



Chapter 1

Introducing the Essentials of Communication, Language and Literacy

In this chapter we show how:

- reading and writing rest on the foundations of communication and language development;
- not every child will develop language or learn to read and write, but with support most children with special needs can learn to communicate;
- there are many diverse activities through which we help children into literacy;
- literacy teaching thrives in an encouraging and relaxed environment linked to the whole curriculum.

When should children be taught to read and write?

In most cultures of the world, literacy (being able to read and write, either in print or Braille or by using computer technological aids) is important and considered necessary for a full participation in society, and in order for each person living in that society to make a contribution. It is seen as a key to knowledge and understanding ideas, or reflection on feelings and relationships through information and literature.

Opening up the world of knowledge and understanding and finding there is lifelong satisfaction in communicating, with and without words, and in reading and writing, also equips children for survival in a fast-developing global world economy where the future is uncertain and unknown.

It involves:

- good communication (sensitive use of words/signs, body language, saying things without words)
- rich language (being articulate and being a sensitive listener)
- becoming a bookworm who reads avidly both for pleasure and for information
- writing mainly for pleasure (greetings to family and friends) and for other reasons as well
- writing so as to share ideas, put forward arguments, campaign, and reaffirm ideas.

In most countries of the world, children are between 6 and 7 years old when they are taught to read and write, because that is a good time biologically, and typically they then learn to do so within about three months. By this age language (either spoken or signed), unless there are socio-cultural challenges or disabilities, will be established. Articulation has developed, so that children can hear and say the sounds of a language. As speech and language specialists remind us, pronunciation and phonological awareness is linked to how children will tackle the links between phonics and graphics that are so central to being able to read and write. Having a wide enough vocabulary, and being able to say what you mean (the semantics) is crucial too. Children can be taught to bark at print, but reading with and for meaning is what it is all about. Language is hardwired to develop in the brain. The processes of reading and writing are not (Carter, 1999). Reading and writing depend on language in order to get going (as it were), and they piggyback onto language as they develop.

Do children (provided they are given a rich learning environment) learn to read and write naturally?

One view is that children will learn to read and write quite naturally, but only if they are in an environment that encourages this through:

- people around them reading and writing
- being read to
- engaging with literature and informational print as an important part of everyday life.

Parents might read a newspaper regularly, or at weekends. As they grow up children will see this focussed attention, and perhaps hear the various comments their mother or father makes about news items. They might see their parents making shopping lists and choosing programmes to watch on television or to listen to on the radio. They might also see them paying bills, writing in cheque

books, or more often nowadays, writing on line at the computer. All this establishes an important backcloth that will in turn encourage children to engage with books and the mark-making which leads into writing.

Bedtime stories (Brice-Heath, 1983) can give children the opportunity to ask questions, and comment as they go, within an atmosphere of warm affection. Not all children are read to in this way, but there can be other times of day when stories can be read to them. Indeed such bedtime stories might be more practical for working parents. Kathy Goouch (in Goouch and Lambirth, 2007) writes about the way a group of graduate parents introduced their children to reading, writing, literature and information-seeking in exactly this way. Their children then possessed a rich language as a base on which to build their literacy development.

Involving children in writing shopping lists – perhaps making their parallel list in their own way, with their own marks and drawings – means that children are participating and becoming part of a writing community, in a relaxed and unpressured way. This is done in the spirit of everyone being involved, and the child is not expected to perform but to join in, doing what they can without being judged for how successfully they achieve adult ways of writing or reading. Having a go is the important thing, with the child's efforts being taken seriously.

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) pioneered the thinking that children can learn a huge amount about communication, language and literacy when they share songs and finger rhymes with their parents. He called these the 'Mother Songs'. Had he been alive today he would doubtless have included fathers too, but at that point in history the emphasis was on the role of mothers in the informal and natural education of children. The idea was to build on nature, with children's natural enjoyment of rhymes, songs and stories as part of family life.

Johannella Tafuri (2008: 1) researched the musical development of young children who had been sung to in the womb. She, like Froebel, emphasized the importance of family singing, as it has 'anthropological, cultural and social value in all cultures'.

Should children be taught to read as early as possible?

Another point of view is that children need to be inducted into reading and writing and the earlier the better. The argument is that becoming independent readers and writers as young as possible gives them the key to the door which opens up the world of literature and knowledge to them. They are then not dependent on others reading to them, or writing on their behalf. Until they can read fluently they are thought to find chunks of text confusing and therefore be unable to appreciate literature or non-fiction texts fully. The emphasis is on being able to read and write without help, rather than on Vygotsky's (1978) notion of

practitioners needing to aim their teaching, as he puts it, at the ‘ripening buds’ rather than the ‘opened flowers’ in order that children do not have to perform early but are supported by adults in their understanding. Sometimes their competence will develop steadily, sometimes in a burst, and sometimes it will plateau as if pausing for breath. Learning does not develop at the same pace throughout.

Key moments in the journey towards literacy

Is it important for practitioners to know about the biological, social and cultural development of children, and the subject knowledge of what is involved in literacy, literature and the seeking and sharing of knowledge and information, so they can learn how to put the two together in order to help children read and write.

The view of this book is that biologically-driven processes are a vital part of learning how to read and write. Without a body and a brain there is no question of this being possible! But we cannot just leave things to nature. Neuroscientist Colin Blakemore (2001) argues that ‘**nurture shapes nature**’. This means that there are important processes functioning both in the brain, and in the growing and maturing body. If we work with these we can help children to develop their learning with maximum impact. Our biological selves are shaped and nurtured by people, relationships and culture. This is particularly the case where reading and writing are concerned. We are not leaving things to nature – instead, we are working with nature.

We need to understand what is involved in the subject knowledge of literacy. What are the essentials of texts and how do they work? What are the mechanics of reading and writing? Some of the most important things in developing literacy are not always that obvious. The way the brain works to co-ordinate vision, hearing and movement is crucial here and so is the way each child develops as a symbol maker and symbol user. Talking, understanding what others say, and engaging in conversations are each part of this process.

The co-ordination of the hands, looking and hearing

How hands, ears and eyes will begin to co-ordinate is an important part of the journey into language and from there into literacy, literature, knowledge and information. (This will be explored in Chapter 3.)

Walking, talking and pretending: the excitement and celebration of the first steps in walking

When a baby becomes a toddler, and takes his or her first steps, family and friends will become awash with excitement – and so they should. This co-ordination of

the body's movements is one of the greatest landmarks towards literacy. By the time a toddler reaches this point in life, the long journey into communication, language and literacy will be well under way.

In her study of children singing in their families, and where a mother sang while her baby was in the womb, Johanelle Tafuri (2008: 83) found that 71% of the 3-year-olds could sing in tune. This was of interest because children at this age do not usually do so. It was helpful if such singing continued after a child was born and if before that 'there was music in the environment from the sixth month of prenatal life, with specific moments dedicated to singing and listening, in a family atmosphere of encouragement and praise'.

First words

The first time a child very obviously uses a word will be of enormous importance in a family. For children who have a hearing impairment, a communication disorder or learning difficulty, this may be their first use of sign language such as British Sign Language. Words or signs are symbols. They stand for something else, and are imbued with meaning. The words 'Mum' or 'Dad' are not the actual people. They stand for the person, who may or may not be present. There are simpler systems for children for whom this is too abstract, such as Maketon using a picture exchange system, or the Objects of Reference, developed by Adam Ockelford (2008).

When a child begins to use words and phrases, symbolic thinking has opened up to that child who can then think about the past, present and future, and describe and comment on events and people, expressing their thoughts and feelings and developing ideas. Marian Whitehead (2009: 10) emphasized that the first word will be used spontaneously by children. It will also be used consistently and regularly in the same context and the same activity. The parent or carer will then be able to notice it.

Pretend play scenarios

Some researchers argue that language and other kinds of symbolic behaviours are separate systems. Others would argue there are different kinds of symbolic behaviour. You will find by reading this book that the important thing is to value both the early beginnings and the later developments of symbolic behaviour, such as pretend play, drawings and paintings, models, sculptures, dance choreography, musical composition and dramatic play scenarios. The pioneering Italian educator Malaguzzi (1998) described these as 'the hundred languages of the child'. We open up a rich world for children when we help them to be symbol users and makers of their own symbols. But we need to remember the warning that relates to our use of the brain: 'Use it, or lose it'.

In order for young children to (later) be able to read and write independently, these are the ESSENTIALS OF LITERACY



Literacy has its beginnings in communication and language. Here the adult and child share a story they have made together about a train's journey. The adult tries to tune into the child's ideas, and to follow, while offering vocabulary as the play scenario develops, such as 'train engine', 'carriage', 'track'

Relating to others

- Literacy has its beginnings in social relationships, movement and the senses, communication and language.
- The way that the hands, eyes and ears co-ordinate and work together is fundamentally important both in tracking, and in the development of, phonological awareness in terms of later following print on a page, gaining pencil control, and linking sounds and letters. Children who are stacked in a certain type of pushchair will only be able to see out if their head is turned to the side. This does not support these important aspects of development.
- People need to talk with and listen to babies and young children.
- Eye contact with babies is important, and so is looking away when a baby has had enough interacting for the moment. Doing this is a problem with front-facing pushchairs or stacking pushchairs.
- Silences and pauses are also important. Adults will tend to fill such silences, when it might be important to leave these as moments of reflection and connection.
- Mirroring, turn-taking and imitation are all important in developing non-verbal and verbal conversations.

The importance of movement

- As babies crawl, their eyes must move in co-ordinated ways which will later on track text on a page (see Greenland, 2006; Bruce, Meggitt and Grenier, 2010).
- Children need to be able to co-ordinate their movements, both large (gross motor) and small (fine motor). The way in which eyes, hands, and fingers move together is vital. Arms and shoulders are also an important aspect of this. Because of the way the physical body develops, the first parts of the spine to become well co-ordinated will be the head and hands. Then the legs will do the same and walking will begin. The arms and legs start to work together. You will see in different chapters of this book that dancing, movement and action songs encourage and support the kinds of physical co-ordination needed to read and write. Unco-ordinated children will have great difficulty later on when they come to reading and writing.

Becoming a symbol maker and a symbol user

- Symbols stand for other things and people, both present and absent.
- Personal symbols hold meaning for the child because they are made by that child.
- Texts themselves (the written words) have no meaning. They represent the meanings that are rooted in personal symbols and personal experiences.
- We need to help children develop the essentials of communicating without words. (There is a whole literature, for example, on picture books: see Baddeley and Eddershaw, 1994; Styles and Bearne, 2003; Whitehead, 2007: 46–7, 99–100.)
- We need to help children make and use their own personal symbols, relating to their culture and the wider world.
- Music, dance, all the art forms, and an appreciation of literature make a huge contribution to the way children develop their understanding and become competent in reading. These give meaningful experiences of rhythm, sequence and narrative, tone and intonation, pauses, rhyme, and alliteration.
- Order (syntax), sequence and narrative help children to make meaning of texts in stories and poems, to compose their own (fiction and non-fiction), and to understand sentences, beginnings and endings.



Picture books are important for focussing children on books. The best of these will provide a subtext, so that several things are happening at the same time. Children love to find out these details, just as with life where more than one thing will occur simultaneously. This encourages them to be observant of detail, which will help when reading and writing words later on

The importance of play

Children's spontaneous free-flow play (Bruce, 1991) presents opportunities for using connecting language, for experimenting with narrative and characters, revisiting songs and rhymes and stories, making alternatives, using familiar rhymes, rhythms and alliteration, and collaborating with others in order to work as a team and bring about a satisfying play scenario. There is no prescribed script in free-flow play – rather this works in the same way as a jazz, drama or dance improvisation.

The importance of conversations with children

- Allow for repeating back, clarifying, and expanding on what children say will help language to develop.
- Using spoken language and the kind of listening that understands what is said, acts on what is said, and responds and initiates, questions and problem-solves, will ensure shared sustained conversations (Siraj-Blatchford, 2006).
- These use and understand language or signing for our own thoughts, ideas, feelings and relationships.
- These use and understand language or signing in order to talk with and respond to other people in all sorts of different situations.



Play scenario in a café. The practitioner observed the children trying to make a café, and so she helped them to gather props. She wrote 'Café' on the shopfront for them, but did not take over. She tried to support their ideas, and joined in with that in mind. The play started to flow, with customers and staff taking their characters, and 'café-type language' being used. The practitioner gave children the words they needed during the play, such as pretending to be a customer, and asking for the 'bill' or to see the 'menu', being ready to give her 'order', and wanting a 'starter' and a 'main course' as well as 'dessert'. She thought it 'cheap/expensive'.

- Children need to be able to understand what is involved in communication without words or sign language. They will not grasp the importance of a question mark if they have not captured the tone and tune of the voice when a question is asked. The sounds and subtle messages of non-verbal communications are to do with pauses; the music of anger; lovingly and affectionately muttered sounds; surprise; fear; protective shouts; a sudden look; meeting someone's gaze or avoiding eye contact; pulling someone towards us to look and share a focus; pointing ... Looking and listening, as you will realize in this book, are important co-ordinations in the brain. Later on, when children read and write, the look of sentences, words and letters will need to co-ordinate with the sound of these in sophisticated ways that have become internalized processes in tracking, decoding print, and encoding the written symbols.

The importance of sounds and listening to them, especially the sounds of languages

- The sounds in words must be distinguished from one another. These are later on mapped onto the letters on the page, and the meaning must be there.

- Children need to develop and learn spoken or signed language. Many children throughout the world will speak two or three languages. Some will be lucky enough to speak three languages with entirely different roots and structures (for example, Italian, English and Urdu). This means it is relatively easy to learn any language with ease. Monolinguals who have become cut off from the music, phonology (sounds in the language) and forms of all but their own language will find this more difficult. The work of Usha Goswami (in Goouch and Lambirth, 2007) is of great value when exploring these issues.

Rhythm, rhyme, intonation, alliteration

- Phonological awareness (the ability to distinguish between similar and different sounds in the language) is crucial to later reading and writing. It is helped when children can hear the differences between phonemes, syllables, initial sounds and rhyming chunks. (These terms are all discussed in later chapters of the book.) Usha Goswami (in Goouch and Lambirth, 2007) has collected data across languages which point to the development of phonological awareness following a similar sequence. Children gain awareness of syllables first, then rhyming chunks, and eventually – and only through direct teaching – phonemes.
- Rhythm (music, dance and song) helps children with syllabification, blending and segmentation.
- Tone, intonation and pauses in the language help children to understand punctuation.



Shared sustained conversation leads to deep thoughts – but adults can never predict when these might begin. When they do happen the important thing is to seize the moment. Conversations of this kind go beyond just describing things. They analyse how things happen, why, and what might happen next (prediction). They are about cause and effect. The adult tries to tune into the child's ideas and to expand these with describing these further, and introducing cause and effect relationships: 'Why?', 'How are these important?', 'What next do you think?'



Distinguishing sounds. Using musical instruments is one way of helping children to distinguish between one sound and another. Experiencing the sounds that everyday objects make is another. Is this a loud or quiet sound/A long or short sound? It is a high or low sound? Which is louder? Longer? Lower? Which is your favourite?



The boys readily listen to the sounds when rhymes are with action and props. Young children find it difficult to listen to sounds without a context, because they become isolated from meaningful experience. Unless learning carries personal meaning, it does not become embedded or connected to the rest of learning. Margaret Donaldson (1978) suggests that this is the difference between embedded and disembedded learning and thinking

- Rhyme helps children to hear patterns and distinguish between those that sound similar and different, as well as to see patterns which help them to decode and encode words as they read and write.
- Alliteration helps children to hear repetition of the smallest units of sound (phonemes) and to see the smallest units of sound in print (graphemes) at the beginning of words.

Time-honoured traditions

- Baby songs, action songs sitting on the spot and later moving from the spot, nursery rhymes both traditional and modern, and carefully introduced poetry cards help children to put all of this together.
- Action songs help the co-ordination of sound, vision and body movements.

They can be on the spot with upper

body movements. They can be moving about using co-ordinated arm and leg movements. All of this is important for later reading and writing co-ordination of the senses (including hearing and vision) and the physical body.

- Nursery rhymes and stories help a sense of narrative, storyline and characters, and in creating events and contexts and new worlds, alternative worlds, imaginative worlds. They can help children to engage in ‘connecting language’ (‘and’, ‘but’, ‘then’, ‘before’, ‘after’, ‘soon’) (Ragnarsdottir, 2006). They can encourage oral and aural blending and segmenting (more of these terms later) – aspects of later reading and writing.
- Poetry cards can give children opportunities to engage with small, manageable chunks of text in order to learn about the alphabetic principle and also to explore how sounds will map onto graphemes (letters or clusters of letters in a word).

High well-being

- Ensure the child has high well-being, and is confident enough to problem-solve their way into reading and writing, to have a go, predict, confirm and self-correct. Both beginners and independent readers need to do this. This is very different from guessing.
- Introduce the essentials of literacy at a pace that is comfortable for each child.

- Support and extend a child's literacy learning in the right way for him or her, at the right time, with that child's full and willing engagement.
- Set children on the path to becoming life-long readers and writers for pleasure, information and understanding from the start, by enjoying music, song and dance and by sharing books, rhymes and poetry.

The essentials of literacy make it possible for children to:

- read and write using print or Braille
- open up worlds of literature
- open up worlds of knowledge and information
- open up worlds to inhabit through creative writing
- connect with the thoughts, feelings and relationships of others
- connect with both their cultures and those of others.

Diversity and inclusion

For very good reasons not all children will speak in words, read or write (owing to having complex needs or learning difficulties), but when this is so, they will need to be able to communicate, with or without language or signs. Children enjoy books, drama, music and dance experiences that are found in stories and poems. They may be the kind of personality that prefers and gains pleasure from information books and the experiences of nature and everyday life that go with this. The journey into literacy is complex, and cannot be normalized or standardized. One size does not fit all. Although human beings are social beings, they are not herds to be driven.



The nursery rhyme 'Incy Wincy Spider' is chanted while using the props. It is easier to learn long sentences in songs than it is to repeat a long sentence in ordinary talking because the music gives the words a shape through the rhythms, and helps to bring some order and pattern to the language. Having props and actions gives further support and brings the words alive, as can be seen in the photograph



Five currant buns in a baker's shop – there is evident enjoyment here. When children are learning in a relaxed and unpressured atmosphere they open up to learning and become engaged in the process. They also show more initiative and are pro-active learners

How to avoid undermining the essentials of literacy

- Encourage **crawling** on the floor.
- Encourage the use of **face-to-face pushchairs**, which will give adult and child a shared focus (looking at the same things together), and talking about what you both can see, hear, smell.
- Avoid pushchairs which stack children so the one underneath cannot look ahead, and can only have a partial view that involves looking to one side or the other.
- Discourage the use of mobile phones on outings and, instead, engage in **talking with** (not at) babies, toddlers and young children.
- Over-use of dummies constrains language development. These can, however, help children with consistently blocked tubes to clear these and be less nasal, hear and sleep better, and to be more relaxed and open to learning.
- Do not rush children into formal instruction in reading and writing. Build their language development with a rich vocabulary and encourage them to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings, and talk about their relationships with people, animals, nature, stories and so on. Reading and writing rest on the firm foundation of language development.

TAKING TRADITIONAL PRACTICE FORWARD IN A LEARNING COMMUNITY

In the chapters that follow, we shall be looking at some traditional ways in which practitioners and parents across the centuries have very effectively and successfully helped babies, toddlers and children to become:

- effective communicators (spoken and unspoken)
- avid bookworms, mark-makers and writers
- readers, at the right time and in the right way for individual children
- seekers of knowledge, understanding and information by a sensitive tuning-in with others, discussion, reading and writing
- appreciators of literature
- on the path to becoming enthusiastic and committed readers and writers for the rest of their lives.

First, we shall look at what is meant by enabling literacy environments indoors and outdoors.

KEY TERMS

Phonological awareness Children need to be able to notice, identify and use the different sounds that make up words. They need to be able to do this in different ways. Psycholinguistic 'Grain sizes' are big, middle, and small (see Goswami, in Gouch and Lambirth, 2007).

- Big – **syllables** – In the word 'dinosaur' (a much-loved word for young children) the syllables are: di–no–saur
- Middle – **rhyming chunks** – In the word 'love' (another much-loved word by young children), when hearing the difference between **love** and **dove**, the last part of each word rhymes but the beginnings sound different. These are sometimes called **onset-rimes**.
- Small – **phonemes** – In order to read and write, children begin to be able to identify the phonemes they hear in words. As language develops they begin to do this gradually, and they need direct adult help to do so. This need for direct teaching, Ziegler and Goswami (2006) suggest, is not surprising because the phoneme is not a natural speech unit. It is best developed through singing and dancing together with rhymes, poems and much-loved and quoted phrases in stories. The word 'bike', much used by children, has three phonemes: b-i-ke.

Phonemic awareness Graphemes and phonemes working together.

When children are becoming phonologically aware, they begin to be able to make links between the way the smallest units of speech sound, and the way they look (the graphemes) when they are written down. Making the link between the smallest sounds and the smallest units of writing (the letters) seems to be central to learning to read and write. As Goswami (in Goouch and Lambirth, 2007: 127) says, 'Letters are used to symbolise phonemes'.

Reading

Bayley, R. (2007) *Action Raps*. Birmingham: Lawrence Educational.

A treasure-chest of lullabies and songs from Southwark parents suitable for all young children (booklet and CD). (Supported by Every Child a Talker (ECAT) Project, 2010, and published by In the Picture – available from inthepicture.info)

Further Reading

Whitehead, M. (2010) *Language and Literacy in the Early Years 0–7* (4th edn). London: SAGE.