clear illustrations
- photographic books and books full of everyday objects
- books about first experience such as a visit to the doctor or a stay with grandparents
- novelty books with textures, flaps and pop-ups.

Emerging readers

There is lots you can do to help children move towards learning to read. Talk with them about what they think might happen next in a story or ask them to retell the story themselves, perhaps using pictures. Pictures continue to be very important, so look for books without any writing to help children practise the skill of telling stories. Have fun acting out stories together. Your enthusiasm for a book will help children to understand that books are exciting.

Focus on the sounds of spoken language by playing games which point out similar sounds in different words. For example, how many things can you find around the house that begin with the sound 'f'? Share favourite rhymes, letting children supply the rhyming word or encouraging them to choose their own silly rhyme.

Help children to understand that the marks on the page mean something, that they represent the words and sentences we speak. Point to the words as you read stories. Have fun discovering examples of print around you: the sign on a bus stop, labels at the supermarket, traffic signs, and so on. Read alphabet books together to make the link between the sounds used in words and the letters used to write those sounds. Label your children's bedroom door, to help them to recognise their name.

Share the following books:

- rhyming books
- alphabet books
- a wide range of exciting stories
- non-fiction books about favourite subjects.

Becoming readers

Most children move gradually from the emergent reader stage into real reading. The age at which this happens can vary but children who enjoy looking at books and telling stories are probably ready to start reading when they can:

- focus on details, and spot similarities and differences
- retell stories, putting events into the correct order
- tell a story from the pictures
- carry out simple instructions.

As children pass through the first three years at school, they learn to recognise more of the sounds made by letters and groups of letters (this is known as phonics). They gain a range of words they recognise on sight, and learn that capital letters and full stops help to group words when reading. As children come to understand print as a way of communicating, they start wanting to communicate themselves – and so their interest in writing develops. This encourages them to pay close attention to the detail of what they read.

All this takes a long time and your encouragement plays an important part. Short, relaxed sessions of reading with you will give children valuable practice in the skills they are learning. If children don't show any interest in reading, perhaps they need to spend more time playing with their emergent reading skills first. Some children need a more systematic approach to learning to read, but if problems continue it is worth talking to your child's teacher.

All children, whatever stage they have reached, benefit from continuing to hear exciting books read to them. The most important thing is that they should find reading fun.

The road to reading

Useful publications

Helen Bromley (2006) ***Making my own mark: play and writing***, London: Early Education.

Di Chilvers (2006) ***Young children talking***: the art of conversation and why children need to chatter, London: Early Education.

Jillian Harker (2003) ***100 language games for ages 3–5***, Leamington Spa: Scholastic.

Jillian Harker (2004) ***Alphabet fun: 10 minute ideas for early years***, Leamington Spa: Scholastic.

Diane Rich (2002) ***More than words***: children developing communication, language and literacy, London: Early Education.

Useful contacts

National Literacy Trust:
www.literacy trust.org.uk

British Dyslexia Association:
helpline 0845 251 9002; www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

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Learning together series
The Learning together series of leaflets aims to help parents and other caring adults understand children's development, play an active part in their learning and enjoy the children they spend time with. The leaflets cover a wide range of topics, including life with babies and toddlers, children's behaviour, being outdoors, drawing and writing, reading, maths, ICT and equality – and more. The leaflets can be downloaded from the Early Education website www.early-education.org.uk

Early Education promotes the right of all children to education of the highest quality. It provides support, advice and information on best practice for everyone concerned with the education and care of young children from birth to eight.