

# An Introduction to Learning to Read

by Prue Goodwin

## Welcome

Books are for each and every one of us at any age.

Books are fun.

Books are full of stories, pictures, rhymes, jokes and songs for us all to learn from and enjoy.

Books help us find out all about the world we live in, the people we share it with and about ourselves.

Books for the very young are chosen by, acquired by and shared with adults. Parents, carers and educators must ensure that all children are:

- told stories;
- read to from good books;
- introduced to the wonderful range of children's books;
- encouraged and supported when learning to read.

At the age of five children start more formal schooling when they move into Key Stage 1. Most schools will follow the National Curriculum (DFE, 2014) which sets out the ways in which children should be taught to read. How well children start their schooling can depend on their experiences from birth, both at home or in caring environments, such as child-minders and nursery. There is evidence to suggest that most children learn to read more successfully if they have already become familiar with books when they start school.

## Every Child from Every Home

By the time they start school, children's learning experiences, and literacy experiences in particular, will have been strongly influenced by their family's social and cultural traditions; these will remain a powerful factor throughout their schooling.

Margaret M. Clark *Young Literacy Learners*, Scholastic, 1994.

The ways that we read and share books differ across social, cultural and ethnic groups. All the different literacy practices and expectations about reading should be respected and, no matter what their background or life circumstances, every child should:

- be able to find children like themselves reflected in books;
- feel welcome and 'at home' in schools, libraries and bookshops;
- be familiar with stories and books, especially those from their own cultural heritage;
- see their first language printed in dual-language books;
- have an expectation of pleasure from reading when they start school.

## What do children learn when they share books with caring adults?

Children learn:

- about how a book works;
- that books provide pleasure and enlightenment;
- how print translates into meaning;
- that both print and pictures tell us stories;
- that both print and pictures give us information;
- that it is well worth becoming a reader;
- that they can have books, and all the pleasures you get from reading.

## Stories Are Essential

Narrative is a primary act of mind. We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. Barbara Hardy in Meek, Warlow & Barton (Eds) *The Cool Web*, Bodley Head, 1978.

### 'Can I have a story?'

Listening to stories has been part of childhood since time began. In fact, it isn't just childhood; whether we listen to them, read them or watch them on stage and screen – we all love stories. Stories are captivating, thought-provoking and satisfying. Narrative is such a natural part of our everyday language use that we are unaware of what an important role it plays in our lives. Story is one of the most powerful ways in which we learn and retain knowledge. It is amazing how much more easily ideas can be remembered if they are couched in a narrative. In some ways, an ever-increasing store of stories is one of the best things we can give children to support their learning. We should never worry that telling or reading a story is a waste of time – either at home or in school.

All stories are valuable but for children the most valuable are often those stories from their own families, communities and cultures. The traditions of our cultural heritage conveyed through stories can be a strong part of our sense of identity and, thus, our sense of self.

### Telling and reading

Stories can be told or read aloud to children. Both are essential in the development of their language, their literacy and their growing knowledge of the world. Every time you share a story with children, they should be invited to respond in some way. Responses can vary from simple conversations about the story to more complex activities such as playing at being the characters or making a picture or engaging in conversations that lead children to further thoughts and reasoning.

## Telling stories

When you tell a story you are able to develop a very close rapport with your listeners. Eye contact, voice variations and facial expressions are part of the story and the fun. Children's reactions are all part of the occasion and you are able to respond immediately to what you observe. For example: you can cut out the frightening bits, increase the funny bits, personalise the story to include the children who are listening and, to be really effective, put on different voices and add dramatic effects. The introduction of puppets, toys and other props will add to the fun and intensify engagement, as will inviting children to join in.

## Storytelling to babies

As well as simple tales and rhymes, babies love to hear about their own lives. Even simple day-to-day activities can be told as a story; everyday things like washing up or going to bed can be told as an interesting sequence of events that babies will recognise. Books such as Sarah Garland's *Doing the Washing* and *Going to the Shops* can help anyone who finds it hard to 'make up' their own words – but always remember to relate what is in a book to the real world of the listener.

## Stories that teach

As stories help us remember and understand it is not surprising that since the beginning of time stories have been used to teach. Many of the stories that we call folk or fairy tales were originally told as warnings or lessons. Some have special names that signal the didactic intention – parable, allegory, fable – but other are just tales that provide 'messages' for the discerning listener (for example, it is sensible not to talk to wolves in dark woods – look what happened to Little Red Riding Hood!).

## Stories increase vocabularies

With babies and toddlers every story increases their vocabulary by several words – especially if there is a repeated refrain such as, 'Not by the hairs on my chinny, chin, chin'. The way language is used to tell tales often reflects the literary language patterns that children will later find in books. It is a good idea to have a book of any traditional tale you tell so that children can revisit the story in written form later on when they have learned to read.

## Stories help us to distinguish between fantasy and reality

Although many stories have a grain of truth in them, we think of most stories as having been 'made up' by someone. The imagination can invent all sorts of weird and wonderful things. Supernatural beings, such as fairies, giants, dragons, goblins and characters like Rumpelstiltskin are common in traditional tales. However, few children fail to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Even those with over-active imaginations seldom believe in the bizarre situations and magical events they hear about in stories; most children know when the characters and creatures are imaginary.

**Hannah and her godmother outwit the troll ... a true story**

Once upon a time, five days before her fifth birthday, Hannah and her godmother went for a walk in the wild, wild woods. They came to a little stream which was crossed by a rickety, rickety wooden bridge.

‘Let’s go and see if the troll is there!’

They tiptoed towards the bridge but when they reached it Hannah stayed back as her godmother stepped on to the planks, knelt down and peered underneath them.

‘It’s all right; he’s gone shopping.’

Hannah skipped on to the bridge and together they stamped and shouted, ‘Silly ol’ troll!’ Then they rushed off the bridge – just in case.

Once safely out of troll-reach, Hannah said, ‘Trolls aren’t in this world.’

‘What?’

‘Trolls aren’t in this world.’

‘You mean there isn’t really a troll that lives under this bridge?’

‘No.’

‘Now she tells me!’

The conversation that followed revealed the extent of Hannah’s knowledge and her understanding of the fairy stories she had heard all her life. She explained that certain things are ‘not in the world’. Other creatures are; for example, ‘wolves are in the world but a long way away.’ Hannah had a good grasp on reality and a vast store of knowledge from all the stories she had ever been told or read. She loved stories and was ready to start learning how to read them for herself.

**Reading aloud to children**

From the very first time children hear a story read aloud they begin to learn about being a reader. Reading aloud is not the same as telling a story. There is a big difference in the sound of a voice when speaking to children and when reading aloud to them. As very young children listen to the language of books, they become familiar with the sound patterns of texts – the intonation and, sometimes, the words themselves (for example, in conventional story language such as ‘Once upon a time’ or repeated phrases such as ‘Trip trap, trip trap over the rickety-rickety bridge’). A repertoire of story language gradually becomes established and the patterns of sound begin to be associated with the visual patterns of words on the page.

**Read aloud to children from birth**

As soon as a child is able to listen to you read a story, the wonderful times spent snuggling together with a book can begin. As most parents know, reading a story just before bed can have a miraculous effect on a lively toddler but, as important as story at bedtime is, books should not be associated only with bedtime routines. Sharing a book can happen at any time.

The best reason for sharing books with babies is that it is very enjoyable and this great pleasure shouldn’t ever be spoilt by pressure from anyone to teach babies and toddlers to read.

Laurie Makin & Marian R. Whitehead *Children’s Early Literacy*, Paul Chapman, 2004.

It is always important to encourage children to talk about the stories they have heard and the books that they have shared. Ideally, before they begin learning to read in a school environment, children will:

- associate books with pleasure;
- be confident and careful when handling books;
- be able and willing to talk about the books they enjoy.

### **When should you stop reading aloud to children?**

Only when they leave home ... or your class. As long as they enjoy listening to you read aloud, doing so will give a great deal of pleasure and be of tremendous benefit to their literary development.

## **First Encounters with Reading: Babies and Books**

The first books that babies are offered may be indistinguishable from toys. However, as long as they have 'pages' which turn to reveal something new to the 'reader' they are books. At first, babies may perceive books to be just another object to explore. They will hold them, chew them and probably bash them about a bit. The books babies are given are likely to have been made of strong card, cloth or soft plastic – materials sufficiently robust to withstand the exploration of tiny fingers and mouths. However, when sharing books with adults, babies very quickly learn that it is what they see on the pages inside the book that really matters. Between the covers are all sorts of delights to comment on (squeak or gurgle), stare at (point and pat), listen to and join in (stories and rhymes). Even at the very earliest stages, babies learn the purpose of books and how readers 'use' them. Most of all, they learn that sharing books is fun!

### **Talking about books**

Sharing a book with a baby provides the ideal opportunity to talk together. As you turn each page and point to different things in the pictures and have a conversation about each thing you see, ask questions and relate what you see to the world around you, for example, with *Let's Feed the Ducks* by Pamela Venus (Tamarind).

Having conversations with babies is essential to their development. If you would like further information about talking to babies visit: [www.wordsforlife.org.uk](http://www.wordsforlife.org.uk) There you can find out about Words For Life, a campaign run by the National Literacy Trust to encourage parents and carers to talk more to babies and toddlers. Talking to young children helps them become good communicators, which is essential if they are to do well at school and lead happy, fulfilled and successful lives.

Check whether your local library offers Rhyme Time sessions for babies and toddlers. These sessions are great fun and introduce babies (and their carers) to the joys of sharing books with others.

## **Books to Share with the Youngest Children (0–3 years)**

### *Fiction*

A bookshelf for 0 to 3-year-olds should include:

- Collections of nursery rhymes and simple traditional tales from a range of cultures
- Picture story books with stories featuring other babies, animals and imaginary creatures
- Poetry written for the very young, such as counting rhymes and lullabies

- Action rhymes, games and songs that involve lots of joining in with actions, singing, clapping, and so on
- Books that invite the reader to lift a flap or pull a lever
- Books with textured pictures to touch and feel
- Books made from a variety of materials – cloth, card and soft plastic
- Stories and songs on CDs and DVDs.

### *Non-fiction*

Information texts for babies are usually caption books with pictures – often beautiful photographs – accompanied by a label or short sentence. The first books to share should relate to the immediate environment (showing, for example, objects that children use every day – toothbrush, spoon, Teddy) but gradually babies can be introduced to the wider world (vehicles, farm animals, at the playground) or different concepts (counting, colours, shapes). Non-fiction on the bookshelf should include:

- books of everyday items, people, places, familiar animals
- events in a day – getting dressed, eating meals, bathtime, sleeping
- everyday life at home – doing the washing up, going shopping
- colours, numbers, shapes and concepts.

Early reading is a partnership of mutual pleasure and discovery. It often involves an older and wiser partner in taking on as much of the task as is necessary, but always making opportunities for the younger and less experienced child partner to contribute something. Perhaps to touch the page, smile, slot in an appropriate sound effect, name a character, or join in a repeated phrase or chorus.

—Marian R. Whitehead *Developing Language and Literacy with Young Children*, 3rd edn, Paul Chapman, 2007.

## **'Again, Again, Again!' (3–5 years)**

Sharing books with children from 3 to 5 years old will have a direct influence on their motivation to learn to read and to become readers for life. At this stage children begin to display reading behaviours that are common to all readers no matter what their age. For example, young children often:

- choose favourite books which they love to return to regularly;
- want to engage entirely with books by 'playing' at being in the story;
- pore over illustrations, pointing and talking about what they can see;
- join in with the words (usually knowing if any have been left out).

And, after all that, they still want to hear you read it aloud again.

### *Fiction, non-fiction and fun*

By 3 years old, children have made friends and will be gaining experience in all sorts of other areas of life. Books should become an important part of their day, especially the many delightful, high quality picture books which combine words and pictures to engage young readers – books by authors and artists who are universally admired, such as Shirley Hughes, John Burningham, Martin Waddell and Quentin Blake.

Find exciting books which have flaps to lift or pop-up pages to marvel at. To ensure that all children can find themselves in the stories they share, seek out publishers such as Tara Publishing and Barefoot Books.

Inquisitive 3 to 5-year-olds will discover that books relate to a wider world and they will begin to make links between their experiences and what they see on the page. For instance, television programmes are often based on good children's books and many youngsters will recognise their TV favourites and enjoy reading, for example, about Charlie and Lola, created by Lauren Child, David McKee's King Rollo or the Little Princess from stories by Tony Ross. A growing knowledge of tales, poems and songs provides a foundation for the literary texts children will meet later. Literary experience starts with nursery rhymes and continues into many childhood 'classics' that every child deserves to meet, such as *Peter Rabbit*, the Anansi stories and Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. At this stage, children's curiosity about the world will be satisfied by their first real information books.

Children should be encouraged to continue their enjoyment of books through play and creative activities. Role play areas can be turned into the Three Bears' cottage, big building blocks can be used to construct a 'rickety, rickety bridge' or Anansi's spider limbs can be made out of pairs of old black tights.

#### *Poetry, rhymes, games and songs*

Children in the 3 to 5 age range are gaining insights about books, reading and language which will prepare them for more formal learning. Playing with sound patterns will help children to distinguish the speech sounds they will need to hear when they start learning about the alphabet.

These children love being active. They don't need much encouragement to sing along and act out nursery rhymes. By doing this they develop phonological awareness, becoming aware of the sounds in speech, rhyming words and patterns of sound in repeated phrases in stories, songs and games.

### **Talk about books**

With very young children the most important aspect is raising their awareness of the sound patterns of language and this can be done through poetry, rhyme and – in particular – nursery rhymes.

—Diane Godwin & Margaret Perkins *Teaching Language and Literacy in the Early Years*,  
2nd edn, David Fulton, 2002.

Along with all the fun and activity, there should always be quieter, more reflective times when the emphasis is on having a conversation about a book. On these occasions children often reveal the extent to which they have implicit knowledge of inference, prediction or empathy. We can talk about how we interpret a picture or a clue in the text to help us have deeper understanding. For example, with *Pumpkin Soup* by Helen Cooper (Random House) there are themes of friendship, anxiety and sharing, all within an enjoyable story.

At this stage, you will get through a lot of books so ensure that your library membership is maintained. As well as being able to borrow books free of charge every week, there is usually a storytime for pre-school children every week.

## On the Bookshelf (3–5 years)

- A wide range of engaging stories including traditional, contemporary and fantasy tales
- Stories and nursery rhymes from their own culture and the wider cultural heritage
- Stories with lots of repetition, alliteration, rhyme and language play
- Poems, games and songs that encourage everyone to join in with words and actions
- Books that invite readers to look at pop-up pages, lift flaps or pull levers
- Alphabets and counting books
- Stories in languages other than English and in dual language
- Information books about the immediate environment and further afield
- Books that tie in with popular television programmes and films
- Stories and songs in books with accompanying story boxes, related toys, CDs or DVDs.

## 'I Can Read This!' (6–7 years)

When children start school they bring four years of intensive learning with them which will include all the experiences they have had with stories and books. Those who have been read to since birth will already know a great deal about reading which will benefit them as they tackle the more complex aspects of learning to read. At this stage it is vital that previous practices are not discarded. Telling stories, reading aloud, playing with words and engaging with books through conversation and creative activity continue to be very important aspects of children's literacy learning. This stage should see the gradual inclusion of more formal teaching about how readers get the meaning from the page.

### Reading aloud is still essential

Reading aloud to children is so pleasurable for all concerned that some people find it hard to believe that it is an essential part of the teaching of reading. Unlike almost any other aspect of literacy, there is agreement among all involved with teaching reading that, whatever your relationship with children – be it as parent, carer, teacher or librarian – it is important that you read aloud to them as often as possible. Children gain immeasurably in their development as readers whenever adults read aloud to them, especially when there is mutual enjoyment of a good children's book.

Reading aloud to children helps them learn:

- how an 'expert' lifts the meaning from the page;
- how readers respond to books, talk about them and find their favourites;
- the different purposes of texts and the ways we use them.

Anyone involved in children's literacy learning in an education setting should take into account the comments made in the *Rose Report* (2006) on the teaching of early reading which says:

- the process of learning to read is very complex;
- speaking and listening precede and underpin all learning;
- children should have a rich and broad experience of language and literacy in their classrooms;
- there should be discrete and systematic teaching of phonics starting around the age of five;
- learning should be creative, multisensory, imaginative and interactive.

## Getting started with reading

The early stages of learning to read are very important. Children gradually acquire all the complex skills necessary to recognise words and then to make meanings. Becoming a confident reader takes time – more time for some than for others.

To have the best start when learning to read children need:

- to be familiar with spoken language;
- to be able to distinguish between speech sounds;
- to have developed a vocabulary;
- to be confident about joining in conversations.

Experience with language play, sound patterns and rhymes will be of great assistance to children as they learn how to match letters and sounds together. A store of remembered stories will also be an advantage. When you are struggling to decode written language for the first time it helps if you know how stories work. Being experienced with books, knowing how to hold them, turn pages and follow the direction of the words will all provide tentative readers with more self-assurance at a vulnerable time.

## Becoming a reader

Sharing books with children, whether in groups or individually, will be of great support at this stage. Sometimes a book will be part of a literacy session; however, learning is more likely to take place if the book is appealing and engagingly presented. Even in the busiest classroom, there must always be time for sharing books entirely for pleasure. Whether reading aloud for teaching purposes or for pleasure, talking about books enhances both the learning and the enjoyment.

- First share the whole book with the children. Introduce only minimum comment on the story and pictures, letting the children wallow in the pleasure of the experience.
- After the first read-through, discuss the story adding comments or questions such as: Did you enjoy that story? That was a funny thing to happen, wasn't it?
- If the children have enjoyed the book, share the story again, asking them to tell you what they like on each page.
- Always explore the pictures and relish the language of the story. Let children return to gaze at the pictures and talk about them.

## Sharing books at school and at home

- Provide all sorts of books for children to browse through and read to themselves – short stories, picture books, non-fiction and poetry.
- Read to children from different kinds of books:
  - longer stories that they are unable to tackle for themselves;
  - a range of different sorts of non-fiction;
  - picture books and other graphic texts;
  - 'classic' children's literature and poetry;
  - books which provide a dual-language text.
- Let children select the book that you will share from the collection. Don't worry if they choose something over and over again. You can always have a rule: two books, one that they have chosen and one chosen by you.

- Use the school library and visit the local library where you can borrow, free of charge, many different books and possibly other exciting book-related items such as story sacks. Librarians will also help with suggestions about what books to choose next.
- Revisit some of the lovely books they read before they started school. They may have a try at reading some of the words for themselves and familiarity with the story will help them to recognise the words.
- Encourage them to re-enact stories, to play at being the characters, to draw pictures and to make up a bit more of the story.
- Provide good quality CDs, DVDs and websites associated with children's books. Don't be afraid to let children revisit favourite stories via the new technologies – especially if they know the books well.

### Children who can read for themselves

It is important to continue reading aloud to children for pleasure even when they reach the stage of being able to read books for themselves. When possible at school (and always at home), we should attempt to retain the intimacy of snuggling up with books that they had when they were younger. Reading aloud need not have any didactic purpose and you may choose to read from a variety of books, according to the circumstances. For example, you may read something quite challenging to introduce them to books which are beyond their current ability or you may return to a comforting read that offers the security of knowing what comes next. You may sometimes choose to read poetry or non-fiction instead of a story. No matter what you read, if you do it well and select engaging books, children will benefit. Reading aloud is never a waste of time; there is plenty of evidence that children who are read to regularly become more competent and confident readers and writers.

Supported by caring adults and high quality books, all children can start on the magical journey into words, images and books, so get them listening and reading with this list of exciting and stimulating favourite, classic and new books for the 0 to 7 age range.

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*Riveting Reads: Book Ahead 0–7* by Julia Eccleshare,  
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