

EARLY YEARS

To lay the foundations for our children's literacy we must immerse them, both in our settings and at home, in the language of everyday life.

LITERACY

The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go. Dr Seuss



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The early learning goals (ELGs) are contained in EYFS profile guidance which summarises and describes children's learning and development at the end of the EYFS.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/942421/EYFSP_Handbook_2021.pdf

6.2 Specific areas of learning

Literacy

This involves encouraging children to read and write, both through listening to others reading, and being encouraged to begin to read and write themselves. Children must be given access to a wide range of reading materials such as books, poems, and other written materials to ignite their interest.

ELG 09 Reading:

- Children read and understand simple sentences
- They use phonic knowledge to decode regular words and read them aloud accurately
- They also read some common irregular words
- They demonstrate understanding when talking with others about what they have read

ELG 10 Writing:

- Children use their phonic knowledge to write words in ways which match their spoken sounds
- They also write some irregular common words
- They write simple sentences which can be read by themselves and others. Some words are spelt correctly and others are phonetically plausible

What is literacy?

The term 'literacy' is used by some to simply describe reading and writing, but in fact literacy covers a much wider range of learning. Literacy in the early years includes talking about books, print in the environment, early mark making and writing, as well as sharing books and reading.

Literacy and Early Years

There are many ways we can prepare young children for school. One of the keys to academic success is strong literacy skills, or the ability to read and write.

A child's journey towards literacy begins at birth, although it may be several years before they are actually ready to read and write. When infants and toddlers scribble with crayons or play with their books by lifting the flaps or pointing to pictures, they are already building emergent literacy skills. As professionals who work with young children, there are many **emergent literacy skills** that we can support in these early years that pave the way to later literacy success.



When parents talk, read, and sing with their babies and toddlers, connections are formed in their young brains. These connections build language, literacy, and social-emotional skills at an important time in a young child's development. These activities strengthen the bond between parent and child.

Introducing literacy into your childcare setting doesn't have to be confined to the printed ink on a page.

Chatting away in funny voices as you flick through picture books, enjoying interactive eBooks together, listening to stories being told via video or audio and singing nursery rhymes can all spark communication and literacy learning. Essentially it is these ideas and questions the activities promote that create the foundation for developing reading and writing skills.

“A shared story between a child and a familiar, loved adult has a huge impact on children’s interest and motivation for reading later on,” says PACEY President, Penny Tassoni.

What is a literate environment?

A literate environment is one where there are high levels of talk, where people say “more than is necessary” (Neaum, 2012), and where reading and writing are everyday, purposeful activities. As speaking and listening are the basis of becoming literate, it’s vital that, alongside engaging children in early literacy practices, we maintain a strong emphasis on speaking.

We know that children acquire and develop spoken language by being surrounded by talk, and that there is a powerful link between the quantity and quality of the language that children are exposed to and the quality and quantity of their language (Risley and Hart, 2006); so children need to hear and use talk in meaningful daily contexts. Similarly with reading and writing, young children learn about reading and writing as they observe and become actively involved in real, purposeful literacy activities in their everyday lives.

There are many opportunities to engage children in talk and literacy practices in the home, which any early years setting can share with parents. What is important is that adults encourage children to notice the ways in which literacy is used in our everyday lives.



Some examples of these authentic literacy practices that can be supported at home:

Reading and writing in support of general chores and household jobs and routines: lists, forms, emails, notes, reading labels and instructions, shopping online;

Reading and writing to communicate: texting, emails, cards and letters, social network sites, reading and writing for pleasure: books, magazines, newspapers, Internet, social network sites;

Reading environmental print: names of shops, streets, and places; street signs, labels and logos on clothes, bags, t-shirts, games and toys; print on transport, such a buses, trains and taxis;

Reading and writing associated with reading books, writing reports or plans, sending and receiving emails – many children will recognise the work of their parents who may be home working.

Alongside these literacy activities it is essential that we talk to children in ways that go beyond a functional use of language and engage in discussion, explanation, questioning and pondering.

In settings there are many ways in which children can be involved in authentic literacy activities:

Use of reading and writing in routines: self-registration, name places, lists, naming paintings, labels on toy storage to help with selecting and tidying toys away, letters home; Reading and writing for pleasure: stories, poems, rhymes and songs;

Reading and writing around the setting: peg labels, display labels, directions, instructions, labels on toy storage;

Observing and using emergent reading and writing during focused activities: e.g. writing down the children's descriptions of their models and reading them out at group time before putting them on display; google, read out, and refer to a recipe on a website when baking;

Provision of resources so children can engage in emergent reading and writing during child-initiated play: books, pencils and paper, computers and tablets.

And, as in the home, alongside this we need to talk in ways that go beyond organisational talk and brief social interactions, and actively engage children in playing with language and talk that uses commentary, conversation / discussion, questioning, pondering and explanation.



Writing – Continuous Provision

When introducing writing to children, make it relevant to them. What is more relevant than their own name? Begin by pointing out the letters in their name when you see them in environmental print. You can say things like, 'Will has four letters in his name, just like Jack has four letters in his name.' Encourage the children to sign in each morning. The young children may not grasp all the letters in their name, but encourage them to 'make their Mark'. This way, they learn that their name is important, and also builds their writing confidence.

Encourage the children to put their name or make their mark on all of the art work that they create.

Writing doesn't have to take place with pencils or crayons. When children use their fingers to write / make marks, they develop the strength and dexterity that is needed to eventually be able to grasp a pencil later on.

Make writing fun by offering unique writing experiences. Writing in shaving cream is a wonderful sensory experience that children won't soon forget. And how often do children get the opportunity to make their mark in snow?

Journaling is a great way for children to practice writing. It can also be a fun way for children to express themselves creatively. Invite children to journal about an enjoyable experience that they've had either at the setting or at home. Children can journal about a story or movie or even their favourite colour. Children's first attempts at journaling may take the form of drawing pictures. Have the children describe their picture to you or 'tell you their story'. Write it down as best as you can word for word to show children that their words have value.

Consider providing a well-resourced writing station to invite and encourage children to practice their writing. Make sure the writing station consists of good quality items including; different types of paper / cards / stickers, various writing tools, scissors, and glue. Vary the materials that you offer in the writing station to keep children interested and engaged.

Remember that the most important part of all early learning experiences is that they should be fun and based in play. We want children to associate writing with enjoyable experiences that they are happy to take part in.

Creating a literacy rich environment

In settings, creating a literacy rich environment means ensuring that children are surrounded by and engaged with talk and print. This can be achieved in a number of ways:

- Actively engage in talk with the children – saying more than is necessary, holding conversations and exploring learning together;
- Labelling toy boxes and cupboards – with both picture and word – and making sure print is at child height;
- Putting up signs – ‘toilet’ ‘kitchen’ ‘cloakroom’, etc. at child height;
- Labelling displays – to be done alongside the children, who should be involved in deciding what the captions should say and observe them being written; older children should also be encouraged to practice writing their name and simple words;
- Labelling role-play and other areas with appropriate signs, captions and charts;
- Providing opportunities to engage with authentic literacy in play – e.g. providing menus, price lists, appointment books, diaries, calendars, maps, instructions, leaflets, notebooks and pencils, reference books, charts, etc.;
- Reading and enjoying a wide range of books (including diversity and inclusion rich literature) – both with the children and independently;
- Ensuring that books are included as part of the resources at activities;
- Enabling children to use computers, iPads and electronic notebooks as an integral part of activities – e.g. to research an access information, to word process, for games and activities;
- Completing routine tasks alongside the children – e.g. doing the register / self registration, naming and handing out letters, completing lists;
- Labelling children’s work and as they observe you, explaining why you are doing this;
- Making good use of opportunities for literacy in all activities (see the case study below);
- Drawing children’s attention to reading and writing in the setting, both to enable them to notice it in their environment, and see when and how you and they engage in reading and writing.



Case study

The following case study develops the idea of providing a literate environment to show how settings can create opportunities that actively engage children in literacy practices.

Following a very enjoyable visit to the nursery by a storyteller, who had told of knights, princesses and castles, the children wanted a castle as the role-play area. Initially the staff and children talked about what they wanted and what they would need to set up a castle in the nursery. The staff collected books about castles and put them out with large sheets of plain paper, and the children were encouraged to come and record their ideas using the books and ideas from the discussion. A member of staff helped the children to record their ideas in pictures, symbols and emergent writing. In addition, staff put up websites on the computer for children to find out information, look at the pictures, and download and print information.

The practitioner then put the items that the children had suggested into a list, and, at group time, the children and staff read the list together and decided which of these resources they already had in the nursery and which they would need to acquire. One of the children highlighted the list in different colours to show what they already had and what was needed.

Question: How could you enhance children's enjoyment and learning even further - think about ways children could be supported / encouraged in greater independent learning.

Early Years literacy activities and games

1. Letter recognition games

Play letter recognition games with the children, eg letter hunts, letter matching, letter sorting, letter bingo, letter of the day.

2. Making magnetic letters

Make your own set of magnetic letters with the children, using cutters and air-drying clay; paint them and stick magnets on the back.

3. Assigning nouns

Stick 26 sheets of paper (as large as you have room for) on the wall – one for each letter of the alphabet (you could cut them into the shape of the letters or just write the letters on). Let the children fill them in with stickers, collage pictures or drawings, representing things that begin with each letter.

4. Stories and narratives

Everyone knows how important it is to read with children, and every nursery should have a good stock of books for all ages. Simply reading to children has plenty of value in itself, but there are lots of ways that you can make story time more interactive and enhance the opportunity to develop their comprehension and communication skills:

- Guess what happens next
- Discuss the book while you're reading it. Ask the children questions, for example 'what do you think is going to happen next?', or 'how do you think she is feeling now?'
- Act it out
- Get the children to act out the story.
- Story scramble
- Photocopy pages from a well-known book and ask the children to put them in order, telling the story as they go.
- Use Sensory books and those with flaps and touchy-feely books to encourage interaction.
- Guess the rhyme - Read rhyming books and get the children to call out the words at the end of sentences.
- Story lucky dip - Put together a story bag, either using pictures drawn/stuck onto pieces of card, or small toys/objects from around the nursery. Get the children to pull them out one by one and use them as narrative props to make up their own stories.

Exploring words - ideas

Have fun exploring words, playing with rhymes, and helping to build the children's vocabulary. Here are some ideas:

- **Sing songs and nonsense rhyme.** Sing songs and nursery rhymes together; make up little nonsense rhymes with the children (eg 'the fat cat sat on the mat').
- **Rhyming pairs** - Make a matching rhymes game, by writing pairs of rhyming words on pieces of card, along with pictures (either drawn or cut out of magazines). This can be played either as a memory game (cards face down) or as a simple pairing game (cards face up).
- **Be descriptive** - Remember to always describe what you're doing, or what you're looking at, and explain new words to children if they don't understand. Get the children to describe things as well.
- **Descriptive I-spy** - Play I-spy with colours or shapes, for example 'I spy, with my little eye, something coloured blue' or 'something square'.

Developing fine motor skills for writing - In order for children to learn to write, they need to be able to hold and control a pencil or pen. For this they need to practise their fine motor skills (the movements made by using small muscles in your hands and forearms), and there are plenty of ways that you can help them:

- **Beads on a string** – encourage children to play with beads, either threading them onto string or sorting them using tweezers.
- **Tiring laces** – Invest in a set of lacing cards, or make your own from paper plates / cardboard.
- **Pipe cleaner creatures** - encourage the children to make creatures using pipe cleaners.
- **Pattern art – encourage and support children to collaborate and** create artwork together by using a wide range of items – e.g. beans, pulses, rice etc to glue onto card to create patterns.
- **Pens, paints, paper and other mark making resources** - Always ensure that the children have plenty of resources and opportunities to draw, scribble and paint.

Why is Reading Important?

Children introduced to reading early on tend to read earlier and excel in school compared to children who are not exposed to language and books at a young age.

Reading, rhyming, singing, and talking — beginning from birth — profoundly influence literacy and language development, the foundations for all other learning.

Developing early literacy skills makes it easier for children to learn to read. Children who enter school with these skills have an advantage that carries with them throughout their school years. However, almost 1 in 3 children start school without the skills they need to learn to read.

Reading is an essential skill for success in school and later in life.

References and resources

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