

How to Use this Book

Introduction

This book focuses on literacy development during the all-important Foundation Stage years. It is aimed at anyone who works with the three-plus age group – nursery nurses, nursery teachers, Reception class teachers, nursery and Reception assistants and students practising in day nurseries, nursery schools or Reception classes.

The book sets out to offer a wide range of practical activities that can be used to help children develop the skills of reading and writing. The chapters break up the field of literacy development into six broad areas. Chapter 1 looks at organizing a literate play environment and working with groups; Chapter 2 covers the sounds of spoken language; Chapter 3 the association between sounds and letters; Chapters 4 and 5 focus on early writing and reading experiences; and Chapter 6 looks at the role of the picture book. The final chapter, Chapter 7, provides information on planning, assessment and recording, showing how each activity links with the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000) and the ‘Reception’ section of *The National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching* (DfEE, 1998).

The chapters and activities are, to some extent, placed in a chronological sequence. For example, the process of exploring the sounds of language (Chapter 2) should be started before introducing the symbols that represent those sounds (Chapter 3). However, young children do not necessarily learn in a linear fashion and it is important to remember that many literacy skills develop side by side. Introducing letters (Chapter 3) will overlap with many of the sound exploration activities in Chapter 2. Early writing and reading experiences in Chapters 4 and 5 have been separated to help facilitate planning, but in practice, these skills are inextricably linked. Likewise, although linking sounds and letters (Chapter 3) and recognizing common letter clusters and words as a whole (Chapters 5 and 6) are dealt with in separate chapters, they all come under the umbrella of ‘absorbing printed language’. Perhaps most important of all, although **The Role of the Picture Book** is the final activities chapter (Chapter 6), children should be introduced to the book corner and picture book related activities as soon as they arrive in your setting. Where it is necessary that activities should follow each other in order to build up skills, this is emphasized in the **Readiness** section attached to each activity.

DEVELOPING LITERACY SKILLS IN THE EARLY YEARS

Overall, the book has been designed to be ‘dipped’ into, and many of the activities constitute different ways of exploring the same skill. The games and activities are also designed to be fun and varied. This is an age group that needs to be on the move and utilizing all five senses to explore the environment. Many of the activities encourage the child to be active, both within the group and within the setting. Wherever possible, activities are based on familiar rhymes, stories and objects, providing a meaningful context for learning.

Although a number of the activities are quite structured and adult led, it is important to remember that play should be at the core of the child’s literacy experience. Many of the activities have strong play elements – playing with alliteration, playing with writing materials, playing with story props – and it is important to exploit any play opportunities that might emerge from an activity. Equally important is the setting up of a play environment to support the development of literacy in all its many aspects. For more information on encouraging literacy related play, see Chapter 1 (**The Setting**).

Each activity or group of activities is presented in a similar format, to help the reader access the information quickly and efficiently. Most of the activities are explained in detail and, where appropriate, the activity descriptions and **Tips** sections include suggestions for differentiation (meeting the needs of a range of abilities and ages) and inclusion (catering for children with additional needs). The activities also include the following headings:

- **Resources:** a list of resources is given where relevant. At the end of each chapter, the **Useful resources** section recommends items that can be purchased.
- **Tips:** practical little suggestions designed to extend the activity or help it run more smoothly. This section also includes suggestions for linking an activity with a particular topic, story or role play.
- **Readiness:** guidance as to what a child needs to be able to do, prior to joining in an activity. Specific ages have deliberately not been given, as rates of development vary so much from child to child. Always choose activities based on what a child is ready for, rather than age alone, and never push the children beyond the limits of their willingness or capability.
- **Curriculum guidance:** a list of relevant Stepping Stones and Early Learning Goals (QCA, 2000) and linked statements from *The National Literacy Strategy* (DfEE, 1998). The activities aim to cover every Stepping Stone in the ‘Linking sounds and letters’, ‘Reading’, ‘Writing’ and ‘Handwriting’ Early Learning Goals.

The activities explained

This section looks at each of the activities chapters in turn and explains their theoretical underpinning, the purpose of the activities and how they can help the child’s overall literacy development.

Chapter 2: The Sounds of Language

Chapter 2 focuses on the development of phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is the ability to tune in to and identify the sounds that make up our language. Until quite recently, phonics was taught from grapheme to phoneme. In other words, children were given the letter symbol and then learnt the sound it represented. *The National Literacy Strategy* now recommends that children should be given the opportunity to explore the sounds that make up a word, before being taught the graphemes that represent that word. This approach makes good sense, given that children have been experiencing oral language from birth if not before.

Apart from all this experience of the spoken word, young children have a natural sensitivity to the rhythms and patterns of spoken language. This is something we can exploit to good purpose in the early years setting with lots of activities designed to explore rhythm, rhyme and the individual phonemes that make up our language. The chapter is divided into three sections – **Rhythm and rhyme**, **Initial sounds** and **Segmenting words**.

Rhythm and rhyme

There is an indisputable link between rhythmic activities and early literacy success. For example, the strong rhythm of a nursery rhyme breaks words into their component syllables – so the child automatically hears *hickory dickory* as *hick-or-y-dick-or-y* when singing or reciting the rhyme. This ability to segment words is particularly important to the writing element of literacy development. Clapping out the rhythms of language is a great way to introduce the rhythms of spoken language, and **Clapping names**, **Clapping rhymes** and **Clapping words** are quick, easy and fun to do.

Being able to detect rhyme is another direct step towards the more refined skill of breaking a word into its onset (initial sound) and rime (the end unit that produces the rhyme); for example, *J-ill / b-ill*. The **Playing with rhyme** activities highlight rime by encouraging children to identify and explore rhyming words, as well as enabling them to be creative with language.

Most important of all, the activities in this section help children to discover the pleasure to be gained from rhythm and rhyme – an important precursor to enjoying both poetry and music in later life.

Initial sounds

Listening for the initial sound of a word is the first step in the process of detecting the individual phonemes that make up that word. It is important that children have lots of experience with the rhythms of multisyllabic words and nursery rhymes, as a prelude to exploring initial sounds. They also need to have developed both their listening skills and an awareness of syllables, before being expected to listen out for individual sounds. Alliteration is useful for highlighting a particular sound for the ear to pick up. Alliteration occurs where a phrase or sentence contains more than one word beginning with the same sound. Many traditional rhymes use alliteration; for example, **Lucy Locket**, **Baa**,

Baa, Black Sheep. The **Playing with alliteration** activities draw on nursery rhymes and strings of alliterative words to help children focus on a given sound.

If children are to be successful in ‘sounding out’ words for later reading and writing, it is essential that they learn correct pronunciation for the individual phonemes. Check that your own articulation is accurate (see Warland, 2004) and keep reiterating correct pronunciation as you explore the sounds of language with the children. Learning to listen out for, identify and pronounce individual phonemes is a long process that needs lots of practice. Play alliterative games, **I spy** and activities such as the **Initial sound games** to provide practice and reinforcement. If we can lay strong foundations when it comes to detecting initial sounds, the later process of sounding out a word will come much more easily to the child.

Segmenting words

Once children have had some experience in identifying initial sounds, you can introduce the process of listening for the other phonemes that make up a word. This involves identifying the initial, middle and end sounds of a simple consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) word such as *mat* (*m-a-t*) or *cup* (*c-u-p*). As with initial sounds, **I spy** makes a useful (and by now familiar) format for introducing all the sounds that make up a word. Remember that the focus is on ‘sound’ rather than ‘spelling’. In other words, if you want to sound out *head*, you will end up articulating exactly the same middle and end phonemes as with the word *bed* – even though the middle phoneme for *head* is represented by the grapheme *ea*, while the middle phoneme for *bed* is represented by the grapheme *e*.

When introducing children to the **Segmenting words** activities, start off with simple, phonetically regular words. The *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000) states that, by the end of the Foundation Stage, children should be able to ‘hear and say initial and final sounds in words and short vowel sounds within words’ – for example, *a* as in *bat*, or *e* as in *leg*. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) guidance *Playing with Sounds* (DfES, 2004) also suggests introducing graphemes/phonemes in staged groups. These groups are based on ‘usefulness, ease of discrimination and development of handwriting’ and they include some of the most common double graphemes and consonant blends:

- Group 1: s m c t g p a o
- Group 2: r l d b f h i u
- Group 3: v w y z j n k e
- Group 4: ll (*bill*) ss (*kiss*) ff (*cuff*) zz (*buzz*)
- Group 5: sh ch th wh
- Group 6: ck (*duck*) ng (*ring*) qu (*queen*) x (*fox*).

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

For settings who are following this guidance, choose letters, words, objects and pictures to fit into these groupings. For example – Group 1: *cat, pot, mop, cap, Sam*; Groups 1 and 2: *bat, dog, cup, pig, log*; Groups 1, 2 and 3: *web, van, zip, red, jam*; Groups 4, 5 and 6: *Bill, hiss, fish, chick, singing*.

Although the focus in this chapter is on the sounds of language, it is essential that segmenting words is looked upon as preparation for becoming a writer. The children should be offered a seamless progression from *sounding out* the phonemes in words to the *writing* process of representing those phonemes with graphemes. This means that the **Segmenting words** activities in this chapter should lead directly on to activities such as **The word basket** in Chapter 4 (**Becoming a Writer**).

As with all activities in the early years setting, a positive experience is the most important aim. If children can simply enjoy listening out for and having a go at identifying the sounds that make up our language, they will have taken a huge step along the path towards reading and writing.

Chapter 3: Matching Sound and Symbol

Chapter 3 focuses on linking the different sounds of language with the symbols that represent those sounds. *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* states that children should be able to name and sound the letters of the alphabet by the end of the Reception year; the *National Literacy Strategy* adds the phonemes and graphemes for *ch, sh* and *th*, while the DfES guidance *Playing with Sounds* specifies a number of double graphemes and consonant blends such as *ll, ss, wh* and *ng* (see page 4 for a full list).

The 26 letters of the alphabet make up the basic building blocks of written language – and learning to associate these symbols with their sounds is an essential first step towards reading and writing. However, a fully competent reader will also need to recognize digraphs such as the *Playing with Sounds* double graphemes, other common consonant blends (such as *br, cl*), vowel blends (such as *ai, oa*), common letter clusters (such as *str, igh*) and the many phonetically irregular words in the English language (such as *she, who*). Although the activities in this chapter concentrate mostly on the letters of the alphabet, make sure that you also provide a literate setting with lots of books and other forms of print. Much of young children's literacy learning is 'untaught' in the sense that they will constantly be absorbing written language – as long as they have lots of daily, ongoing exposure to a print-rich environment. For a more detailed look at this aspect of literacy development, see Chapter 1, Organizing the setting, see pages 12–18 and Chapter 5, Reading in the Environment, pages 76–8.

This chapter is divided into four sections – **Introducing letters**, **Practising letters**, **Exploring letters** and **The alphabet**.

Introducing letters

Children should have experienced listening out for the initial sound of a word, before being introduced to the corresponding letter for that sound. Introducing letters can follow on as an adjunct to many sound games such as ***Playing with alliteration*** and ***I***

spy. In this respect, the activities in this chapter should be regarded as overlapping those of Chapter 2 (**The Sounds of Language**).

The **Textured letters** (pages 38–40) make a useful key resource for introducing letter symbols. Learning to recognize letters is a preparation for letter formation (writing) as well as reading, and the textured shape enables the children to feel how the letter is written. Always check that the child is tracing the letter in the same way as it is written; laying sound foundations at this early stage is invaluable for later handwriting.

Practising letters/Exploring letters

Children need lots of opportunity to reinforce their knowledge of sound/letter links. Most of the activities in the **Practising letters** section require the children to be active, moving around the setting and handling real objects. Many of the activities encourage the children to identify a given letter within a CVC word. As part of the activity, you can also model the process of sounding out/blending sounds to read the whole word – a precursor to **The reading basket** and other activities in Chapter 5 (**Becoming a Reader**).

Apart from day-to-day exposure to letters through books, signs, notices and other environmental print, children should be helped to find familiar letters in words, books and chunks of text. This gives them the all-important opportunity to experience letters within their natural context. The activities in the **Exploring letters** section encourage children to search for letters in magazines, newspapers and books, as well as introducing the many different font styles to be found within the world of print.

The alphabet

The names of the letters (as opposed to the sounds they make) are not of much use when it comes to decoding the printed word. For this reason, letter names and upper case letters should only be introduced once the child has established the link between sounds and lower case letters. If the child has had lots of experience of books and other forms of environmental print, capital letters should already be quite familiar. Learning the order of the alphabet is also not necessary for the basics of reading and writing. However, alphabetical order is used in many different kinds of literature, particularly dictionaries, encyclopaedias and indexes. For this reason, older children should learn to recite the alphabet through pleasurable activities such as songs, games, looking at alphabet books and making alphabet charts.

Chapter 4: Becoming a Writer

Writing is a complex activity that brings together many different strands. In order to become a 'whole' writer, there are three main areas of capability that the child needs to develop:

- **The content:** deciding on what your piece of writing is going to say; choosing the words to fit the purpose of the communication; organizing those words so that they make sense and deciding on an appropriate writing format. For example, a poem generally uses different kinds of words and a different layout compared with a shopping list.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

- **Word building:** the ability to segment a word into its separate sounds and represent those sounds with symbols, as well as the ability to spell irregular words such as *the* or *where*.
- **Handwriting:** the ability to manipulate a writing implement to represent the words on paper.

Segmenting words into their separate sounds and linking sounds with letters has been covered in Chapters 2 and 3. In this chapter, the focus is on developing a controlled and co-ordinated hand, letter formation, word building and writing simple words, exploring opportunities to write and using different writing formats.

The chapter is divided into three sections – **Pre-writing activities**, **Handwriting** and **Content**.

Pre-writing activities

Lots of preparation is essential to the development of physical writing skills. The ***Developing muscular strength and co-ordination*** activities focus on ways of refining hand/eye co-ordination and developing strength in the three writing digits (the thumb, index and middle fingers).

Discovering that you can change the appearance of a surface is one of the first steps towards seeing oneself as ‘a writer’. Through the ***Mark making and patterning*** activities, children can explore the act of mark making, with all its many possibilities. These activities also enable the children to make the kind of hand and arm movements that will later be translated into writing letters and words on paper.

Handwriting

As children gain experience of print through books and other forms of writing, learn their letters and develop the ability to manipulate a writing implement, their mark making takes on a more ‘writing-like’ quality. The opportunity to freely explore writing materials is an essential part of this process. ***Writing letters with chalk and pencil*** can be introduced if necessary, but it is important not to push a reluctant child. Tracing the ***Textured letters*** with the fingers, ***Writing letters in air*** and ***Writing letters in sand*** are useful precursors to the more permanent act of writing on paper.

Investigating letter formation can also help the development of handwriting. The ***Exploring letter shapes*** activities offer ways of discovering the many different features of lower case letters. Always remember that letters in isolation are ultimately meaningless. As you explore letter shapes and writing letters, keep on providing a context by looking for the letter within words, books, notices and other environmental print.

Content

The activities in this section cover what is perhaps the most important element of writing – its content. As an introduction to writing words, start off with the child’s name. Apart from being a familiar *spoken* word, children will already have had lots of opportunity to

explore the sounds and letters that make up their name. **The word basket** activity goes on to introduce the process of segmenting a CVC word into its separate sounds and representing those sounds with cut-out letters. This process enables the children to 'write' simple words, without the additional challenge of handling a writing implement or coping with letter formation.

Building and writing single words is, however, just one small aspect of becoming a whole writer. To enable children to experience the process of 'writing', use **Dictation** techniques to scribe their thoughts, ideas and messages. Always write in front of the children, to help them absorb the purpose and process of writing. The next stage on from **Dictation** is **Shared writing**. This activity encourages children to use their emergent writing skills by helping you, the writer, to construct sentences, build words and organize the writing on the page. Children should also be encouraged to write freely and independently (**Independent writing**). This can range from younger children creating meaningful marks and 'writing-like' representations, to older able children writing extensively.

In order for **Dictation**, **Shared writing** and **Independent writing** to take place, you and your children will need something to write about. The **Opportunities to write** activities offer many ideas for both content and format. Children learn best when they participate in meaningful activities, and these writing opportunities are all based around real-life situations – composing a letter for home, writing notices for the setting. Part of becoming a whole writer includes being able to choose from a wide range of writing options, in order to fulfil the purpose of your communication. To this end, the **Opportunities to write** activities also look at some of the many different formats available to the writer, including lists, captions and letters.

Most important of all, children should be helped to enjoy writing, at whatever stage they have reached. Never push children into formal writing activities before they are ready. Avoid correcting the spelling of those children who are starting to write independently and make sure you provide lots of stimulating writing materials and writing related play opportunities (see Chapter 1, **The Setting**).

Chapter 5: Becoming a Reader

Like writing, reading is a complex activity that brings together lots of different skills. To become a competent reader, the individual needs to develop four areas of capability:

- **Phonics:** the ability to read letters, digraphs, common letter clusters and use phonic knowledge to tackle unfamiliar words.
- **Sight recognition:** the ability to recognize common irregular words, gradually reaching the stage where all words are read by sight.
- **Reading clues:** the ability to use various strategies to make sense of the text. For example, knowledge of common sentence structure, drawing on picture cues and overall context.
- **Reading experience:** familiarity with the many different forms of written language – stories, information books, notices, captions, lists and so on.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In conjunction with the writing activities from Chapter 4, the activities in this chapter provide a foundation for each of these areas. The chapter is divided into three sections – **Reading in the environment**, **Reading activities: words** and **Reading activities: phrases and sentences**.

Reading in the environment

Reading in the environment begins from day one in that children are constantly exposed to signs, notices and other environmental print. The activities in this section encourage children to start reading within their surroundings. **Reading notices and signs** gets the children looking out for everyday print to be found in the setting and beyond, while **A wrappings chart** explores the print on familiar food containers.

Reading activities: words

Children approach the printed word in various ways when they first start to read. **The reading basket** introduces the phonic technique of identifying and blending sounds in order to read simple CVC words. It makes a good starting point for reading and gives the children some useful word attack techniques to draw on later in their reading careers (try giving an unfamiliar word to Key Stage 2 children with poor phonics knowledge, and you soon discover that that they don't know where to begin!).

Phonics is, however, just a small part of the reading story. Many words in the English language have to be sight learnt, and some children respond better to word recognition than a phonic approach. The **High frequency word activities** offer lots of ways to sight learn the words from *The National Literacy Strategy* list for Reception. Each activity explores the words within the context of a meaningful chunk of text. This is particularly important here. Unlike an object name or action word, it is difficult to get across the meaning of words such as *all* or *she* out of context.

Practice and reinforcement are essential to reading development. The **Word games** encourage children to use their developing reading skills by approaching new words. Each game starts off with simple CVC words, moving on to more complex words as the children grow in confidence. As always with reading, meaning is important, and the games encourage the children to act on the word they have just read. For example, performing an action word in **The 'I can' game** or using a word card as a label for different items in **Labelling the setting**.

Once children can cope with simple CVC words, they need to discover that the same words will appear in different contexts. **A reading flap book** enables children to revisit familiar words, while **Rime sorting boxes** help children to explore groups of CVC words with a similar spelling pattern.

Reading activities: phrases and sentences

The **Phrase and sentence games** introduce the next step: tackling words within the context of a sentence. As with the **Word games**, the children are required to act upon what they have just read – and in order to interpret the meaning of the sentence or

phrase, they have to read it in its entirety. For example, you need all the words in the phrase *'put the teddy under the chair'* to know *how* and *where* to position the teddy.

Once children have started to approach texts in a 'readerly' manner, they can be encouraged to help you read a text during a **Shared reading** session. Shared reading is a useful means of introducing and reinforcing various reading strategies as well as exploring the meaning of the text.

Chapter 6: The Role of the Picture Book

The picture book is perhaps the single most important resource when it comes to literacy development. Through exploring picture books, the children will make all kinds of discoveries about literacy and the reading process. For example:

- The many different purposes of books – information, pleasure, reference.
- The appearance of print on the page and the opportunity to absorb printed letters, common letter clusters and words.
- The chance to witness the process of reading – how the reader looks at the printed page and translates it into meaningful spoken language.
- Learning how a story 'works'.
- Becoming familiar and comfortable with books, embracing them as a natural part of everyday life.

The chapter is divided into three sections – **Sharing picture books**, **Exploring picture books** and **Story structure**.

Sharing picture books

The process of sharing picture books is, in many ways, similar to **Shared reading** (Chapter 5). However, whereas **Shared reading** encourages the children to use their developing reading strategies, the **Sharing picture books** activities focus on the pleasures of the story.

Most of the learning opportunities offered by a picture book will be greatly enhanced if you can share it on a one-to-one or small group basis. In an individual picture book sharing session, children can see the printed page as you read and you can stop and converse about whatever interests them. Using books independently is also essential to the child's early reading experience (**Using books independently**). Ultimately, reading is a private activity. When children start to look at books by themselves, they are taking a huge step forward in identifying themselves as 'readers'.

Exploring picture books

Authors, illustrators and publishers are endlessly creative as to what a modern picture book can embrace. This results in a huge range of possibilities for children to explore – from 'smelly' books and intricate moving parts to a wide selection of themes, topics and

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

subject matter. The ***Different types of books*** activities help the children to discover just how much the world of books has to offer. They also help the child to categorize and make sense of what can seem an overwhelming number of choices.

The book is a physical object as well as the purveyor of abstract information, and children need to discover and identify its many different parts. One of the best ways of helping children to find their way around a book is to get them designing, constructing, writing and illustrating their own. Along with ***The author and illustrator*** activities, making books also enables the children to explore the idea that real people wrote and illustrated the books in their book corner.

Story structure

Knowing how a story works is fundamental to becoming fully literate. As a starting point, the ***Character*** activities show children who the story is 'about'. Once they know who to focus on, they can engage with that character and follow its fortunes throughout the book.

'The setting' is another important aspect of understanding a story. The ***Story settings*** activities focus on where the events of a story take place, linking the concept to the children's own experiences by encouraging them to explore the settings within their own lives.

The third narrative element in this section is 'the plot': what actually happens in the story. The ***Plot*** activities encourage the children to focus on narrative elements such as the sequence of events, cause and effect and endings. This focus is important in helping children to become committed readers; after all, it is wanting to find out what happens next that keeps you going right up to the end.

Last but very definitely not least, children should be encouraged to retell familiar stories in their own words (***Recounting stories***). This gives them the opportunity to use their knowledge of character, setting and plot through reconstructing the events of a familiar book or making up their own stories.