GREAT WAYS TO SUPPORT
COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE & LITERACY

- Sue Cowley’s tips on developing talk
- Make mark making irresistible
- Six ways to put the fun into phonics
- Using ‘story scribing’ in your setting
- Boost the confidence of early writers
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It’s easy to take our ability to communicate with one another for granted, but as all those involved in the education of children in the early years know, the processes by which we acquire the ability to talk, read and write are not ones that can be left to chance. Where children fail to build a solid foundation in communication, language and literacy between birth and age five, there are often long-term educational consequences and serious implications for an individual’s life chances.

Little wonder, then, that the EYFS places so much emphasis on supporting children to develop these skills – and that early years settings put a great deal of effort into finding effective and engaging ways to give those in their care the best possible start.

To support you and your team in this endeavour, we’ve compiled this selection of expert articles, covering a wide range of themes but all linked to the prime area of Communication and Language, and/or the specific area of Literacy – from insights into the value of storytelling (and why children shouldn’t merely have the passive role they traditionally adopt) and teaching children to sign before they can talk, to creative and playful ways to introduce mark making, phonics and pre-reading skills, plus insights into supporting fledgling writers as they put pencil to paper. Last but not least, you’ll find tips on developing talk as a means to tackling challenging behaviour, and an introduction to ‘Helicopter Stories’, a method of nurturing personal, social and development as well as communication. Whatever your current focus, we hope you find something new and useful to try.

Jacob Stow - Editor
Start their reading journey with Lift-off

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MARK MAKING IS THE CREATION of different patterns, lines, textures and shapes on a range of surfaces and is fundamentally the basis of developing writing skills. It can be done using tools such as pens, pencils and sticks, and may involve making marks on a range of surfaces including paper, card and sand. Early mark making begins with babies and young children exploring the world around them. You may observe babies tipping out water or food and making patterns with their fingers as part of their first mark-making attempts. However you encounter them, all forms of mark making need to be valued and supported.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?
Reading and writing are an essential part of our daily lives. Just think about how often you have to write as part of your working day, even in the digital age: when recording observations, jotting notes to parents and completing essential paperwork, to name just three. Research tells us that unlike language development we are not programmed with the ability to read and write; we have to be taught. Writing is a complex skill that involves physical dexterity and cognitive processes combining to enable us to form fluid letters in an organised way. Mark making provides children with the muscle development they need to hold a pencil confidently and prepares them for writing. It also develops their fine motor skills and helps support hand-eye coordination. It is a physical and sensory experience for children of all ages.

Mark making also gives children the opportunity for creative expression by allowing them to use marks to portray stories using their own imagination or experiences. As children develop and grow, their creations will become more complex and sophisticated.

GETTING CHILDREN READY
Children need lots of opportunities to develop their motor skills to become successful writers. Be sure to offer experiences that support each individual’s physical development. Practitioners should ensure they have a range of mark-making tools to meet the physical skills of each child. Do you have chunky chalks and paintbrushes for children that grasp tools in their whole hand? Do you have tools for children with good fine motor skills such as cotton buds or lolly sticks to challenge them further?

Create a paper station offering a range of different paper sizes to meet individual children’s needs. Depending on their stage of physical development, some children require large pieces of paper to make marks. Add a range of materials and surfaces like sheets of tinfoil, wallpaper samples and cardboard too.

Offer a range of books and create stories together to help children develop a narrative for play. You could act out stories together using storytelling props such as story stones/spoons and puppet theatres.

OPPORTUNITIES AROUND THE SETTING
There are many ways you can incorporate mark making into indoor and outdoor activities. Create opportunities that are linked to children’s current interests and in every area of your nursery to create meaningful contexts for writing. This could include putting paper and pencils in your construction areas for drawing buildings and maps, or creating health and safety rules. In your outdoor space, create large wall or floor murals using lining paper to create a frame. If you have a tarmac surface, make borders with tape and provide chalk. Tape paper to a wall or fence and provide children with paint (mixed with water) in spray bottles, or stick paper to the floor and dip balls in paint and explore the patterns the balls make when rolled, kicked or dropped.

Make the most of whatever the weather is doing. If it’s snowing, take your paints outside and encourage children to paint on it directly. Collect natural resources to create 3D shapes and letters. Play around with these ideas and most importantly have fun! Children need exciting invitations to engage in a range of mark-making experiences – and that means practitioners must be knowledgeable about a child’s developmental stage and their interests to ensure they offer opportunities that stimulate them.

For more advice on best practice in early years settings, visit ndna.org.uk

Fiona Bland is an Early Years Adviser at NDNA.

Spotlight on mark making

Here’s how you can support every child to develop crucial pre-writing skills, says Fiona Bland...
Want to boost communication? Use your hands!

Teaching children signs and gestures can accelerate language development and even reduce tantrums, explains Tamsin Grimmer...

ONE OF THE FIRST MILESTONES that I remember all of my children making was waving “bye-bye” to their daddy as he left for work in the morning. Gestures are a large part of how we naturally communicate with others and more specifically with young children, for example, nodding in agreement, waving ‘hello’ or clapping in delight. This is not just about physical coordination but primarily about social interaction. Babies are social beings from birth, eager to communicate. You may have seen the lovely video clip of a baby, only a few minutes old, poking his tongue out and copying his dad as he pokes his tongue out at him. This is an example of our innate desire to communicate with others and gesture is the ideal way to do this.

I have always been interested in sign language and many years ago learned British Sign Language and Makaton while working as an Area SENCo. I’d read lots of articles about using signs with babies but it was only when I had my own children that I had the opportunity to try it out. I signed with all three of my children from birth and they communicated with me through signs several months before they could speak. I have since used signs and gestures while childminding and in a number of schools and settings, and I am convinced that it is an underused style of communication within the early years sector.

Encouraging communication

For me, communication is about developing meaningful interactions with others and giving and receiving messages within a reciprocal relationship. Very young children naturally communicate their needs and wants through vocalisations, crying and gestures, and deliberately using signs taps into these natural methods and can ensure the success of these communication styles. Children begin to gesture from around 8–9-months old and this provides an insight into their receptive language development, what they hear and understand. Children who use signs and gestures demonstrate their understanding of language at an earlier age because developmentally children gesture before they can speak, thus their gestures enable them to communicate effectively before they utter their first word. This is about the richness of early language acquisition and not about getting children to talk as early as possible, but simply getting children to communicate. There is a wealth of research which outlines the benefits of using signs and gestures with all children, not just with children who may have additional needs (Barnes, bit.do/TEYbn10; Ford, bit.do/TEYfd06):

- Signing can decrease frustration in the early years before speech is developed enough to express a child’s needs and wants, thus fewer tantrums!
- It has been noted that babies who use signs have a greater attention span and can focus for longer on play.
- Signing assists understanding of

Signing with young children will enable practitioners to get to know the child’s needs and wants and plan effectively to meet those needs.
language for some children as the action reinforces what the signer is saying.

- Signing often reinforces the adult/child bond as it offers a shared understanding and quality time together.
- Children who sign are often more interested in books as they can ‘read’ the pictures using signs.
- Everyone in contact with the child can use the same signs, offering consistency for the child.
- Adults can understand and interpret what a child is trying to tell them more easily.
- Practitioners can communicate earlier with children as actions precede speech in child development.

**Supporting development**

Within a setting, signing with young children will enable practitioners to get to know the child’s needs and wants and plan effectively to meet those needs, demonstrating to parents their thorough knowledge of the child and contributing to a positive relationship with the whole family. Signing with young children closely links with the EYFS prime areas of Personal, Social and Emotional Development, as children are able to build relationships, interact with others and use gestures to communicate and gain attention; Physical Development, as children learn to control their movements and deliberately move their hands and bodies to make signs; and Communication and Language, as children use signs to communicate their needs and wants. It also links with specific areas such as Literacy, as children learn to ‘read’ stories using the signs that they have learned, and Expressive Arts and Design, as young children express and communicate their own ideas, thoughts and feelings through signs.

I was once approached in the supermarket when using sign language with my baby and asked if she was deaf. I explained that she could hear perfectly but I chose to use signs with her so that she could communicate earlier. I was then asked if this would delay her speech. It’s a common misconception that using signs with young children will delay their speech when it actually does the opposite – it accelerates it! This is because signs and iconic gestures reinforce a child’s understanding of the word being demonstrated – the sign/gesture often acts out the word. For example, the sign for drink is to cup your hand and ‘drink’ from it.

In addition, sign language and gesture also form part of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) where children who have speech or language problems use ways to communicate that do not rely on speech alone. Signs have also been successfully used with children for whom English is not their first language. Blackburn and Aubrey (bit.do/TEYba16) acknowledge that a number of children with English as an Additional Language would benefit from practitioners using more signs and gestures within their practice. We know that early intervention is vital to support all children and therefore it makes sense to use these strategies as early as possible with all of our children.

There are a number of resources available to aid practitioners in learning sign language and I recommend visiting the Cbeebies website (bit.do/TEYcbm) as a good place to start!

### 8 STEPS TO SIGNING SUCCESS

- Always say the word when signing with young children.
- Begin with a few signs that you can use every day that fit in with your routine.
- Maintain eye contact or sign when children are focused on the relevant object.
- Be consistent – encourage all carers to use the same signs.
- Only sign key words using simple sentences – one sign per sentence is often enough.
- Follow the children’s lead – increase their signing vocabulary when they are ready and use signs linked to their interests.
- Make signing fun! Teach children signs using rhymes, stories and songs.
- Repeat signs again and again, as repetition is key!
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“EVERY CHILD SUCCEEDS WITH EVERY ACTIVITY”
STORIES ARE VITAL FOR YOUNG children. They develop language, stir the imagination and create familial and social bonds. Yet one of the most effective ways of communicating stories is almost completely unknown to many people today. Oral storytelling is the formal term for it. Children who experience it frequently refer to it as “a story out of your mouth”. But for most adults it just raises questions. “What’s that?” is what I generally get asked when I tell people I’m a storyteller. “What sort of stories?”

Such unawareness is especially sad when shown by early years practitioners or parents. Picture books are commonplace things, but the idea of not using a book to tell even the most familiar stories simply doesn’t occur to many adults. As to those personal and family tales that can become the backbone of a child’s inner life, these can be completely overlooked. What a shame! Stories bring words and concepts. They introduce character, help with understanding emotion. But whether they’re read or told, they can only do these things if children are engaged by them in the first place.

I’ve learned a lot about how to pass on the techniques for engaging people’s attention over the years. Essentially, all stories have to come from yourself. Pondering on them, seeing them in your imagination, caring about what they are saying – these are essential to success. But it’s not only adults that can do this. One thing I learned during my early days as a storyteller was that young children can do it too.

INVITE THEIR INVOLVEMENT

While working on the National Oracy Project during my early days as a storyteller I was faced with the challenge of finding out how much response can come from early years children and was greatly helped by a marvellous coordinator called Diane Cinnamon. She suggested I start by asking three-and-four-year-olds to retell each other a simple story I’d told them. To my astonishment, it worked. All I needed to do after telling my story was to say I was now going to invite them to be the storytellers. First, I’d suggest that each person found a friend to speak to. When they’d done that, I’d briefly explain that they could decide between themselves which of them was going to be the first storyteller and which was going to be the first listener. Then they’d have the chance to swap over.

It’s a technique I’ve used ever since. And in my experience, it generally proves no harder for early years children than for older people. What it does need is vigilance on the part of staff members and, preferably, several of these. The adults have to make sure there’s no squabbling that isn’t quickly resolved. Equally problematic is if a child has no one to talk to and is not saying so. Or when some children stick to the task while others quickly move on to something else which isn’t part of the agenda. First and foremost, any adult who decides to try out the technique must overcome their fear that only chaos will result and the children will experience nothing of value. What I’ve seen many times over in early years work is a wholly surprising level of involvement and interest.

HAVE A GO

Talking, listening – young children can do it just as they can express what they’ve seen in a story by drawing it and painting it and making props for it. We adults tend to forget that painting something from a story doesn’t need to involve getting it to look like a photo. Swirls of colour can tell you lots. So can play-acting a scene. Or moving about like a character in it.

But what’s important is that the adults concerned develop sufficient confidence to try such things. We must learn to avoid things turning to chaos by being clear in explaining what we have in mind. We have to learn how to enable each individual child to get the best possible experience. Such a programme is not without its challenges, yet it holds within it the promise of great reward.

This article includes an edited extract from Mary’s latest book, Storytelling and Story-Reading in Early Years (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, £14.99). Visit jkp.com

MARY MEDLICOTT IS A PROFESSIONAL STORYTELLER AND STORYTELLING TRAINER.

Why young children should be telling tales

Sharing stories orally can be incredibly beneficial for your charges, says Mary Medlicott...
Help kids become confident talkers

Children who struggle to communicate can resort to bad behaviour; so supporting strong verbal skills is essential, says Sue Cowley...

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

is one of the most crucial areas in early child development. Talk creates a pathway for so much of what follows, and if a child experiences a language delay, this can impact on their learning in a range of ways. Talk is important in order for children to access the curriculum during their time at school, but it is also vital for their social and emotional development as well. A child who struggles to express their needs may well turn to inappropriate behaviour.

To those without sufficient knowledge of early child development, it might seem as though talk ‘just happens’ – that immersing a child in a talk-filled environment would be enough to ensure language development. Often, the Hart and Risley ‘30 million word gap’ study (bit.do/Talkgap) is quoted to demonstrate that the number of words a child hears is crucial. However, this aspect of early child development is not just about the amount of talk a child hears and we should remember that not all kinds of talk are equal. It is the high quality interactions between children and adults that support the developing brain and help them make sense of language and develop their vocabulary.

THE SCENARIO

You have noticed that several children coming into your setting appear to be delayed in their language development. They use a limited range of words, do not speak in sentences and will sometimes make noises rather than use words to express what they mean. Some children are also struggling to say the sounds in words properly or to follow instructions. You are noticing an increase in behaviour incidents that seem to be caused by this lack of language, and you are concerned that these behaviours are having an impact on the children’s progress.

EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

The term ‘serve and return’ describes the way that children’s brains develop, in response to high quality interactions with adults. A baby ‘coos’ at an adult, and the adult responds in a meaningful way, by speaking back to the baby and using facial expressions to demonstrate interest. Encourage staff to use ‘serve and return’ when talking with children. You might also set up a workshop for parents – you can find a short video here to show them that explains the technique at bit.do/SandR

Focus on all aspects of language development, creating activities that boost all areas, including close listening and phonemic awareness. Encourage children to pick out sounds from the environment, for instance by going outdoors and listening to birdsong or by listening to different environmental sounds and identifying what they are.

Where you have concerns about a child, encourage parents to have them checked for glue ear – this condition can hamper early language development and cause significant problems if it is not spotted and treated. If you have particular concerns about an individual child, flag this up with your SENCo and your local authority SEND support team.

Remember that language development is not just about how you work with toddlers – it should be a focus with babies too. I heard a young baby the other day try to join in with a conversation that I was having with his mum and some of our staff. Even though he didn’t yet have words, he clearly understood talk as a way to communicate his ideas and opinions to us. In fact, we could pretty much work out what he was ‘saying’ to us, even though he wasn’t yet speaking.
SELF AND PARALLEL TALK

Keep up a running commentary as you play with your children, using both ‘self’ and ‘parallel’ talk. ‘Self talk’ describes the way in which you voice the thoughts that are going on in your head, and ‘parallel talk’ describes the way that a practitioner narrates what a child is doing. These approaches are particularly useful for modelling patterns of language for children who have English as an additional language. For instance, “I can see that you have painted the balloon red” or “Now you are painting the sky blue.”

THE ROLE OF THE ADULT

Adults are crucial in the development of talk, because we can model its use in different contexts, we can demonstrate how communication works, we can help children learn the names of things, and we can show them how they might develop their thinking through talking about it. To make the most of your role, pay attention to the following points:

1. Consider how you use your face when a child is talking with you – use wide open eyes to encourage engagement.
2. Non-verbal signals, gestures and facial expressions are all crucial in building talk – get staff to observe each other during interactions and use the feedback for development.
3. Use plenty of repetition in order to embed new words – revisit and reinforce new language.
4. Avoid using ‘baby talk’ and oversimplifying your talk with your children. Although it is best not to use overly complex vocabulary, speak mainly in full sentences and Standard English.
5. Make full use of open-ended questions – they are useful for encouraging talk because they leave a space for the child to develop a conversation with you.
6. Utilise sustained shared thinking to support language learning when you are playing with your children.
7. Devise challenging and interesting environments in order to engage your children and create lots of opportunities for meaningful talk.
8. Where a child makes a mistake with a word, or its pronunciation, rather than pointing out the error, simply repeat back the word said correctly.

If you are looking for further advice, the children’s communication charity I CAN is a fantastic source of resources, support and training in early language development. You can find out more on their website – ican.org.uk

For more ideas and advice, visit www.suecowley.co.uk

BEHAVIOUR BEST PRACTICE

You’ll find lots more expert advice from Sue Cowley at teachearlyyears.com:

- Tips on promoting great behaviour outdoors – bit.do/TEYbotdhrs.
- Effective ways to respond to persistent biting – bit.do/TEYbbite
- How to prevent confident children from becoming bossy – bit.do/TEYbboss

And visit teachwire.net/free-teacher-cpd to sign up for a free eight-part early years behaviour management masterclass...
Keeping Children Safe Through Stories

9.30am - 12.30pm

This practical workshop will look at how you can use stories, props and storytelling techniques to help you be proactive with safeguarding issues and help identify children that may be at risk to help you to know when to initiate a setting’s safeguarding procedures.

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1.30pm - 4.30pm

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Tonya and Natasha, the storytelling sisters, are authors of a series of books about a little dog called Pojo who gets itchy paws and goes off on adventures. They have won multiple awards for their puppet making kits that accompany the stories including the Teach Early Years Excellence award for Communication and Language Resource. They also run literacy workshops in schools and nurseries across the country and run training courses for local authorities.

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Stacey Holmes, Little Pippins Pre School

See our website for further details of our in house workshops and workshops for children.
Ways to Have Fun with Phonics

Practising letter sounds needn’t be as dull as dishwater, says Hilary White...

1 Buzzy Bees
Make a list of sounds that link with an animal, vehicle or action when repeated. For example, zzz-zzz for buzzy bees, sh-sh-sh for soothing a baby, sss-sss for a hissing snake, and ch-ch-ch for a chugging train. Practise the sounds and explore ways of role playing the action, animal or vehicle. Encourage the children to come up with their own ideas for actions. Can they think of any other scenarios to link with a particular sound?

2 Jolly Jumps
Make up a selection of alliterative phrases that include a simple action. For example, “do a jolly jump”, “run around the rug”, “hop happily”, “sip steaming soup”. Identify the alliterative initial sound (‘j’, ‘r’, ‘h’, ‘s’) and emphasise the sound as you say the phrase. Encourage the children to repeat the phrase before carrying out the action. Introduce alliterative phrases that include names of children in the group – “kiss Katie”, “hug Harry”, “tap Tomas” (first asking their permission!) Where necessary, choose action words that children can carry out themselves – “grumbling Gregor”, “rolling Rashid”, “stamping Stevie”.

3 The Sound Box
Fill an attractive lidded box with interesting items and pictures covering the sounds you wish to explore. Possibilities include items with the same initial sound, a selection of items for sorting into separate sounds and picture cards for matching sounds (“chair/cheese”). Talk about the items, name them and identify their initial sounds before using them for ‘I Spy’, pairing and sorting games. With children who are adept at identifying initial sounds, use items that introduce end sounds, e.g. ‘pig’ ends with a ‘g’ sound. You can also add letter cards for children to match with the sounds.

4 Sandpit Sounds
Bury a collection of items in the sandbox and challenge the children to dig them up. Encourage them to explore the items, and during conversation identify each item’s initial sound. Theme the items to fit in with a specific topic, or make a random collection. You can also focus on particular sounds and ask children to help you sort the items into sound groups. Encourage older children to identify the sounds for themselves and find their own items to bury. Remember to identify the initial sound – for example, ‘ship’ begins with the sound ‘sh’ rather than the letter ‘s’.

5 Tongue Tasters
Gather a selection of foods beginning with sounds you want to explore, e.g. apple, cheese, carrot, ham, bun, muffin. Name the foods, put one or two on the table and say, “I taste with my little tongue, something beginning with...” Let the children taste the chosen food, and encourage them to repeat its name, emphasising the initial sound. Always check for allergies, and never force an unwilling child to taste a food. As children become more able to identify initial sounds, follow the traditional ‘I spy’ format by increasing the number of foods.

6 Sound Hunts
Hide items from the sound box in the setting and ask children to hunt for an item beginning with a given sound. Give them a clue by telling them which area to look in, for example, the cloakroom. Once they have started to link sounds and letters, give them a letter card as a prompt. As they bring back items they have found, help them to put the items into sound pairs or sort into sound groups. If necessary, ask other adults in the setting to accompany children and help them remember the sound they are hunting for.
Putting pen to paper can be a tricky business. Anjali Patel looks at the provision and practice that best supports our fledgling authors...

Write from the start

7 ideas to try with your class

Learning to write is a complex process, relying on both social and cognitive development, not to mention physical dexterity, but it’s every child’s entitlement. Taking possession of the written word can open up a world in which children can cultivate identity, an understanding of the world and their relation to others. Fostering a community of writers is hugely rewarding and has enormous impact on children’s lives.

Put simply, writing is talk written down. It allows us to express ourselves and communicate ideas with an audience distant in time and space. It does depend, then, on an author’s ability to translate the gestures, facial expression and intonation prevalent in spoken language into written text. The written word can live on long after the spoken word has been forgotten, but meaning is made powerful for a reader through the writer’s choice of language, structure and voice. It is not straightforward, it can be baffling, but it is full of possibilities.

The way we approach writing in the early years can influence children’s engagement in writing throughout their lives. So how do we go about inspiring our young writers while ensuring they have the skills and knowledge to master written language?

Writing Creatively

In young children, the simple joy of expression through writing can be incentive enough. Where one would expect communication to be the driving force, you may see children engaging in writing or mark-making activities for their own satisfaction, generally without an intended audience.

A child might spend weeks writing endless missives and these might be read and appreciated by another, but the primary incentive for writing can...
be the child’s need to express emotion rather than garner response. Writing, drawing and mark making is invaluable in helping a child make sense of their own lives or the wider world. If this incentive is nurtured, children will naturally engage in free and creative writing. Provide materials with which children – and adults – can draw and write about anything that interests them in any form they like, at home and school.

2 WRITING FOR AN AUDIENCE

With time and opportunity, children will take pleasure in a reader’s feedback and begin to link writing with communication. They will begin to develop ‘writer identity’ whereby they make informed choices to support the reader experience. Writing is taught effectively when children see the use in it; when there is real, authentic purpose; when there is an audience that authenticates their voice, be it themselves or another reader. When writing is part of daily life, linked to play and engaged in by a community of writers, it becomes inherent to a child. When children are given extensive opportunity to read and respond to powerful texts, this experience naturally influences their own writing choices. They develop an awareness of the reader. They are becoming authors.

3 WRITING EVERYWHERE

Children’s starting points can be wildly disparate upon joining an early years setting and this will be reflected in their early attempts at writing. Some children will have enjoyed talk-rich households, a bedtime-reading routine and experienced writing in action. Others will not have benefited from the same immersion in spoken and written language, nor understood the value of writing yet.

How we support parents to contribute to their child’s literacy development cannot be overstated. As Iram Siraj (2015) affirms, “We can’t afford not to.” The provision we put in place and the experiences we plan for children will have enjoyed talk-rich households, a bedtime-reading routine and experienced writing in action. Others will not have benefited from the same immersion in spoken and written language, nor understood the value of writing yet.

4 READING ALOUD

Read aloud to your children every day, as many times a day as you can. Reading aloud helps children to broaden their repertoire as readers, becoming familiar with a wider range of genres and the work and voice of particular authors. Read aloud with enthusiasm, emphasising the prosody, patterns and intonation or a range of texts including stories, non-fiction and poetry. Reading aloud is a kind of performance. It’s helpful to think about the best way to read it and ‘lift it off the page’ in order to engage children and enable them to respond to the tunes and the meaning.

5 ABSORBING LANGUAGE

Reread and revisit, allowing the children to respond and absorb written language. Read aloud books with strong ‘tunes’ but that are rich in vocabulary and beyond a child’s oracy. Reading aloud slows written language down so that children can hear and absorb the words, tunes and patterns which will impact on their spoken language and allow them a natural route into writing. Allow them access to “the tunes of language [that] ring in their ears and sing in their voices” (Holdaway).

FIND OUT MORE

CLPE’s Power of Reading programme supports schools in raising engagement and attainment in reading and writing for all pupils. Power of Reading in the Early Years projects run across the country. The subscription-based Power of Reading website provides access to a bank of teaching sequences and materials developed to complement the Power of Reading training.

- Book training or buy a subscription at clpe.org.uk/powerofreading
- Download free resources at clpe.org.uk/library-and-resources

Read more from Anjali and the CLPE on Teachwire.net:

- Comprehension in early years – ow.ly/x76z30epsu
- The power of poetry – ow.ly/CGBv30eps2
- Books that reflect children’s lives – ow.ly/1S630epsCV

6 TALKING ABOUT BOOKS

Conversations about books help children to explore and reflect on texts in ways that are made meaningful, personal and pleasurable. Choose high-quality texts that link to interests or expand horizons, with rich language and illustrations that provoke response and inspire children to revisit. A well-chosen text can provide not only the rich language models or structures with which to play in their own writing but also offer interesting audience and stimulus. When a child makes strong personal connections with a character, they are more likely to develop empathy, expanding their repertoire of emotional vocabulary and opening up a range of writing opportunities.

7 DEVELOPING VIEWPOINT

Pause at pivotal moments as you unfold a story, allowing the children to express and discuss their initial responses. When children have explored a fictional situation through talk or role-play, they may be ready to write in role as a character in the story. Taking the role of a particular character enables young writers to see events from a different viewpoint and involves them writing in a different voice. In role, children can often access feelings and language that is not available to them when they write as themselves.

FIND OUT MORE

Read an extended version of this article featuring a complete teaching sequence based on Petr Horáček’s Blue Penguin at bit.ly/2wmBW9q
Unlocking a voice

Trisha Lee introduces Helicopter Stories, an approach that can enable even the quietest child to develop their personal, social and emotional skills, while boosting language and literacy...

"ONCE UPON A TIME THERE LIVED a girl called Ella. She was very pretty, until one day she got her dress all mucky. And her mum and dad were very cross. They locked her in her bedroom for one year. And she was never naughty again."

A week ago, Martha, aged five, told me this story. She sat beside me on the carpet of a Reception classroom in London, whilst the other children were engaged in painting, or building with blocks, or moving trains along the track that filled the classroom. She was “a quiet girl, who rarely spoke” according to her teacher, and yet to me she was confident and articulate.

Later, when she stood on the stage to act out her story, this five-year-old, who normally shied away from the limelight, twirled in her imaginary dress, before raising her hands in disgust to demonstrate how she was now ‘all mucky’.

Two children from around the stage came up to take on the role of her parents. Another group of six children created the walls of her bedroom. They stood around her, forming a prison. The girl in the story looked out through the walls of children, peering at the class with the saddest of eyes. Martha was in her element.

When we applauded, she smiled coyly, the pride in what she had just achieved flushed across her cheeks.

"That was a big punishment for that girl, just for getting her dress dirty," I said.

"Mmmm," she nodded, and skipped back to her place in the circle, her face alight with smiles.

Sharing stories

Helicopter Stories is the only approach I know where even the quietest child clamours to open their mouth, to share their story and imagination, to stand bravely in front of their peers and portray their deepest thoughts, characters and interactions. It’s a place where children who are overlooked suddenly find themselves in an environment where their gifts are recognised and where they can shine.

A teacher reiterated this when she shared with me the story of a boy who was struggling to make friends. Days after she incorporated Helicopter Stories into her setting, his situation changed. The teacher observed the class sitting up and taking notice when they realised how good he was at pretending to be a monster. The invitations for tea soon followed.

The personal, social and emotional benefits of Helicopter Stories continue to astound me with every new anecdote I hear. The process is simple, and can be easily incorporated into any setting on a daily or weekly basis, and the only

TRY IT YOURSELF

Using Helicopter Stories in your setting...

- Mark out a rectangular stage and invite the children to sit around it.
- Read an introductory story, stopping after the first sentence to enable children to begin acting out the roles.
- Move around the stage, selecting children in order of how they are seated, one after the other.
- Ask if anyone would like to tell their own story.
- The story can be as short as they like but it can’t be any longer than the bottom of the A5 page.
- Write the story verbatim, repeating the words out loud as you scribe.
- Once you have scribed and acted two or three stories, ask if anyone would like to tell you a private story.
- Write exactly what the child dictates and say each word out loud as you scribe.
- Return to the stage.
- All stories should be acted on the day they are taken.
ingredients required are a roll of masking tape, A5 paper and a practitioner rich in curiosity.

A child tells their story. The adult scribes it word for word. The child decides which character they would like to play and then the class gathers to act the story out. This is child-centred learning. The story belongs to the individual and because the teacher does not lead, instead allowing the child the freedom to create in the way they want to, beautiful tales are born and rich learning takes place.

Revealing confidence

Based on the work of Vivian Gussin Paley in Storytelling and Story Acting, Helicopter Stories is a highly reflective approach that engages children in one of the things they know best: making up stories. Speaking to a teacher who has been using it on a weekly basis for over a year, I was told that the one thing she likes best about the work is the opportunity it gives her to find out what really matters to her children. Now she gets to see a side of each child that she normally never witnesses: the part where they are confident, where they have a safe space to take risks and where they demonstrate their learning at their own pace, around their own agenda.

In Helicopter Stories, children’s words are respected. Once they have been collected, the class sits around a taped-out stage and the stories are brought to life. Children have the opportunity to take turns in acting them out, to play cooperatively with each other. Throughout the process they are able to demonstrate how they take account of one another’s ideas, allowing each other to interpret the stories of the class and work together to breathe new life into them. They comfortably adapt their responses, taking on the roles of listeners, storytellers and actors, and shifting seamlessly between these, as each new story emerges.

Perfect introductions

In today’s digital age, how often do our children see adults write? Perhaps for a shopping list, or a scribbled note, or to record an observation. In Helicopter Stories, the thing that is most precious to the child, their story, is written as they watch. They witness first-hand how writing captures their words, and perceive how ingenious mark making is. Often they become self-motivated and find their own way to explore the connection between the spoken and the written word that is such a vital part of early literacy.

The approach has been evaluated by the Open University, who found it to have a significant impact on communication, literacy, speaking and listening. Teachers have remarked how “children’s stories have got longer and more descriptive. They are adapting ideas from their peers. The work makes the children feel like part of a group. They learn how to take turns... everyone is accepted and no one is judged.”

Recently, in a school labelled ‘requires improvement’, I was told that the teacher had been monitoring her children’s progress towards the Early Learning Goals for six weeks prior to incorporating Helicopter Stories. Their progress was good. She carried on monitoring the children for the following six weeks as she introduced the approach, during which time the children continued to make progress at an accelerated pace.

None of this should come as a shock. As with Martha, unlocking her voice to tell the tale of a character locked away for a year, Helicopter Stories sets children free and allows us to witness their imaginations fly.

For more information, pick up Trisha’s new book, Princesses, Dragons and Helicopter Stories, published by Routledge. Alternatively, visit makebelievaerts.co.uk or watch Trisha in action at ow.ly/QmUaD
There is much we can do to prepare children for the challenges of tackling their first book, says Kirstine Beeley...

**Get comfy**

**HOME FROM HOME**
We, as practitioners, are always on a mission to get parents to hear their children read and to snuggle up and share a book, yet in settings we often restrict reading with a child to a sterile, sit-at-a-table experience...

**WHAT TO TRY**
For children in the early years, part of a good reading experience involves spending high quality, one-on-one time with a supportive, caring adult. This is where we as settings need to take what goes on at home as our lead and replicate that cosy, shared time with our children. Just because we choose to snuggle up on a comfy chair or sofa to read a book with a child, that does not mean we will be any less effective in assessing where they are with their reading, and it will certainly be a more positive experience for them.

**REMEMBER...**
By making reading a positive shared experience in setting, we help to develop social skills and confidence as well as literacy.

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**Picture this**

**WHAT CAN YOU SEE?**
Reading is not just about decoding the phonics of a word. One of the strategies children use to work out familiar words as they read is to ‘read the pictures’, to look to see if they can gain a clue from the context of the story.

**WHAT TO TRY**
We in early years can do much to aid our children’s ability to put this skill into action by taking time when we are sharing a book to talk about what the children can see in the pictures. We can then discuss the different possibilities with them, allowing them to begin to predict what they think might happen next. This is a great way to help children not yet old enough to fully engage with text take their first steps on the road towards reading.

**REMEMBER...**
When reading, we should occasionally stop and let a child try and fill in a word for us, and then help them to see from the information in front of them that the book provides lots of helpful clues that they can use.

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**Physical skills**

**LEFT TO RIGHT**
We must always be aware of the physical side to reading. In English, we track with our eyes from left to right (remember this isn’t the case in all languages) and this left-to-right tracking skill has to be learned and built upon.

**WHAT TO TRY**
We can do lots to help children with their ability to track text by encouraging left-to-right movements with brushes, pens and even with mops and brooms in our outdoor play. As with all areas of learning, children need to be physically ready for reading and this includes being able to hold a book and turn the pages from left to right, too. So lots of shared practice in these physical skills will ensure children are confident and ready for reading when they finally put all of these elements together.

**REMEMBER...**
It’s worth repeating that early reading is not all about phonics! In our settings, we must take a holistic approach to this vital skill.

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**REAL READING**

**FILL YOUR SETTING WITH EXAMPLES OF TEXT FROM THE WIDER WORLD...**
Another way that we learn to read is by our brains recognising the shape of a word. Write the word ‘aeroplane’ and then draw around it. You will see it is aeroplane-shaped! This is how children recognise familiar logos and labels, and hence we should fill our classrooms with these commonly encountered words to give our children early confidence in their ability to read around their environment. Add lots of real packets, magazines, toy catalogues and newspapers to your role-play area. Not only will children be able to read the logos, but they will also see the reason for reading in everyday life.

Kirstine Beeley is an author and educational consultant.
FINE-TUNING YOUR APPROACH TO
HEALTH, SAFETY AND HYGIENE IN
THE NURSERY

COMING THIS MAY

- Take the stress out of risk assessment
- Your safeguarding responsibilities
- Championing challenging play
- How to improve hygiene setting-wide
- Nourishing growing bodies and brains