



# Teaching Early Reading Skills

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## Introduction

There are studies available and many books published dealing with the process of learning to read. However some of the language used often means that such knowledge is only accessible to specialist early years professionals, when in fact many individuals are involved in preparing children to be successful readers, whether they know it or not.

At one point during my teaching career I was in charge of the Early Years of education in my school and was teaching the Reception / Year 1 class. At this time I was also Deputy to a Head Teacher who had no experience of teaching very young children. Soon after we began working together, I remember him asking me, 'How do children learn to read?' I did manage to explain it to him, and at the end of it all, he said, 'I think it would be really useful if the parents could hear this.'

As a result we began to hold an annual 'Reading Meeting' specifically for the parents of children who had just started school for the first time. As the years progressed the content of my presentation at the meeting changed slightly. Parents who wanted to attend were not just the ones who had children in the new Reception class, but parents of children further up the school too. The feedback we had was extremely positive. Many parents came to the meeting year after year. They felt it was interesting, easy to understand and inspirational because they were given clear ideas of what they could do to help their children begin to read, and support them once they became independent readers.

The following advice for developing reading skills from birth to independent reading is a compilation of the content of my Reading Meetings referred to above. I hope it is written in such a way that anyone who is trying to help children prepare for reading, such as parents, family members, nursery staff,

teaching assistants as well as teachers will find it easy to understand, logical and useful.

## ***Promoting Skills Needed for Reading (Pre-Reading Skills)***

### **Early language skills**

When a child is born it needs love, nourishment and a sense that it is cherished and safe. Those involved in caring for babies and very young children strive to provide all these things, however difficult their circumstances and where ever they are in the world.

Families who talk gently and kindly to their babies, use eye contact and happy expressions are teaching babies that communication is a pleasurable and useful means of interacting with the world around them.

These are the first vital things a child needs to learn in order to connect with loved ones. Without the ability to communicate using appropriate language, reading would be impossible and meaningless.

In early childhood, songs, rhymes and chants are all useful in building skills for reading. The nature of traditional nursery rhymes is a vehicle for young children to hear similar sounds and to memorise rhymes, building up auditory skills which will help with phonic learning in the future. In my experience children who come to school knowing nursery rhymes often learn to read more quickly than those who are unfamiliar with them.



Play is another vital part of early childhood. Play is one of the ways children are able to interact with each other and engage in role-play. The language which develops in these situations builds experience of conversation.

All young children love colourful pictures. There is little as rewarding for an adult as sitting with a young child who is transfixed by a picture. Even before a child can speak, an adult will be able to talk about the details of a picture and the child will be able to follow, often trying to repeat words and point to parts of the picture. Interpretation of pictures plays a key role in early reading clues.

When children are still very young, stories are an essential component of pre-reading experiences. Children who experience books within the family learn how pictures and text together in a book tell a story. They learn how to concentrate and listen because stories are fun, and children love fun! They learn prediction skills and experience sequencing and repetition.

Occasionally I had a challenging group of reception pupils. This happened when some of the children came to school not knowing about stories or how to listen. I found that to tell a story without a book, or just using pictures enabled me to keep eye contact with the children. Lots of expression, funny faces and even songs maintain their interest which helped build up concentration skills.

### **The importance of FUN**

All pre-reading activities need to be fun for children. Enjoyment related to all the oral and practical experiences we help facilitate for children will give positive re-enforcement to the acquisition of reading skills.

Children generally laugh easily and naturally, and if they do so while they are engaged in any pre-reading activities, we should be delighted. I have always said that the more fun you can generate, the better the learning!

### **Being aware of developmental issues**

As any parent or teacher knows children develop at different rates both emotionally and physically.

In my experience the only generalisation possible would be that little girls tend to be ready to read at a younger age than little boys. However, there are always exceptions.

The emotional and physical developmental differences between the genders can vary by about 6 months or more.

A note of caution must be included here. A child who is pushed into a formal reading situation before he is ready, will not experience the joys of success. There is a real danger he will associate failure and frustration with learning this vital skill.

Pre-reading activities should continue for some children longer than for others. The benefits in the long term are likely to be huge.

I quote here an example of one of my pupils:

He came into my reception class as a very young (only just 4 years old), very small, immature, sweet natured little boy. He loved to play with the construction kits, dress up and engage in role play in the play house. All his learning during the whole of his first year in school was pre-reading based. During that first year he was happy and gained confidence. When he returned to school for his next year, he was ready for reading and made a very good start almost straight away. He was a good, average confident pupil with an excellent attitude to work by the time he left primary education. He took one of the leading roles in a large drama production we produced in his last year with us. He also did well in high school and went on to a very prestigious college. I often wonder if things would have turned out differently for him if he had been rushed into formal reading a year earlier.

### **Physical Development**

Physical development is associated with hand / eye coordination and must be an integral part of early year's education. Without good hand eye coordination a child will not be able to write successfully. Early writing activities can be used to reinforce phonic learning and spelling.



All young children love physical activity and are constantly setting themselves physical challenges. When very young they can be observed extending their own abilities by trying out and perfecting physical skills, for example: rolling over and over; throwing things to see how far they go. Many of these activities are to be observed quite naturally in children's free play.

When children enter a school environment, they still need to be able to play for a considerable portion of their day in order to continue developing their physical skills. More structured physical learning is evident when they begin to enjoy physical group activities with their peers. Much of this continues to be evident in play, for example: balancing along a beam or branch, all ball games, clapping games with rhymes, dancing of all kinds, skipping, swimming and riding a cycle or a scooter.

### **Construction activities**

In order for children to learn to read successfully it is important that they have developed the ability to visualise and to recall shapes. Words are really only patterns on a page, most of which can be decoded by knowing the phonic meaning of all the components. However, there are also many words which can not be decoded in this way and the 'shape' of the word has to be learned.

For young children the ability to visualise shapes in 2 and 3 dimensions is greatly enhanced by the opportunity to create shapes and patterns using various construction techniques. Simple wooden building blocks are often a favourite and can be transformed into a range of amazing structures with the help of a child! They can become a train, a bridge, a fort, a palace, a tractor, a car, a house, a bed --- the list is endless. In each transformation the child is recalling the shapes to be constructed and putting the blocks into what he/she considers a similar shape. All these effort should be valued and encouraged.

### **Pattern making**

Individual letters are patterns on a page, words are patterns made up of other patterns!

Children need experience of pattern making before they are asked to interpret the complex 'patterns' of the written word.

Young children love the order of patterns. A practical way of introducing the concept of pattern

to a group of young children is to arrange them into a simple line of boy, girl, boy, girl, boy, girl etc. Young children will find this exciting because they can predict what should come next when they begin to understand patterns.

There are numerous wonderful activities which can be done through the theme of pattern. 3D objects such as sticks and leaves are usually readily available and can be put to good use for pattern making. A simple pattern (one leaf – one stick –one leaf etc) can develop into more complex arrangements such as 2 leaves, 3 sticks 2 leaves, 3 sticks etc. Beads for threading, blocks for piling up, in fact anything can be used to introduce pattern play.


After playing with 3D objects to make various patterns, children are usually ready to move onto 2D pattern making. Printing with vegetable shapes onto paper, is a popular and exciting activity for young children. I used to cut out various assorted different coloured paper into 'tree' shapes. Each child had a shape. They would invent a pattern for their tree and print the pattern using different vegetable shapes and colours. When all were completed I would mount them on a large wall and we would have a 'forest' of patterns.

The fun of practical activities such as these builds skills in prediction and sequencing.

### **The use of pictures – Matching and sequencing**

Matching picture games such as 'Lotto' are fun and valuable for young children. It builds their visual skills in recognising similarities which is essential for reading. Children will need to have the ability to recognise words which are the same so that they do not always have to go through the process of decoding a word each time they meet it. Practicing this skill with pictures is enjoyable and meaningful for a young child.





Jig-saws are also valuable in building visual discrimination skills. Children who learn to do jig-saws successfully build up visual learning skills and because of this will be able to discriminate between all the phonic symbols and blends required for reading.

The next stage on would be to present a series of pictures – perhaps 3 different pictures to begin with, and build up to about 5 or 6. Children can use the pictures to tell a story, either individually or in a group. This will build up the ability to sequence events, another vital skill if a child is to enjoy and understand stories through independent reading.

Pictures are an essential part of early reading activities. Children enjoy all kinds of pictures. One picture can tell a whole story. The language associated with such a picture is the language of books, and if children are able to participate in this kind of story-telling they are being well prepared for the world of reading.

Children will often embark on ‘play’ reading from a very early age. This takes many forms, but frequently involves a child sitting with a book, turning the pages and ‘telling’ the story with appropriate intonation as they have seen modelled by adults. Sometimes, as children are becoming ready to read, they will often independently scan the text in a book for sounds or words which are familiar to them. They show great excitement when they find some symbols they recognise. This is one of the signs that a child may be ready to begin formal reading activities.

### **Avoiding failure**

I can not stress enough that all these pre-reading activities should be fun for children. It is vitally important that learning is pleasurable and that children are motivated. Adults should have the role of facilitators building up their expectations of children gradually. A copious amount of praise for all efforts, even the less successful ones, should be the order of the day. I have found, over the years, that there is always something positive one can say in the way of encouragement. Human beings, however young or old, thrive on praise!

### ***Beginning Formal Reading Activities***

#### **Developing Phonic Knowledge**

Children need to know the relationship between the symbols of the alphabet and the sounds they make.

This can be started quite early but must be approached using informal, multi-sensory, practical activities. There are many ways of incorporating fun into early phonic learning. A number of good schemes and programmes are available to help educators achieve success. The best ones involve visual clues, an auditory element, and some sort of activity which tie all these together. Merely showing young children the letters of the alphabet, telling them the related sounds and expecting them to remember them all, may work for some children, but many will need more clues than this to make a successful early start to reading.

During my teaching career I have seen a number of different methods used to introduce early phonics. Some have been more successful than others.

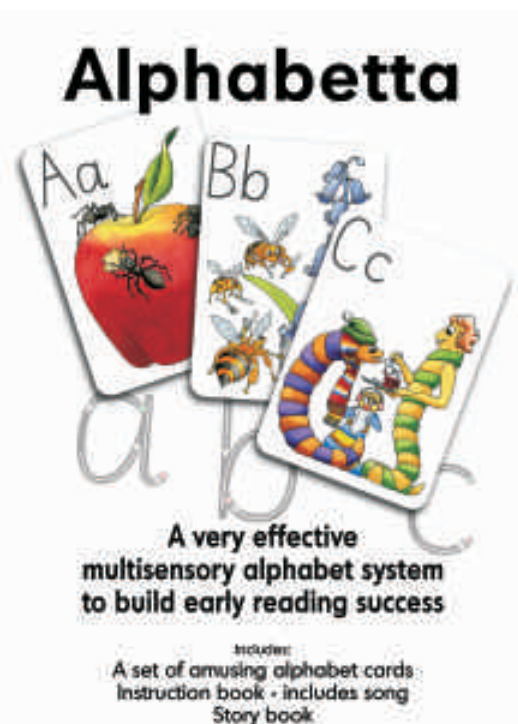
I myself developed a simple song with a verse for each letter – extremely simple and repetitive – with associated amusing illustrations, which I used very successfully for many years. What made my simple system different at the time was that as children finished singing each verse of the song, they would be encouraged to trace the correct shape of the letter in the air. This helped in a number of ways:

- It helped children to visualise what the letter looked like.
- It added a kinaesthetic (touch) element to the learning of phonic connections.
- It allowed children to practice the formation of letters without having to risk making incorrect marks on paper before they have developed the ability to control a pencil effectively.
- In becoming familiar with the way letters are formed at the same time as learning the sounds they make, children are able to make connections and consolidate their learning because visual, auditory and kinaesthetic activities were involved throughout.
- Knowing the correct way to form all the letters of the alphabet from an early stage has huge benefits not only for handwriting, but also for the future learning of spelling.

I am now retired from teaching but continue to be passionate about the importance of learning to read. My daughter lives in a remote part of Ireland and has 4 children. When the youngest two were approaching school age she and her husband decided that they would home educate all 4

children. She grew up knowing my 'Alphabet Song' and taking it for granted. When she started using it with her own children in their home education programme she realised how effective it is, and encouraged me to publish it. I have taken her advice and hope that it may be of use to families who seek to help their children at home and indeed other educators of young children in a variety of settings ( [www.pre-school-phonics.co.uk](http://www.pre-school-phonics.co.uk) ). The illustrations have been re-worked by my husband who is an artist with a very active sense of humour! I have written a story which weaves through the letters of the alphabet and is linked to the pictures and the song. There is also an audio CD included in the pack which contains the whole story and the song.

'Our 'Alphabetta' system can be used with very young children who enjoy the individual pictures and the related simple verse of the song. It can also be used with older children who enjoy picking out more phonic links in the text of the story. My own Grandchildren still delight in inventing more of their own funny verses for the song, which are often very amusing indeed!



### Letter formation as an aid to learning

As children are introduced to the phonic sounds of each letter, in whatever way is chosen, a very useful way of re-enforcing learning is to teach the

formation of the letter at the same time as the sound it makes, as explained in the paragraph above. It is important to focus on lower case letter formation in the early stages. Capital letters are likely to be familiar, because they are used in signs, on packaging and are also on computer key-boards. Upper case letters are easy to form because there are many straight lines in their construction. However, the bulk of any text is made up of lower case letters. Although traditional handwriting is not used as much in the modern world as it used to be, it is still important for children to know how lower case letters are formed.

For a young child the skill of writing is a much more complex process to learn than the skill of reading. Reading involves decoding marks on a page, whereas writing involves beginning with a blank page, and making the marks which should be correct, in order for them to be deciphered. For this reason, when a young child begins to learn to read, it is important that the focus should be on reading, and not to expect progress to be made in writing at the same time. However, correct letter formation can be introduced in a very practical way so that it is an aid to early reading activities.

Just keep in mind that without the ability to read, the skill of writing is meaningless.

### Whole word recognition

When children can recognise all the sounds required to decode simple words and are able to blend these sounds together, they can usually begin to read simple text in books.

There are many words which can not be decoded by blending the component sounds, so it is also important to show the children that it is possible to recognise whole words by their shapes. I have found that a good way to begin building this skill is to provide cards upon which are printed colour words, in the correct colour. (e.g. red, blue, green yellow etc.) A number of activities can be devised which require children to match the word on the card in order to complete a task. The children have the clue they need initially in the colour of the word. Soon the coloured word cards can be replaced by standard word cards on which all text is printed in black. Activities such as these can begin quite early, and as long as they are repeated in a variety of forms which are not too complex, children will have fun

and the skill of whole word recognition will build quite naturally.

When children are able to pick out familiar words within text, they are probably ready to read simple books.

### **Early books and the right to choose stories**

As stated previously, a vital element in helping children to read is to help them enjoy books in a safe, non-judgemental environment from a very early age. This approach should be on-going as children develop and mature.

One of the things I occasionally heard from parents was: 'I covered the picture in her reading book to see if she could read the words, and she couldn't, so she is not reading!'

I always tried to explain that initially children need clues to help them make sense of text. There are always pictures in early reading books and they are there to help give children clues about the story and to aid their enjoyment. If a child is pressurised to decode text without the visual input of a picture, the whole process is likely to become less enjoyable and indeed stressful .... Need I say any more?

I firmly believe that reading with understanding is a complex process which involves a number of skills. The modern approach stresses phonics above all else. I believe that phonics is one of the skills needed. Prediction skills and clues from text and pictures all add to comprehension which is vital for enjoyment.

There are many very good early reading schemes around now, and in this we are fortunate. In years gone by, there was extremely limited availability of good early reading material.

Many of the best schemes today have a selection of books at each reading level. This means that books at each level do not have to be read sequentially, but children can make a personal choice about which books they would like to read. This is a wonderful feature, and one which should be available from the very beginning. In my experience the joy young children get from making their own choice of reading material promotes enthusiasm and self-esteem.

If this system is to work well, it requires preparation by the adults involved. It is preferable for children

who are just beginning to read to be familiar with all the books at the first level.

### **This can be achieved as follows:**

- The teacher/adult can take one book at a time from the scheme and share it with a group of children.
- Look at the cover and the title. Discuss what you can find out about the author and illustrator by looking at the first pages in the book.
- Children can be asked to predict what they think will happen, followed by turning over pages to see if they have been correct, or if there is a surprise at the end of the story.
- The teacher/adult should then read the text of the story to the group and model how it can be read with expression. The children should be able to see and follow the text as the adult reads.
- Discussion about punctuation can be introduced and how it governs the way a story is read.
- The use of capital letters in the story can also be discussed.

If this type of introduction is made for each book in the early levels of any reading scheme before children actually begin to read them independently, they will be well prepared to make their own choices of books. They will be familiar with the characters and the events in the stories and providing all the other preparations have been on-going, they will be able to use phonic decoding skills, word recall, prediction and sequencing in order to read independently and enjoy the experience.

### **The importance of repetition**

Many young children who have just started to read independently love to return a favourite book more than once. To be allowed to do this is important as it will facilitate consolidation as well as enjoyment in the early reading process.

An on-going role for parents, family members and teachers

One of the most important things adults can do for children both before they begin independent reading and after they have become readers is to continue reading to them.

It is valuable, when reading in a one-to-one situation for the adult to have the child beside them. The child then has the opportunity to follow the text

as the adult reads it. Some children will do this naturally and are likely to build a love of literature and the written word. Other children who do not follow text spontaneously will still benefit, and will usually follow some text, but will still become absorbed in the story.

There is some wonderful literature to be enjoyed, and if adults can help children discover this by reading to them, it will be an enriching experience for all concerned.

The choice of books to read to children should be a little in advance of those they are able to read

independently. This means that as children progress in their reading, they will be able to re-visit familiar texts and their reading will be continually extended.

### Conclusion

Helping to facilitate reading skills is a real privilege. It is like giving children the key to a magical kingdom of stories, learning and understanding. Every human being deserves to be given this key and the knowledge of how to use it.



Rhea began her teaching career in a High School in a very deprived part of London in 1970. She was idealistic and soon realised that to make a real difference to the lives of children, she needed to work with younger pupils. She moved to an infant school in 1972 and it was here that she found her passion for teaching children to read. During her career her interest in the early years of education continued and she became an experienced practitioner. When she became a Head Teacher in 1983 she was able to pass on her interest and expertise through in-service training and presentations at meetings and conferences. Now, in retirement she continues to support home schooling and pre-school groups, an adult literacy organisation, and has published a pre-school phonics pack ([www.pre-school-phonics.co.uk](http://www.pre-school-phonics.co.uk)). She is currently working on an all-age phonics system. She is married to artist Christopher Bazeley ([www.chrisbazeley.com](http://www.chrisbazeley.com)). They have two grown up children and six grandchildren. She can be contacted at [rheabazeley@fastmail.fm](mailto:rheabazeley@fastmail.fm)