



## Helping Your Child With Literacy

## Parents are the first and most important teachers

From the moment a new-born baby begins to respond to the words and facial expressions of its parents, the learning process starts and continues relentlessly without the need for great effort on the part of the parent. As daunting as it might sound at the outset, as soon as a young child delights in a new skill learned, so the reward of being the first and most important teacher becomes obvious.

The journey to literacy begins for a child as soon as they learn to respond to voices and begin to understand that certain words accompany certain actions. It would be easy to assume that before a child begins to speak, his or her comprehension of language was non-existent. Whilst it is usual for a toddler to begin to use between 10 and 20 words by 18 months, it is also usual for a 12 month old to recognise common words and be able to follow simple commands when accompanied by gestures.<sup>i</sup> This confirms that very young children are constantly learning. It is a natural progression for parents as first teachers to also encourage the development of a child's reading and writing skills.

Less than 30 years after education became compulsory for all children in Britain, the Acland Report of 1908 began to explore at what age children should begin a formal education;

"The proper place for a child between three and five is at home with its mother...."<sup>ii</sup>

A century later and academics are confirming that what happens in the home before a child reaches school age makes a huge difference;

"Parents who introduce their babies to books may give them a head start in school, giving them an advantage over their peers throughout primary school"<sup>iii</sup>

"The early years HLE [home learning environment] is found to be a powerful predictor of better cognitive attainment at age 10 even after 5 years in primary school."<sup>iv</sup>



Before breaking into a cold sweat at the thought of spelling tests before breakfast, parents should note some of the most important home and parental influences on children up until the age of 3 include;

- How often children play with numbers and letters
- Whether children and parents discuss letters and sounds
- Parents reading to their children and visiting libraries together
- Parents teaching nursery rhymes and songs to their child<sup>v</sup>

Whether children are cared for at home before beginning school or by a childcare provider, the evidence in favour of seeking out and encouraging learning opportunities for pre-schoolers is abundant. It is considered to be of such importance that the Department for Education produced a framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage which outlines the growth and development of young children that begins at birth until 5 years.<sup>vi</sup>

1908 – “Where children under five are admitted to school, they should not be subjected to mental pressure....”<sup>vii</sup>

1933 – “The curriculum of the infant school is to be thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than of knowledge to be acquired....”<sup>viii</sup>

1990 – “Children must be given opportunities for playing and talking....play is a good deal more than recreation”<sup>ix</sup>



Encouraging your pre-school child with reading and writing does not need a formal approach and research cited in Esmé Raji Codell's *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading* indicates that simply reading stories with a young child;

- Provides the child with a reading role model
- Creates empathy toward other people
- Improves a child's probability of staying in school
- Nurtures emotional development and improves self-esteem
- Improves problem-solving and critical thinking skills...<sup>x</sup>

## Encouraging Mark Making

Although it is usual for a child to develop skills in recognising and identifying letters and numbers before being able to write them, babies from 12 months old take an interest in 'mark making' which is the predecessor of drawing and writing recognisable images and shapes. An extensive study published by the Centre for Early Literacy Learning in 2009<sup>xi</sup>, explored the ages and stages for mark making amongst children aged 12 months to 42 months. The purpose of the study of 1675 infants and toddlers was to ascertain whether or not there are developmental

stages in children's mark making and what factors might enable them to progress through these stages.

One of the most interesting discoveries of the study was that children develop the ability to create representational drawings (as opposed to squiggles, dots and lines) at an age that corresponds to their ability to begin to think in words.<sup>xii</sup> Some key factors that were also identified to encourage toddlers to pick up a pen included;

- A writing instrument that produces a visual effect easily, which encouraged better quantity and quality of mark making.
- Paper that has a background, such as a picture, produced more complex drawings.
- Children produced better quality drawings when engaged in activities alongside adults.
- Felt tip pens and crayons were identified as the best writing instruments for infants and toddlers.<sup>xiii</sup>

### How did you learn to read and write?

Whilst it is likely that parents today have the sketchiest of memories of learning to read and write themselves, it is worthwhile recognising that the techniques used to teach literacy in schools today may be very different from those in previous generations. An insight into how the teaching and learning process has changed may be beneficial to understanding how best to support your child with their learning journey. The information below is summarised from research conducted by Jan Turnbull, a lecturer in Language Education at Wollongong University, Australia.<sup>xiv</sup>

Parent's Age	Primary School Start Date	Focus of Literacy Teaching
20s	1988-1998	A shift in emphasis that equated literacy with social mobility and success. The Literacy Hour and SATs were introduced in UK schools which had a significant impact on structured literacy education. The development of new technologies meant a huge range of additional sources for reading.
30s	1978-1988	Pupils were encouraged to write at a much earlier age and 'have a go' with spelling words. A greater variety of reading materials were available – including 'big' books which were used for whole class story reading. There was some concern that children were overly encouraged and not taught how to spell 'properly' during this time.
40s	1968-1978	The teaching of reading became less mechanical and continued throughout primary school. It was recognised that the reader brings meaning to texts.
50s	1958-1968	Reading was taught to pupils through phonics, rote learning and drills. Reading was seen as a tool for information only and was taught separately from spelling and writing. Reading was taught as a skill only at the beginning of primary school.



## Different approaches to literacy

With more than 130 years of standardised education in Britain, it is not surprising that there are a number of different approaches to teaching children to read and write. Whilst phonics based programmes are most commonly used across British primary schools today, it is useful to be familiar with other techniques that have been historically popular as there are merits in each approach and many children instinctively blend a variety of techniques when they are learning to read and write.

### Look Say method

At the start of the 20th Century, there was concern that techniques that relied on children rote learning lists of spellings caused anxiety in many and hindered their progress. The Look Say method sought to combat this issue by encouraging children to remember the appearance and shape of a core list of 100 simple words. This would enable children to successfully read a series of simple reading texts thus building their self-confidence. The disadvantage of this technique is that children are still required to learn phonics, which are the building blocks of reading at a later point. Instinctively, children do use this technique as they recognise first words, such as their name.

### Whole Language method

In 1967, Ken Goodman, an expert in reading and language, proposed a technique for teaching reading and writing which asserted that children should focus on the context of words in a sentence and their meaning, rather than emphasising the individual sounds or phonemes within each word. Whole Language advocates argue that reading should be enjoyed and not approached as a scientific process. This method became popular in the 1980s and schools gave over more classroom time to reading and encouraging students to enjoy reading individually and in groups. Those who opposed Whole Language expressed concern about the lack of scientific research supporting its merits.

### Phonics- based approach



Phonics based approaches to teaching reading are used by schools throughout Britain since the 1990s. Children are taught phonemes (speech sounds) for the letters of the alphabet and are taught how to blend these sounds together to form words. This technique focuses on the building blocks of reading but also allows for the teaching of writing simultaneously as children can 'sound out' the words that they wish

to write with reasonable accuracy. This approach has led to year on year increases in national literacy standards in the UK since the mid-1990s.

## Practical ideas for supporting your child at the start of their journey to literacy

The Department for Education in September 2012 issued an updated framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, which essentially covers a child's suggested development from birth to 5 years, when they have completed the Reception year of Primary school. The framework does not attempt to tell parents or childcare providers what children should be doing at any given age, but gives guidance on the usual pattern of learning at each age as well as suggesting ways in which adults can support this learning.

Some parents may be concerned at the use of 'learning' when discussing infants and pre-schoolers. The research suggests however, that 90% of brain growth happens in the first 6 years of life<sup>vi</sup> and taking an active role in encouraging children as they acquire new skills is surely a natural part of parenthood. The suggestions below do not require special training or equipment and should integrate naturally with daily activities and conversations with your pre-schooler. There is no expectation on parents or childcare providers of pre-schoolers to teach children the alphabet before they begin Reception class at 4 years old. In reality, many children will take an interest in letters and numbers at a much earlier age with gentle encouragement.

### If your child is 12 months or younger...

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You might notice...

- He enjoys looking at books with people who he is familiar with.
- He likes to hold crayons but isn't yet ready for mark making.

You could support this by...

- Visiting the local library for a selection of board books.
- Using songs and rhymes with actions to keep his interest. You will find some suggestions at the Bookstart website below.
- Contacting your health visitor or local library to collect your Bookstart pack containing free board books and useful information about reading with children. Visit <http://www.bookstart.org.uk/> for more information.
- Experimenting with non-toxic finger paints – under close supervision as it is likely he will try to taste them. If you are concerned about this, consider using leftover vegetable puree or pasta sauce. Tape newspaper or wallpaper (pattern side down) to a table and let the creativity begin.



- For the truly brave parent, consider a bare foot painting session.

If your child is 12 to 18 months old....

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You might notice...

- She is interested in looking at books and may have favourites.
- She is beginning to recognise objects, animals and people in books and point at them.
- She is beginning to show an interest in mark making.

You could support this by....

- Researching story time activities available at the local library or children's centre.
- Making a selection of board books available for her to reach easily and choose from.
- Making a picture book for your baby with photos of familiar people, objects or places.
- Encouraging her animal impersonations, however strange they might sound! Point out animals and objects during the day, that she has seen in books you have read together.
- Let her enjoy playing with crayons and felt tips, remembering that any marks made are just for fun.
- The research suggests that paper that has a picture outline on it (particularly of faces or animals) is most likely to engage a toddler.<sup>xvi</sup>
- There is also evidence that toddlers will remain interested in mark making for a longer period of time if creating alongside an adult.<sup>xvii</sup>

If your child is 18 months to 2 years old....

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You might notice...

- He is beginning to join in songs and rhymes
- He has favourite stories or songs
- He is beginning to make controlled marks

You could support this by....

- Encouraging joining in with rhymes and songs and make a CD or playlist of favourites for the car or at home.
- Focusing on the pictures in books, ask simple questions such as, 'what colour is the car?'
- Encouraging curiosity with books containing hidden pictures behind flaps.
- Avoiding the temptation to get a CD of his favourite story and use this instead of reading to him.

- Praising his art work with a frame somewhere prominent for displaying his masterpieces.

If your child is 2 to 3 years old.....

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You might notice....

- She will fill in words from her favourite stories if you miss them out whilst reading to her.
- She will hold a book the right way up and turn pages in the right direction.
- She is beginning to create marks and recognisable shapes and she can describe them.

You could support this by....

- Reading favourite stories and pausing to allow the missing word to be added in.
- Encouraging her to use her favourite stories when she's playing; such as recreating 'The Tiger who Came to Tea' with a tea party with teddies or going on a 'Gruffalo' hunt in the local park.
- Creating a simple story corner or den at home; gather together some cushions, a blanket and favourite teddies and books for reading fun or consider a darker setting for story corner and providing a torch or coloured light.
- Making some picture cards with names of items regularly bought at the supermarket allowing her to help you with the shopping. This will encourage her to remember the first sounds of the objects as well as the shape of the words.
- Ensuring that you model good practice with reading; does your toddler ever see you read?
- Encouraging her listening skills – it is important to remember that speaking and listening are the first steps of language development that lead naturally to reading and writing. By age 2, a child has listened to more than 1000 hours of speech. Head outside for a 'listening walk' and encourage your toddler to identify the sounds she can hear.
- Embracing technology; if you own a smartphone or tablet computer, there are a huge range of free educational apps aimed at toddlers. Whilst it might seem terrifying, the reality is that your child watches and learns from your interaction with a touch-screen device and soon expects other objects to respond accordingly.<sup>xviii</sup> With a little discernment, it is possible to find some activities that encourage hand-eye co-ordination with simple puzzles as well as those that allow the user to trace over letters, numbers and shapes.

If your child is 3 to 4 years old.....

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You might notice....

- He can describe what is happening in a story and suggest an ending.





- He is interested in the words and pictures in a book.
- He can identify his own name and some logos.
- He may be able to recognise and give the sounds for the letters of the alphabet.
- He creates pictures that he can describe and may imitate writing.
- He may attempt to write his own name.

You could support this by.....

- Encouraging him to retell parts of a story read together to someone else. You may need to think of questions or prompts that will help or consider using props to represent characters or objects from the story.
- Using the pictures in a book as a springboard for a discussion about feelings. Can he tell if someone is happy or angry from looking at their expressions? Why are they feeling sad? Encouraging children to be able to identify feelings is a fundamental part of social education and using third parties often makes this easier.
- Spotting familiar logos and brands when shopping – Create a bingo sheet of items that you know he can spot or consider using a shopping list app, some of which allow you to have both a picture of the item as well as the word. This will reinforce the spelling and appearance of familiar words.
- Developing his knowledge of the sounds of the letters of the alphabet. Remember that the phonetic sound of a letter is different from the name of the letter. Children usually learn the sound first, such as 'nnnnn' for the letter N. You can encourage this learning process with simple phonics based games such as 'hide and seek' – Can he find ten objects in the house that start with a 'nnnnn' sound? Or consider making collages with pictures of objects starting with particular sounds.
- Helping him learn the order of the letters of the alphabet. T.H MacDonald, author of *The Road to Reading* suggests this is a great starting point for learning to read.<sup>xix</sup> Use a set of magnetic or foam letters and see if he can put them into the correct order and be willing to offer lots of support to begin with.
- Remembering that reading as a skill is likely to develop long before writing so be willing to be the scribe yourself or obtain a set of magnetic or foam letters that he can use.
- Developing listening skills by saying simple words and asking him to try to identify the first sound. You could have the set of letters available for him as a prompt.
- Encouraging his creative side with photos of his artwork together with his description of what is happening in the picture.

If your child is 4 to 5 years old.....

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You might notice....

- She can give the names and sounds for the letters of the alphabet
- She has begun to read simple words and sentences



- She is taking a greater interest in books
- She can hold a pencil correctly and is able to form most letters accurately
- She can hear and say the first sound in words
- She attempts to write some simple words and sentences

You could support this by....

- Encouraging her to write her own story – with you as the scribe! Esme Raji Codell in her book, *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading*, suggests making a booklet out of folded and stapled paper and getting your child to dictate a story to you which you write down verbatim.<sup>xx</sup> This a great task for encouraging creativity as well as empowering your child as a ‘writer’.
- Demonstrating writing with your child. If you are writing a list or note, ask her to sound out some of the simpler words for you and do the same yourself so that she can observe what spelling looks like.
- Sounding out words or ‘oral blending’ – such as, “can you find your h-a-t?”
- Showing an interest in what she is doing at school. Try to ask the right question, ‘what was the best thing you did at school today?’ will always get a fuller answer than, ‘what did you do today at school?’
- Rewarding persistence and other important life skills over results. Picking up on the positive qualities that your child demonstrates rather than how many answers are correct will provide greater encouragement without any pressure.

These suggestions aim to support parents in encouraging children to develop a love for reading and writing. Whilst it is undeniable that having a secure foundation in literacy skills at an early age is educationally beneficial, the role of a parent in



encouraging a love for books should go much further than just this aim. As T H McDonald explains,

“When the child is very young, one of its most intimate experiences should surely be that of being cuddled and read to at the same time. That creates such a strong, supportive and positive association that it is difficult to underestimate its psychological value.”<sup>xxi</sup>

- <sup>i</sup> N Lilienthal, 2008, Typical Speech and Language Development located at <http://www.speechpathologyguru.com/typical-speech-and-language-development-a11/>
- <sup>ii</sup> A.H.D. Acland, 1908, School Attendance of Children below the age of 5 located at <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/acland1908/>
- <sup>iii</sup> Professor B Moore and Dr M Wade, 2000, Bookstart research quoted at [http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0423/Parental\\_involvement\\_2001.pdf](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0423/Parental_involvement_2001.pdf)
- <sup>iv</sup> Sammons, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, Smees, Dobson, Jeavons, Lewis, Morahan and Sadler, 2000, Influences on Children's Attainment and Progress in Key Stage 2: Cognitive Outcomes in Year 5 found at <http://eppe.ioe.ac.uk/eppe3-11/eppe3-11%20pdfs/eppepapers/Tier%20%20Research%20Brief.pdf>
- <sup>v</sup> Sammons et al, cited in National Literacy Trust, 2001, Parental involvement and literacy achievement found at [http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0423/Parental\\_involvement\\_2001.pdf](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0423/Parental_involvement_2001.pdf)
- <sup>vi</sup> The Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage is available to download from: <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/a0068102/early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs>
- <sup>vii</sup> A.H.D. Acland, 1908, School Attendance of Children below the age of 5 located at <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/acland1908/>
- <sup>viii</sup> H.Hadow, 1933, Infant and Nursery Schools located at <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/hadow1933/>
- <sup>ix</sup> A Rumbold, Starting with Quality located at <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/rumbold/>
- <sup>x</sup> Quotation taken from Esme Raji Codell, 2003, How to Get Your Child to Love Reading, p 12
- <sup>xi</sup> C. J. Dunst & E. Gorman Development of Infant and Toddler Mark Making and Scribbling, article located at [http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/cellreviews/cellreviews\\_v2\\_n2.pdf](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/cellreviews/cellreviews_v2_n2.pdf)
- <sup>xii</sup> The authors of the study refer to the different stages as Jean Piaget described them; namely the Sensorimotor Stage and the Preoperational stage.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Summary points taken from throughout article cited at endnote xi located at [http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/cellreviews/cellreviews\\_v2\\_n2.pdf](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/cellreviews/cellreviews_v2_n2.pdf)
- <sup>xiv</sup> J Turbill, The Four Ages of Reading Philosophy and Pedagogy: A Framework for Examining Theory and Practice located at [http://www.readingonline.org/international/inter\\_index.asp?href=turbill4/index.html](http://www.readingonline.org/international/inter_index.asp?href=turbill4/index.html)
- <sup>xv</sup> D Massaro, Acquiring Literacy Naturally, 2012 published in the American Scientist Magazine, July – August 2012 located at <http://www.americanscientist.org/issues/feature/acquiring-literacy-naturally>
- <sup>xvi</sup> See endnote xi
- <sup>xvii</sup> See endnote xi
- <sup>xviii</sup> This point is highlighted in D Massaro's article, referenced at endnote xv
- <sup>xix</sup> T H MacDonald, The Road to Reading, 1998, p52
- <sup>xx</sup> See endnote x
- <sup>xxi</sup> T H MacDonald, The Road to Reading, 1998, p31

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