

Help your Child to Develop Preschool Literacy Skills

We all know that by talking to our babies we help to encourage their language development leading eventually to those unforgettable first words.

The same applies to the other literacy skills of reading and writing. Studies have shown that reading, writing and oral language abilities develop together, beginning at birth and evolving gradually over time.

We can encourage this development by actively engaging our children while they are still young in interesting and meaningful reading and writing experiences. By learning preschool literacy skills long before they can actually read or write, our children are more likely to experience later success in reading and writing.

Make your child aware of the text around her and help her to interact with it.

Expose her to many different types of preschool literacy experiences such as conversation, word play, stories, books, writing materials, road signs, shopping lists etc.

You should also let your child see you read every day - whether it is a newspaper, a recipe book or a magazine. This will show her the value and enjoyment of reading and she will begin to learn why, what and how people read.

Below are some specific ideas of ways you can help to promote your child's preschool literacy learning:

Oral Language, Vocabulary and Language Comprehension

- Label the environment. Talk to your child commenting on what she is doing, thinking and seeing.
- Engage your child in conversations. Ask questions and encourage her to reply.
- Use interesting new vocabulary when speaking to your child.
- Tell and draw stories for your child.
- Take turns describing pictures in books. Try pretending to make a mistake. Children love correcting their parents!
- Read aloud to your child. The importance of reading aloud cannot be overemphasized. Research shows that it is the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual reading success. Find out more about how you can make the most of reading to children.

Print Awareness

Research shows that children from homes containing many books develop a high interest in books themselves. These children are more likely to become confident readers.

- Create a print-rich environment. Surround your child with books and other written materials. Place baskets full of books around the house where they will be used most often, for example the bathroom, kitchen, playroom and bedroom. Label toy boxes and bedroom doors.
- Point out the different forms and functions of print. For example, point out signs warning of danger or telling you where to find a favourite restaurant, menus informing you of food choices, lists reminding you what to buy, books telling a story.
- Explain how books 'work'. They have a front and a back, you read from left to right and top to bottom. Words are made up of letters and there are spaces between words. Try pretending that a stuffed animal wants to read the book and doesn't know how. Can your child help? Where should the animal start? Which word should he read first? Then what?
- Go to the library. Let your child pick out her own books.

Production of Text

- Surround your child with writing supplies. Provide a variety of different supplies where they can be easily reached such as paper of different colours, pens, pencils, crayons, chalkboard and chalk, markers and marker board.
- Encourage your child to write or draw.
- Provide a bulletin board to display your child's writing and other work.
- Develop your child's writing skills by trying some of these activities for teaching writing.

Phonological Awareness (speech sounds)

- Read nursery rhymes and rhyming poems. The unusual sounds and rhythms in nursery rhymes capture your child's attention and entertain her. She focuses on the strange rhymes and alliterations rather than the actual meaning of the words. This tunes her ear to differences and similarities in how words sound.
- For example, to know that 'pat' rhymes with 'cat' but not with 'pack' means that she can distinguish among sounds, thus helping her make the association between written letters and their sounds. This will eventually help her to use known words to read new (rhyming) words.
- Reinforce the idea of syllables. Clap between the syllables of a nursery rhyme. This will help reinforce the idea of breaking down a word into parts to spell or read it.
- Build your child's awareness of sounds in words by playing these phonics games. They are all about recognising sounds in words, blending sounds to make words and having fun with rhyming words.

Alphabet Knowledge and Letter-Sound Connections

- Use stamps to help your child learn the letters. Write her name and ask her to reproduce it with alphabet stamps.
- Provide other material to help your child manipulate letters. For example, magnetic letters on the refrigerator, sponge letters in the bath.
- Teach your child the alphabet song.
- Point out letter-sound connections to your child while reading books. Alphabet books can be particularly useful for this.
- Try these other early literacy activities to help your child recognise the letters of the alphabet and the sounds which the letters make.

From www.childrens-books-and-reading.com

Reading Activities for Making Children's Books

Your child has just started to read a few words and you are trying to think of reading activities to further stimulate his interest.

Think how motivated he would be if he could read a whole book using the words he knows. Not just phonetically simple words, but words he's really interested in. Like dinosaur or yoghurt. And what if he had a hand in making those books? Then he would be sure to read them with even greater enthusiasm and interest.

The following reading activities describe how to make simple, personalised books about specific things which interest your child. Think of a topic that captures your child's imagination, help him write a book about it and watch his creativity blossom. As your child writes his book (or dictates it to you) he learns the importance of words and how he can share his knowledge through the written language.

Since the words in your child's books have come from within him, he will be able to read them easily. This will build your child's confidence and help to etch the words in his memory. Words are much easier to remember if you come across them in context, and what better way than in sentences which your own child has written.

Try out the reading activities on this page and create your own treasured library of personalised books. You can also find more great reading activities by clicking through to the sections on early literacy activities which focus on learning letters, phonics games which are all about playing with sounds or literacy games designed to develop word recognition.

Making A Book

Firstly, a word about physically making the book. If money is no object there are many websites which enable you to upload your own photos and then design and produce your own books. The quality is very high but so is the cost. You will also find that the text size is probably too small for a beginner reader. In addition the opportunities for your child to illustrate the book are more limited. A better option is to make a homemade book following these guidelines:

- For a simple book put two or more pieces of paper together, fold in half and staple along the folded edge or sew the seam together with needle and thread.
- For a little book cut one or more pieces of paper in half first, then fold and staple the pieces together as described above.
- If you have thicker card available use this for the cover and pages of the book to make it more robust. To make a book which will really last laminate the pages.
- To bind books made of card or laminated pages, punch holes in the pages and use ribbon, string or binder rings to keep the pages together. Alternatively get them bound in a photocopy shop.

Book Structure

Here are some ideas for structuring your books:

- Write the title and author of the book on the front page. The author is, of course, your child!
- If your child has good writing skills he can write the words in the book himself, otherwise let him dictate them to you.
- If you are writing the words, keep the text size large and the letters clear.
- Let your child illustrate the words on each page by drawing a picture, cutting and pasting pictures from a magazine or the internet, or pasting photos he or you have taken.
- Think about including a page at the back of the book entitled 'About the Author' and include some details of your child (eg age, siblings etc) and a photo.
- You could also include a page entitled 'About the Book' which allows your child to give a brief description of what the book is about.

When the book is finished, read it to your child first, running your finger under the words as you read. Then ask him to read the book to you. Keep his homemade books in a special place so he can return to them again and again.

Book Content

Finally, what about the content of the book? Here are some ideas of themes and topics which should stimulate your child's imagination and make the creation of his book one of his most fun and rewarding reading activities.

- **Simple Sentence Books** - Create a simple book made up of sentences all starting with the same first few words, for example, "I love ...", "I wish ...", "I'm happy when ...", "I'll never ...", "When I was little, I ...". Include a different ending on each page to finish the sentence and illustrate it with a picture. You can also try a slightly different structure where you also vary the subject of the sentence, such as "Elephants can ... but elephants can't ...", "Monkey's love ..." etc.
- **Themed Books** - Ask your child to choose the topic of the book and think of one short sentence for each page based on the topic. Help your child to keep the sentence short and simple. For younger children just include one word on each page. Encourage your child to illustrate each page. Ideas for topics include:
 - Letters eg "The P Book" with each page dedicated to a different word that starts with the letter 'p'.
 - Categories eg "The Yellow Book", "The Friend Book", "The Farm Book", "The Weather Book" etc.
 - Favourite things eg toys, animals, foods, vehicles etc.
 - Experiences eg vacations, day trips, a shopping trip etc.
 - Senses eg smelly things, noisy sounds, colourful animals etc.
 - 'If' stories eg "If I could fly ...", "If I were a giant ...", "If I were an ant ..." etc.
 - Sequence stories eg getting dressed, making dinner, from egg to frog, from seed to tree etc.

- **Baby Book** - Gather together a baby photo and a recent photo of your child and also of a selection of his friends and relatives. On the first page write these words: "Look at me as a baby. Who could I be?" Stick the photo of your child as a baby next and then write these words underneath: "Turn the page and you will see." On the next page stick the recent photo of your child with his name written underneath. On the following pages repeat with your child's friends and relatives, using the same words next the baby photos, and the relevant name by the recent photos.
- **Mail Book** - On the first page of the book write the following words, substituting the name of your child for 'William': "William's mail is in this book. Open the envelope and take a look". Stick an envelope underneath the words and put whatever message you like in the envelope eg "I love you", "Let's play in the garden" or "You are a really fast runner". Repeat the same verse on the following pages substituting the names of friends, relatives or favourite characters for 'William' and attaching other envelopes with messages. As you read the book with your child you can read the messages together and then encourage your child to dictate or write new messages to put in the envelopes.
- **Song Book** - Make a book about a song or rhyme which your child knows well. Since he already knows the words, he will find it easier to start reading along with the book. You could try "Old MacDonald Had a Farm", including a different animal on each page with an appropriate picture. Or try "The Wheels on the Bus", "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" or "1,2, Buckle My Shoe". You can also try varying the words to create a new song using the same structure eg "The Chimney on the House goes puff, puff, puff" etc
- **Brown Bear, Brown Bear** - The format of certain books, which your child is probably already familiar with, lend themselves to being adapted into your own homemade books, replacing the old, familiar words with new words which are special to your child. For example, "Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?" could be changed to "Little friend, little friend, who do you see?" Then include a picture of one of your child's friends with the following words written underneath: "I see [Jacob] looking at me." Repeat the same words on subsequent pages with pictures of other friends included.
- **Goodnight Moon** - This is another book with clear structure which can be easily personalised. On each page of the book include a picture of something or someone special to your child and the words "Goodnight [Jacob]"

From www.childrens-books-and-reading.com

Reading Strategies and Comprehension

Have you ever been in the midst of an Oscar-winning performance of a new children's book when your child interrupts you to ask a question about something that was clearly explained just minutes earlier?

Or maybe you are half way through reading a newspaper article to yourself when you find your mind is completely blank when trying to remember what you just read? In both of these examples, your child or you may have heard or read the specific words in the text, but you did not process these words to extract real understanding from them. What is the point of reading if you do not understand what you read?

The purpose of reading is to construct meaning from the words on the page. We do this by connecting ideas from the words we are reading to what we already know. To help your child understand what they are reading better, you can encourage them to use a combination of reading strategies to enable them to process the words and ideas. The five key reading strategies are:

- Using background knowledge and making connections
- Generating and answering questions
- Visualising and mental images
- Inferring and drawing conclusions
- Summarising and synthesising

You should practice these reading strategies with your child until they can start to apply them automatically. Your child will begin to think more deeply and critically about the text, forming new ideas and adding to their store of knowledge which can then be used in other areas of their life. Even young children are able to start to use these reading comprehension strategies to bring more meaning to what they are listening to. These techniques are a great way of introducing a little bit of learning when reading aloud to your child.

Choose a reading strategy to focus on, explain what it is and why we use it and then model the strategy for your child. This simply means that while reading aloud to your child you stop reading every now and then, and think aloud about what you just read, demonstrating the reading strategy. When your child starts to get the idea, start asking them for their opinions. But remember to keep it fun and don't push your child. If they are not interested in joining in, continue modelling and try again the next day.

Keep reading for more details and examples on each of the five key reading strategies of making connections, asking questions, visualising, inferring and summarising.

Using Background Knowledge and Making Connections

When your child uses some piece of prior knowledge or experience to help them understand and relate to what they are reading, they are making connections with the text. This connection makes it easier for them to learn and remember any new information they come across within the text. They may also adjust their thinking based on the ideas they read. Good readers make connections with their own personal experiences, other literature they have read or to real-world events, people or issues.

This is one of the easiest reading strategies to use with young children, since they love to tell you about themselves and what they have done and so can be readily encouraged to connect things they are reading with their personal experiences. You can explain to your young child how we understand and remember something we read better if we can 'stick' it to another idea already in our head.

Help your child make these connections by having conversations such as:

- "Olivia" by Ian Falconer reminds me of someone I know ... someone who also wants lots of books read to them before bed ... someone sitting right next to me now!
- "Stone Fox" by John Reynolds Gardiner reminds me of "The Little Engine That Could" by Watty Piper which we read when you were smaller. Both Willy and the little blue engine really believed in themselves and their abilities and worked hard to achieve the near impossible.
- I find "The Man Who Walked Between the Towers" by Mordicai Gerstein such an uplifting story, which makes it all the more shocking when thinking about what happened to the towers nearly 30 years later.

Generating and Answering Questions

If your child is asking and answering questions about what they are reading (or what you are reading to them) they interact more with the text, being forced to think actively as they read. This helps them to better understand the meaning of what they are reading and retain more about the text. To help your child use this reading strategy, ask questions for your child to answer, and encourage them to ask questions themselves.

Ask questions before, during, and after reading. Before reading, ask your child what they think the book is about. Encourage them to look at the title and cover and skim through the text to try to get clues as to what it is about. This previewing process starts to stimulate the reader to remember relevant background information they may already have on the subject which can then be used in the other comprehension strategies.

During reading ask about the plot, the characters and what they are feeling and the setting. Ask your child to predict what they think will happen next, based on what they have read so far and on their personal background knowledge. After reading further, they can confirm whether their predictions were accurate. Predictive questioning helps your child to connect earlier with the text and really understand what they are reading.

After the reading ask what your child learned from the text, what they think the author may be like, and what their favourite part was. When your child is asking questions, encourage them to ask challenging questions where the answers are not immediately obvious without a little reflection.

Examples of questions you might ask are:

- "The BFG" by Roald Dahl has a picture of a giant and a little girl on the front. What do you think might happen in the book?
- What do you think the toys in the store are thinking in "Corduroy" by Don Freeman
- The boy in "My Father's Dragon" by Ruth Stiles Gannett has some clever ways of getting past the animals he meets on the path. Which is your favourite encounter?

Visualising and Mental Images

Another of the reading strategies you can explain to your child is visualisation. Readers create a picture in their minds of what they are reading, using their own prior knowledge as well as the author's writing to build a rich visual picture or even a movie. This comprehension strategy helps readers to engage more deeply with the text by encouraging them to interpret and draw conclusions about what they are reading. Visualizing can also help the reader remember and retain more of what they are reading. Encourage your child to use all their senses while visualising, so they describe not only what they see, but also what they taste, hear, smell and feel. Ask them about what the characters look like and what they are wearing, or how they see the setting in their mind.

Visualising can also work well with younger children, although it can be harder to do with picture books, where much of the description is already provided in pictures rather than words. Children's poems are ideal for practicing this reading strategy, their short length being more likely to hold your child's attention. It is also a good technique to use as your child makes the transition from picture books to chapter books, where they might otherwise struggle with the lack of pictures.

Try having conversations along these lines:

- Roald Dahl tells us in "The BFG" that the BFG's cave has lots and lots of jars in it, but describe what the rest of the cave looks like in your mind.
- Did you create a movie in your mind when Augustus Gloop went up the pipe in the Chocolate Room in "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" by Roald Dahl? Describe the movie to me.
- What do you think Mr McGregor looks like in Beatrix Potter's "The Tale of Peter Rabbit"? Could you make a map of his garden? Let's try this map making activity.

Inferring and Drawing Conclusions

Good readers merge their background knowledge with clues provided in the text and draw conclusions which are not explicitly stated in the text. This is known as inferring, or 'reading between the lines', and is another of the reading strategies you can practice with your child. By inferring, readers are able to grasp the deeper essence of what they are reading, understanding more completely the writer's point of view. This in turn helps them to glean more information and ideas from the text. The more background knowledge a reader has, the more likely they are to make a reasonable inference.

You can try practicing this technique with a younger child by asking them, before the first reading of a picture book, to look at the front cover and the title of the book and think about what might happen in the book. Encourage them to ask questions starting with "I wonder why...", "I wonder how..." or "I wonder if..." and jot these questions down. Read the book and then look back at the list of questions. Discuss with your child whether each question was answered explicitly in the book or whether they have to deduce (or infer) the answer.

Other good inferring questions to ask are:

- Why do you think the Rainbow Fish never played with the other fish in "The Rainbow Fish" by Marcus Pfister? What clues did the author give you that helped you to work that out?

- In "The Polar Express" by Chris Van Allsburg the boy can ask Santa Claus for anything in the world. Why do you think he chooses only a bell?
- What do you think Curious George is feeling at this point in the story in the book "Curious George" by H. A. and Margret Ray. Let's try this activity all about Curious George's feelings.

Summarising and Synthesising

The last of the key reading strategies to help your child develop is the ability to summarise and synthesise what they read. This involves identifying the most important points in what they are reading, summarising these essential ideas in their own words and then integrating these ideas with their existing knowledge to form an idea which is new to them. This process will help your child to acquire and remember new knowledge from what they are reading much more effectively and ensure they have a complete understanding of what they are reading.

First help your child to extract the key information in the text. Ask them to distinguish between what is important and what is simply interesting. They can't remember everything, so what are the essential facts. Suggest they use titles, headings and pictures to help them identify the big ideas. Then ask your child to put all of these big ideas together again, retelling the information in their own words. Finally ask your child to add this new information to existing knowledge they already have on the subject and see if this leads to any new thoughts or conclusions. What does the bigger picture look like now?

Activities you could try with your child include:

- After reading to your child for about half an hour (or after they have read independently) ask them to re-tell to you what has just been read. It can be fun to ask your child to re-tell the story by acting it out with props such as in this re-telling of "Where the Wild Things Are" by Maurice Sendak.
- Ask your child to create a kid's comic strip summarising with pictures and words a story which they have just read, as in this activity with "How The Grinch Stole Christmas".
- After finishing a story ask your child to think up a different ending.
- If your child has a particular interest in something such as volcanoes, dinosaurs or horses, buy or borrow a non-fiction book on the subject and read part of it. Ask your child what they understand now which they didn't understand before.

So there you are, five reading strategies to make sure your child gets the most out of what they are reading. Choose one today and try it out with your child. Soon they will not just be thinking about what they are reading, but they will also be thinking about what they are learning.