

Early literacy

We live in a literate world, in a society that values reading and writing (literacy). Children begin to notice and respond to this literate world long before they begin the formal process of learning to read and write. Their environment contains many examples of writing, from the signs in stores and on the bus ticket, to the storybooks read at home and at school. Through their everyday experiences, children become familiar with the product of writing. When they see someone take a telephone message or write a letter, they become aware of the process of writing too. These experiences have an impact; once children realise that writing carries meaning, they have taken their first step towards becoming literate.

Learning to read and write

Learning to read and write is a long and complex process for most children. They will need to learn skills and rules and have plenty of practice to consolidate them. If children have already begun to enjoy books, then it is likely that this will encourage them on and give them a reason to persevere.

By the age of 5, many children will have a sight vocabulary of a number of words. Most will recognise their own name; many will be able to write it. Formal instruction in reading and writing will often begin in a pre-school environment alongside other, less formal, experiences and activities that contribute to the development of reading and writing skills. These include activities that involve any or all of the following:

- *hand-eye co-ordination and fine-motor skills* – you need to control a pencil to write
- *visual discrimination* – it is important to be able to distinguish one word or letter from another
- *sequencing* – the order of the letters or words affects the meaning
- *auditory discrimination* – hearing the difference between sounds and combination of sounds helps reading
- *use of symbols* – reading and writing are representational forms in which one thing, a combination of letters, stands for something else.

Also very important at this stage is using reading and writing as a meaningful part of play, for example, ‘writing’ a telephone message in role-play, or ‘reading’ the menu in a play cafe.

Reading

There are basically two approaches used in the teaching of reading:

- Look and say – an approach to reading that relies on recognition of the shape or pattern of a word.
- Phonics – an approach to reading that is based on recognition of sounds.

Look and say involves the recognition of whole words by their shape. Words are often written on flashcards and children will attempt to memorise them. Children can then read simple stories comprised of the words they have learned. They recognise words from their shapes, from the look of them. The shortcoming of this approach is that early readers will have no way of recognising words that they have not yet learned.

Phonics breaks down words into sounds and encourages the sounding out of words. Children are encouraged to pick out patterns in the sounds of words, noticing rhymes and rhythms. A knowledge of phonics will give children a good strategy for attempting unfamiliar words, especially in a language such as Vietnamese, which is phonically regular, i.e. the sounds of the letters remains reasonably consistent, even when letters are combined to form syllables and words.

In reality, a combination of both methods is usually the best approach, supported by good access to a range of reading materials, especially story books.

Early readers need lots of practice. When you listen to children read you can help them by:

- giving them your attention
- finding a place with minimal distraction
- giving the child thinking time
- helping when necessary – sometimes a bit of encouragement or a clue, for example, ‘What’s that sound?’, ‘What’s happening in that picture?’ can help the child move on.
- talking about the book and getting them to talk to you – the child may lose the sense of a story when reading it word by word
- monitoring and recording their progress – you may notice that a child is not doing very well on a particular book, so suggest something else as different approaches suit different children
- alerting them to patterns in words and sounds
- being positive about their achievements
- make individual books about the child with simple text about themselves, their family, etc.

Reading is a complex skill that may take years to achieve. As with all skills, some children will grasp it easily and progress quickly, while others find it more difficult.

Writing

Children begin writing by making marks. To adults this may appear to be meaningless scribble, but to the child it is their name, a picture of daddy, etc. During their early years in school, children need to learn the rules and conventions of writing. It becomes an important tool that they use to communicate with themselves and with the outside world.

The conventions of writing that children need to learn are as follows:

- *Letter formation* – children need to know how to form letters correctly and consistently. This means where you start and where you finish and requires a great deal of practice. Children also learn to recognise the feel of a letter when they write it. Tracing in the air and in sand helps to reinforce this.
- *Orientation* – in Vietnamese (and many other languages) this means writing (and reading) from left to right and from top to bottom.
- *Spacing* – groups of letters go together to form syllables and words and spaces separate these syllables and words. Spacing syllables and words correctly needs practice.

- *Spelling* – children need to learn that there is a standard way of spelling words. However, excessive concentration on this at the very early stages will limit and inhibit children's writing.
- *Punctuation* – this is a skill acquired later, but children notice punctuation early on in their reading and begin to introduce it into their writing. Punctuation also includes the appropriate use of upper and lower case letters.

Children's writing is not just about the technical skills listed above, it is about content too. Sometimes children become overwhelmed by these technical skills and this affects the content of their writing. A child who is limited to the words they can spell correctly or who is afraid to make a mistake will not become involved in or enjoy writing. It will become a task to be completed because an adult demands it. A sensitive adult will watch the child's progress and introduce the need for correct spelling at the right stage, ensuring that the child retains confidence in their writing abilities.

Writing is taught in a variety of ways. All approaches will ensure that children learn to form letters correctly and develop fluency in their handwriting style. Some schools favour an approach where the child writes completely on their own and then reads the writing back to an adult who may then identify something with the child that can then be discussed. This approach is known as emergent writing:

Emergent writing – an approach to writing that encourages children to write independently; also known as developmental writing.

This method enables children to get on with what they want to write without waiting for an adult to show them the correct way to write a word. Critics say that technical accuracy takes longer to establish with this method. Other schools place an earlier emphasis on accuracy, with children relying on adults for correct spelling at an early stage, with independent writing coming later. Critics of this approach say that children become over-dependent on adults and may not have the confidence to make their own attempts.

In reality, a combination of both methods is usually the best approach, with the aim of producing children's writing that shows both independence and accuracy.

Early writers need lots of practice. You can help them by:

- Sit with children and help them form letters correctly. Left-handed children may need particular help.
- Be a good role model. Let children watch you making notes, so they see that writing is a part of everyday life.
- When you write for children, make sure that your writing is clear, legible, and accurate. If children are going to copy your writing, make sure that it is large enough.
- Talk to children about their writing; use it in displays. Let them know that you value it.
- Present children with a variety of writing tasks, not just stories. Get them to make shopping lists, write letters and invitations, etc.
- Show children that writing can be found in many different places. Collect examples – involve children in this – and make a display of comics, cereal boxes, bus tickets, food labels, etc.

- Help children to present their writing in different ways, such as making books.

Development of early-drawing skills

Early-drawing skills

Initially the child holds the pencil in his palm and makes marks. This is called the “palmar grasp”. Some children hold the marking end of the pencil close to the thumb (palmar pronate), while other children hold it close to the little finger (called the “palmar supinate grasp”). Gradually, the fingers extend out onto the shaft of the pencil, while it is still held in the palm. This is sometimes referred to as a “radial palmar” or “digital pronate” grasp. Next the pencil is brought out from the palm to between the thumb and fingers, and the thumb and fingers hold it in a somewhat clumsy looking grasp. Most of the movement comes from the wrist and arm. This is called a “static tripod”, or “immature tripod” grasp.

Finally, children begin using the mature grasp with the pencil positioned between the tips of the thumb and the first two fingers, using small movements of the hand joints to move the pencil. This is called the “dynamic tripod grasp”.

Activities to develop pencil grasp

The first stage is enjoying making marks on the paper.

- Use short stubs of crayons or chalk rather than a long piece. With a regular length your child may use a palmar grasp, but when given a short piece that won’t fit into his palm, he will use the thumb and fingers in a tripod grasp.
- Triangular crayons can help cue the child to hold it with a tripod grasp.
- Thick markers, as opposed to thin, may encourage the child to use the tripod grasp.
- As the child develops a triangular pencil grip may continue to reinforce the tripod grasp.

Learning to form letters/letter formation

- Position is important. Place the paper at eye level (on an easel or board), so that the hands come up in front of the eyes, this benefits eye-hand co-ordination when the child is first learning to direct a pencil on paper, it helps the continued development of shoulder stability and wrist positioning. The child begins using large strokes, with movements of his whole arm.
- Use paper on a table or floor, taped down so it doesn’t move around. When the child has developed more control, he will be able to stabilise the paper with his other hand.

Activities to help

- Practice drawing vertical and horizontal lines beginning on a green dot (indicating ‘go’) and ending on a red dot (indicating ‘stop’).
- With simple matching activities: drawing a line from one picture to the same picture on the other side of the page.
- Dot-to-dot activities reinforce the idea of a definite starting/stopping point, and number and letter sequencing.
- Mazes are another activity that can help a child learn to begin a stroke then stop and change direction.

Drawing

Drawing is the child's first experience of expressing a thought or idea on paper. Children benefit from plenty of opportunity to experiment with different mediums such as painting or drawing on paper at an easel, on a blackboard, or on a large sheet of paper taped to the table or floor. Children need time to explore the range of marks that they can make and the combination of individual marks to produce different shapes and patterns on the paper.

Children's books

Books are an important and integral part of the educational curriculum. The early experience of books is very important in establishing positive attitudes to books and to reading.

Why are books important?

Books and stories are an important part of children's development. Books and stories can be introduced to very young children. Although the child may not fully understand the story, a quiet, intimate time reading with a parent or carer forms a positive association for the child. This in turn helps to establish a habit of reading and listening to stories that has many benefits for the child.

Language development

Language is learned: the more exposure a child has to different patterns in language, the richer their own language is likely to be. Listening to stories and talking about books enables young children to listen and respond to the sound and rhythm of spoken language. This is important to speech development at all levels. Initially, children need to recognise the sounds and rhythms that occur in their language; once this has been established they need to practise and refine their use of spoken language.

Listening to stories can also extend a child's vocabulary. As long as most of the language in the text is familiar to the child, new, imaginative language can be introduced. The child will begin to understand these new words by their context, that is, how they are used and linked with the storyline and the pictures.

Experience with books and story telling is also an important part of a child's early understanding of symbols. A child who has contact with books begins to understand that the squiggles on a page represent speech. This is a vital skill in the development of reading and writing.

Emotional development

Books and stories are enjoyable. They give children the opportunity to express a whole range of positive emotions. They provide a rich imaginative world that can be a source of great pleasure to the child, and through identification with the characters and the storyline children can develop and practise their own responses to events and experience situations and feelings that are beyond their own life experiences. This can be done in a safe environment where the child has an element of control over events.

Cognitive development

Books, if carefully chosen, can provide a powerful stimulus to the imagination of a child. They can encourage interesting and exciting thoughts and ideas. The development of imagination is an important part of being creative. Creative thoughts

and ideas are an important part of the quality of life and necessary to the development of society.

Books can also introduce children to a wide range of concepts. Repetition and varied contexts enable children to develop their understanding of the world that they live in. listening to stories, recalling and sequencing the events are also positive ways of extending young children's concentration span and memory.

Social development

Books and stories are more than just the presentation of a sequence of events; they carry in them a whole range of messages about how a society functions. This includes acceptable patterns of behaviour, expectations of groups within the society and moral codes of right and wrong. Children pick up these messages. It is therefore vital that books for young children portray a positive view of society and the people within that society. This positive view of the world contributes towards young children developing a balanced and constructive outlook on life.

Group storytime and sharing books contribute to the development of social skills of sharing, turn-taking and co-operating with others. Children begin to learn that they have to take other people's needs and wishes into account. Storytime can also provide children and adults with the opportunity to build and maintain relationships. If a cosy and comfortable environment is provided it offers a sense of closeness and intimacy for the children and adults involved.

Choosing children's books

It is important that children's books are chosen carefully. Children have different needs and interests at different stages of their development. The maximum benefit can be gained if the book chosen meets the child's needs. All children are individual and will have different needs, likes, and dislikes. There are, however, some general points to consider when choosing a book for a young child:

Planning storytime

Storytime needs to be planned as carefully as any other activity for children. The following points should be considered for all story telling, whether on a one-to-one basis, or in a small or large group:

- Choose a book that is appropriate to the child/children involved, considering their interest and their concentration span.
- Allow the child to see the pages as the story is being told.
- Point to the words as you read them, demonstrating left-to-right tracking and identifying individual words as you say them. This will help children to develop aural reading and writing skills.
- Tell the story enthusiastically, showing that you are enjoying it.
- Talk about the book after you have read it through, and follow on with songs and rhymes that link to the subject.

When telling a story to a group of children you also need to think about:

- *The area* – it should be cosy, quiet, warm, comfortable.
- *The structure of the session* – introduction, story, discussion topics and questions, rhymes and songs appropriate, where possible, to the story.

- *Visual aids* – a storyboard, puppets and other props will encourage participation and understanding. Story sacks, which contain puppets, games, or other activities linked to a particular story, being particularly effective.
- *Behaviour management* – how will you manage the behaviour to minimise interruptions and to make sure that all children can be involved in the session.

Books are a powerful way of influencing children's views about the society they live in. Books for children must, therefore, reflect positive images of all sections of society, in both the text and the illustrations.

0-3 years:

- Picture books are appropriate for this age range, especially for children under 1 year.
- Where there is text, it needs to be limited, especially for children 0-1.
- The pictures need to have bright colours and bold shapes.
- The pictures need little detail. They need to be simplified so that they are easily identified – the most obvious features stressed.
- Children enjoy familiar themes, for example families, animals.
- The complexity of pictures and text can be increased for children aged 2+.
- The context of the storytime is as important as the book itself; the cosy, close and intimate time gives children a positive association with books and reading.

3-7 years:

- Illustrations still need to be bold, bright, and eye-catching, but can be more detailed and have more meaning than pure recognition.
- Sequenced stories become popular – with a beginning, middle, and end.
- The storyline needs to be easy to follow, with a limited number of characters.
- Repetition is important so that the reader or listener can become involved in the text.
- Animated objects are popular – children can enter into the fantasy.
- Children enjoy humour in stories, but it needs to be obvious humour, not puns or sarcasm.

Further issues to consider, include:

3-5 years:

- Repetition is important – for language development and for the enjoyment of the sound and rhythm of language.
- Books need to be reasonably short, to match children's concentration span.
- Books need minimum language with plenty of pictures that relate to the text.
- Popular themes are still everyday objects and occurrences.

5-7 years:

- A clearly identifiable story and setting are important.
- Children's wider interests, experiences, and imagination should be reflected in themes.
- The characters can be developed through the story.
- Language can be richer – playing with rhyme and rhythm, the introduction of new vocabulary and the use of repetition for dramatic effect.

Story telling

Issues to think about:

- How to promote positive images when story telling.
- How to arrange children comfortably.
- Ways of engaging and maintaining children's interest.
- Telling stories and rhymes to children.
- The ways that children may react to stories and rhymes.
- How to plan a story session.
- Closing a story session.

How to promote positive images when story telling

The contents of a story can have a profound effect upon the way that children view themselves, their families and the world around them. It is important to remember:

- Boys and girls can both have adventures.
- The diversity of characters and cultures can be celebrated.
- Children with special needs can take the main roles in a story.
- Parents can help to provide stories in other cultures and languages.

How to arrange children comfortably

Children need to be able to sit comfortably during a story session and should be able to easily hear and see you. You too need to be comfortable, slightly higher than the children and be able to see them all well.

In a large group – children should sit on a carpet or mat. *In a small group* of five or six children you may be able to sit at the same level of the children and bring them closer to you.

One-to-one or *in pairs* – with one or two children, they may sit on your lap if they wish to or sit close to you on a chair. This is a wonderful time to make a child feel special.

Ways of engaging and maintaining children's interest

Never begin a story until all the children are settled and ready to listen. Sometimes you may have to play a gentle game or sing a song to calm them down, particularly if they have been playing outside before storytime. Remember that the story that you choose needs to be appropriate for the age of the children involved.

It is also important to tell the children something about the story before you start so that they are keen to hear more. For older children, who will cope with listening to a chapter or section of a story each session, stop the story at an interesting place. This will make them eager to listen at the next storytime.

Make sure also to provide a story that is the right length, because if it is too long the children will find it difficult to remain attentive.

Visual aids

All sorts of props can be used to help you tell your story. This will help to stimulate the children's imagination.

The list of props that could be used is endless and they need not be expensive. Here are some suggestions:

- Dress up as a character.
- Show photographs or pictures.
- Use puppets.
- Show objects from the story, such as food, animals, etc.
- Display a storyboard to add pictures of characters as you tell a story.

Story bags or sacks are a valuable resource. Story bags contain a storybook and a variety of objects and activities related to the theme of the story.

Your voice

Your voice is your most important tool when reading a story to children. You should use:

- A variety of tone – giving interest to the story, and different voices.
- Appropriate and varied pitch – use your voice like a musical instrument.
- Clear speech – so that the children are able to understand the story – make sure you sit up straight and are slightly above the children.
- Changes of pace when necessary to suit the mood of the story.
- Pauses when necessary – this can be very effective, adding dramatic pauses to the story!

Your body language

Your body language can also add a lot to the atmosphere when you are telling a story. You can use:

- Eye contact to attract the children's attention (although remember that some children may feel uncomfortable if too much use is made of this).
- Your hands, when necessary, to illustrate a part of the story, such as holding an animal or pretending to throw a ball that is contained in the story.
- Facial expressions to reflect moods of the story, such as happiness, fear, etc.
- The angle of your body – lean forward slightly to increase the excitement at an intense moment of the story!

When reading to a group of children remember that you should hold the book to one side, with the pages facing the children at their level.

Telling stories and rhymes to children

Telling a story or rhyme is a skill that you will develop through practice. A good story will have a structure – a beginning, a middle, and an end. When reading a book you will depend upon the text, but when *telling* a story you will depend upon:

- Your body language
- Your voice – the pitch and tone
- Props
- Involving the children when necessary.

It may be an ideal time for you to dress up as a character from the story or to use a puppet, as the children need to focus on you rather than a text.

Story telling sessions are an ideal time to introduce traditional tales or to focus on stories where the main characters have particular learning needs, such as a child in a wheelchair, or a character who has a visual impairment.

The way that children may react to stories and rhymes

When you are telling a story rather than reading a book it is easier to change the story length according to the children's attention span. Children do interrupt and they should be encouraged to listen. They may interrupt because:

- Part of the story relates to things they know about and wish to share with others.
- Part of the story relates to things they know little about.
- The story does not interest them or is too long.

Deal with interruptions very carefully and calmly, according to the nature of the interruption – some are positive interruptions (e.g. asking a question related to the story), some are negative (e.g. a child pushing another child in the group).

How to plan a story session

The following guidelines may help you when planning a story session:

- Ensure that all the children can see or hear and that you have chosen an appropriate place to tell the story.
- Take into account any particular needs of individual children in order for them to enjoy the story (e.g. any child with a visual impairment should be placed close to the book).
- Become familiar with the story yourself – this will help you read fluently whilst holding the book for the children to see.
- Consider using visual aids to enhance the session.

Closing a story session

It is important to encourage children to recall stories as part of their language development. Questions at the end of a story session are a good way to develop these skills. Make sure questions are:

- Varied and interesting.
- Encourage recall of the story.
- Open and encourage discussion.

You may also want to sing some relevant songs to develop the story theme or relate other curricular activities to the story, such as drama or art.

Above all have fun, relax, and enjoy this special time!

Further reading:

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