



LITERATE ENVIRONMENTS

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, says **Sally Neaum...**

Imagine an iceberg. The crisp, white tip emerging from the sea, supported by a vast body of ice, unseen, huge and absolutely necessary to the existence of what we see. This is a wonderful analogy for children's literacy learning. The tip of the iceberg is the observable skills of reading and writing, and these emerge from, and are supported by, a significant body of knowledge, skill and understanding: vast, unseen but absolutely necessary!

To extend this analogy, the strong, solid tip of an iceberg depends upon the strength of its foundations. Similarly, young children who have rich experiences of spoken

language and engagement with print in their everyday lives build strong foundations on which the observable skills of reading and writing can be built. Creating a literate environment for children is one of the ways in which we can build this strong foundation for literacy.

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 in the home are as follows:

Reading and writing in support of 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 as buses, trains and taxis;

Reading and writing associated with work done at home: reading books, reports or plans; writing reports or preparing invoices, sending and receiving emails.

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.

CASE STUDY

A packet of herb seeds fell from a food magazine that Mia was reading. Her daughter noticed them and asked what they were. Mia pointed out the picture on the front and explained about plants and how they grew from seeds. Her daughter was keen to plant them so Mia read the packet instructions to her daughter and they talked about what they would need to plant the seeds. Together they collected what they would need and set it all up in the kitchen; Mia then read the instructions out one by one as they planted the seeds.

Notice how, in the case study, reading and writing are embedded in an everyday activity. As Mia engages her daughter in this activity she is talking to her, and she is modelling reasons for reading and writing. This talk and engagement with literacy practices will enable her daughter to develop a range of skills and concepts necessary to becoming literate.

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

about the author

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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, discussion, questioning, pondering and explanation.

Creating a literate environment

In settings, creating a literate 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;
- Labelling toy boxes and cupboards - with both picture and word;
- Putting up signs - 'toilet' 'kitchen' 'cloakroom', etc.;
- Labelling displays - this can be done alongside the children, who can be involved in deciding what the captions should say and observe them being written;
- Labelling role-play areas with appropriate signs, captions and charts;
- Providing opportunities to engage with authentic literacy in play - e.g. providing menus, price lists, appointment books, maps, instructions, leaflets, notebooks and pencils, reference books, charts, etc.;
- Reading and enjoying books - both with the children and independently;
- Ensuring that books are included as part of the resources at activities;
- Using the computer as an integral part of activities - e.g. to access information, to word process, for games and activities;
- Completing routinized tasks alongside the children - e.g. doing the register, naming and handing out letters, completing lists;
- Labelling children's work as they observe you and explaining why you are doing this;
- Making good use of opportunities for literacy in 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 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.

What do children learn from this?

As children are drawn into literacy practices in their everyday lives they learn about both the forms and functions of reading and writing. They come to know what we use reading and writing for (the functions), and how we read and write (the forms).

As we read and write for a variety of purposes and engage children in this, we

CASE STUDY**DEVELOPING EMERGENT READING AND WRITING IN CHILD-INITIATED PLAY**

The boys in the nursery loved playing at police. They created and played out elaborate narratives all ending with the police chasing 'baddies', arresting them, and taking them down to the police station. The staff had provided dressing up clothes and equipment and, with the children's help, created a police station and cells. This included opportunities for reading and writing through labels, signs, directions, name badges, posters, paper and pens, and a computer.

The boys enjoyed this, so the staff enhanced their play by joining in and introducing different ideas. On one day the staff joined in and introduced some specific vocabulary, such as suspect, charge, interview and crime scene. On another day they joined in and introduced the idea of using digital cameras and the computer to take pictures of the crime scene and suspects and label them. On another day they joined in and introduced the idea of using police notebooks to record what happened at the crime scene, and what the suspects said when interviewed at the police station.



model different functions of literacy for children, for example, they come to know that we read and write for enjoyment, to find, convey, record and organise information, and to understand directions and instructions.

Similarly with the forms of language: through their engagement with spoken language, and their exposure to reading and writing in real, everyday contexts, children begin to develop important concepts necessary for reading and writing; for example, they learn about the relationship between speech and print; that writing is the setting down, or recording, of speech (as squiggles-on-a-page). They learn that reading is decoding writing (the squiggles-on-a-page) into speech. They also learn print-related terms, such as 'letter' and 'word.' In addition, by observing people read and write they come to know that, predominantly, we track left to right and top to bottom when we read and write.

Tracking left to right and top-to-bottom is not always the case, for example, tracking is different when reading from some websites and in some children's books that use words and text creatively. Modelling reading in these different ways will enable children to come to know that there are, occasionally, different ways in which we track when we read and write.

Understanding forms and functions of literacy are important concepts for children as they become readers and writers. It enables them to understand why we need to read and write, and some of the ways in which we read and write. This means that when they move to more formal literacy learning they have an understanding of reading and writing as meaningful activities. So, if we return to our iceberg analogy, understanding forms and functions of print through engagement in a literate environment are vital elements of a strong foundation on which the observable aspects of literacy can be built.



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