

A parent's guide to...

Literacy

As a parent, literacy is probably the area that you are most determined for your child to succeed in. It is important, both in school and in life, and being able to read and write confidently and fluently are vital skills that we all need.

Literacy – or the lack of it – often forms the main focus of any media coverage of education, and politicians of all persuasions are keen to pronounce on the merits or otherwise of various approaches. It has, quite understandably, become the measure of success, both of individuals and entire systems and approaches.

We all have our own distant memories of learning how to read and write – perhaps the sense of achievement and possibility that it brought, and the confidence it gave us in all areas of life and schooling.

As your child begins to grow and mature, it is perfectly normal for you to refer back to these experiences as templates for supporting them in acquiring these most important of skills. However, it is also important to be aware of what we know about how children learn to read and write.

Over the past 20 years or so, a huge amount of research has been undertaken to establish the facts, and we are now in a much better position to see



Children become aware of meaning from quite young and start asking questions

what works, how it works and how best to enable children to read and write successfully.

What helps most when learning to read and write?

LANGUAGE

Fundamental to literacy skills is a well-developed use and understanding of language, so talking to your child at every opportunity is crucial. Educationalist James Britton once said that 'Reading and writing float on a sea of talk', and it is no surprise that having a good vocabulary, understanding of sentence structure and the ability to communicate effectively using the spoken word are directly linked to later reading and writing. After all, what we

read or write is simply what has been said and then recorded, and this is not possible without the language that allows it to happen.

PLAY

Aligned to the role of language is children's opportunity to play, of equal importance. All learning and understanding depends on this – and literacy is no exception. When children play, they make sense of what they have learned or seen and make it 'real' for themselves so that they know how to use it.

Literacy play will involve those underpinning skills of language through talking, conversing, thinking out loud, questioning, imagining, storytelling and finding out. ➤

In their play children will also 'try out' reading and writing, copying what they have seen around them and this too is a vital part of their development. These 'meaningful contexts' for children help to establish the real purpose of reading and writing.

THE EXAMPLE OF OTHERS

For most of their early years, children's understanding of literacy will develop from what they see and experience. Being read stories, and watching adults and siblings reading and writing in different ways – such as reading recipe books or sending emails – contributes to this understanding.

From quite a young age, children become aware that these things have an important meaning in the world around them. They start to make marks, notice different letter shapes and begin to ask what things 'say'. However, it is crucial to be aware that for the most part, and certainly until the age of about five, these will



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be demonstrated as reading and writing 'behaviours' rather than the finished product itself.

This means that children will imitate making marks and call it their 'writing', even if no actual letters are visible. They will pick up books and 'read' them without 'decoding' the print, often telling the story or information from memory or simply making it up using the pictures. This is an important part of the process and should be encouraged.

BE PATIENT

Above all, there should not be an inappropriate 'rush' to teach children the specific shapes and sounds of letters – what constitutes 'phonics'. It is true that to be confidently literate, children will need to be taught the 'alphabetic code'. However, this requires a very sophisticated understanding of language and will only be successful when particular neurological developments have taken place in the child's brain.

In all other European countries, these 'final' literacy



Understanding of literacy will develop from what is seen and experienced, but each child should progress in their own time



Talk to your child at every opportunity as this will help build a well-developed understanding of language crucial for literacy

skills are not taught until children are aged six or seven, and comparative studies show that European children outperform English children in reading and writing throughout their school years and beyond.

There is a real danger that if children are expected to learn letter shapes before they are developmentally ready, it will only serve to damage their understanding of literacy and give them a sense that this is something that they cannot do and affect their confidence and self-esteem.

So how can you, as a parent, support your child's understanding and development of literacy? Taking into account the

principles already discussed and what we know about how these skills develop, there are a range of simple activities and considerations linked to the child's age that will help this. Don't forget though that the age bands are merely a rough guide, as all children will progress and develop at different rates.

Birth to 12 months

- All communication at this point supports the development of the prerequisite skills for literacy. Talking to your baby while maintaining eye contact and physical rhymes such as 'Round and round the garden' all build up a



child's understanding of communication.

- Introducing children to simple board and cloth books develops the beginnings of 'reading behaviours'. Even from this young age, children will begin to recognise simple representations of familiar objects in books and this lays the foundations for their understanding. ➤

One to two years

- Continue developing children's communication skills with more sophisticated language and conversations. This will increase their understanding and extend their vocabulary, which can happen rapidly at this age.
- Children will begin to show preferences for particular books, and will start to model the understanding of 'book behaviour' and language after seeing you read them. Make some of your own books with photographs of familiar objects or family members that the child will recognise.
- Encourage your child to 'mark make' with paint and in flour, water and dough.

Two to three years

- At this age, children will start joining in with stories, particularly ones with rhymes or repetition. Encourage them to do so and praise them when they do. Start asking simple questions about the story – for example, 'Where is the ball?' or 'Can you see the apple?'

- Make sure that your child sees you reading and writing for your own purposes. And if they are showing curiosity, tell them what you are writing in a card, on a list, an email or a text. Start pointing out signs to them and telling them what the words say. This helps them to understand the link between language and print.

Three to four years

- Children will become much more adept at choosing their own books, handling them appropriately and turning pages. They may spend time doing this on their own, re-telling themselves favourite stories or texts. Introduce them to different stories with more challenging plots and characters so they can start to consider what comes 'next'.
- Start encouraging your child to recognise words that are meaningful to them, such as their name or names of siblings, pets, favourite shops, foods or characters.



- Encourage them to 'mark make' in their play, by making lists or signs. Celebrate the marks as their 'writing', as it is a significant developmental step when a child makes this link explicit and meaningful for themselves.
- Play simple sound games such as 'I spy' or rhyming games. These will help a child to refine their ability to 'segment' – breaking down words into sounds.

Four to five years

- At this age, children will show some interest in both identifying and producing specific letter shapes. It is important that this is allowed to develop at the pace that suits the child and that they don't feel pressured. Ask them to read their own writing to you, asking 'What do you want this to say?'
- Write lists, cards and messages with your child, being explicit about what you are doing and perhaps 'forgetting' what sound a word that you are writing begins with so that they can 'help'. ■



Play helps children to make sense of what they have learned in a practical setting

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