

Getting ready for school: Supporting literacy skills

What is literacy?

When we talk about supporting children's literacy skills we are talking about supporting their reading and writing skills. Emerging literacy skills begin before birth with babies hearing sounds, patterns and rhythms of language. Young babies begin interacting and communicating with others, and young children explore books and share stories. They explore how to make marks with different tools and develop the physical skills they will need to enable them to write. As their imaginative play develops, children create characters, events and stories in their play.

How these activities will support my child: Why is literacy important?

Reading and writing are an essential part of our daily lives and literacy skills can determine our job prospects and financial circumstances. They influence our self-esteem, creativity, imagination and how we communicate in our social world. To become successful readers and writers children need exciting literacy experiences that spark their imagination and motivate them. Children will develop a love of books and telling stories; they will enjoy playing with sounds and words; they will explore mark making in a range of ways. At this early stage it is important to develop strong foundations to help children develop the skills they will need throughout their educational journey and beyond.

Developing reading skills

To develop a child's love of stories and reading you need to have fun together. There are lots of lovely activities you can enjoy with your child. Try not to be self-conscious about how you read a story or act out a character. Your child will just enjoy spending time with you and having fun together. If you don't feel confident reading stories, make up your own and tell them orally to your children.

- **Sharing story books.** Look at story books together and talk about what you can see in the pictures and what might be about to happen. Books without any words are great for encouraging children to 'tell' a story
- **Oral stories.** Make up stories for your child. To make it fun, you can include family members or special events your child has experienced. Use props from around your home to help you tell the story. Let your child make up parts of the story – do they want to suggest what might happen next?

- **Puppet theatres.** Draw simple characters with your child on the inside of a cereal box.. Cut them out and attach them to sticks. Use the puppets to tell a story
- **Story box.** Choose an item and place it inside a 'story box'. This can be any box you find in your house - decorate it if you wish to. Open up the box with your child and tell a story around your chosen item. Take turns to add new events or characters to the story. Use story language such as, 'once upon a time' and 'the end'
- **Nursery rhymes.** Sing favourite nursery rhymes together. The rhythm and rhyme help children to learn about the ways in which language works and develops their memory skills. Learn some new rhymes or make up new words to songs you know
- **A listening walk.** Whilst out in the garden or out for a walk in your community, why not try a listening walk? Ask your child to identify all the different sounds they hear on their walk. If you have access to a smartphone you can record the sounds and listen to them back at home - see if your child can identify the sounds you recorded
- **Acting out stories.** Act out stories or nursery rhymes together. Use props or dressing up clothes and take on the role of a character from the story. You don't need expensive items – just your imagination. A blanket, old shirt or a hat can be made into a range of characters of your child's choice.

Developing writing skills

The starting point for writing skills is physical development. Children need to have the muscle development necessary to enable them to eventually hold a pencil and to form letters. There are lots of activities you can do to support this at home. A child's first attempts to write are referred to as 'mark making'. This starts when children are sat in a high chair and use a finger to swirl around the liquid they have tipped onto their tray, exploring the marks and patterns they can make. Mark making activities can be done both indoors and outdoors and they help your child to develop the control they will need to write letters. Below are lots of ideas you can try together.

- **Playdough.** This is a great activity to encourage children's muscle development - squishing, squeezing, pulling and pressing the playdough
- **Ball play.** Throwing and catching balls helps to develop hand-eye coordination necessary for writing
- **Sand play.** Pour sand into a small tray and encourage children to draw pictures, shapes and patterns. If they want to, let them try writing letters with their fingers
- **Cornflour.** Mix cornflour and water in a tray. Draw shapes or faces and see how they disappear
- **Paint.** Drive cars and trucks through a plate of paint (you can use a paper plate) and then drive the vehicles over a piece of paper to make tracks and patterns
- **Recipes.** Follow recipes when baking or cooking with your child. Talk to them about what you are doing as you write a recipe or ingredients for a shopping list. Encourage your child to pretend to write for their toys

- **Chalk.** Provide chunky chinks for drawing or writing on walls, or pavements
- **Water.** Provide a tub of water and some paintbrushes or paint rollers for your child to use outdoors. They can paint pictures, patterns or pretend to repaint any outdoor items for example the fence or wall
- **Letter hunt.** Cut out letters and hide them around your outdoor space or indoors and go on a letter hunt. You could start with the first letter of your child’s name and build up to more letters. Don’t worry if your child doesn’t know the sound or name of the letter at this stage – see if they can find two that look the same.

Tools and surfaces you can use for mark making activities

Children may need support and an adult to watch over them to keep them safe.

Tools	Surfaces
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paintbrushes in a range of different sizes • Pencils and pens • Felt tips of varying widths • Chalk • Sticks of various sizes and widths • Lolly sticks, chopsticks • Cotton buds, combs • Brushes of varying sizes – washing up brushes, toothbrushes, wallpaper paste brushes, pastry brushes • Paint rollers • Charcoal • Cars and other wheeled vehicles • Paint rollers of varying sizes • Marbles • Various cloths and sponges • Feathers • Spray bottles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lining paper • Wallpaper samples • Plastic lids • Cardboard of different thickness and textures • Tissue paper • Sandpaper • Fabric • Wrapping paper • Coloured paper of different sizes and shapes • Paper bags • Dry and wet sand • Blackboards • Whiteboards • Cardboard boxes • Leaves of various size and shapes • Mud and soil • Banana skin.

Further guidance

- What to expect in the Early Years Foundation stage: a Guide for Parents: <https://bit.ly/3ul1anJ>
- Literacy Trust: <https://bit.ly/3AbkcUK>