

# “Literacy begins with an awareness of sound...”

Musical activities are ideal for kick-starting young children’s reading and writing skills, says **Maria Kay...**



It is hard to overstate the importance of being able to read and write. It gives children confidence and helps fuel a desire for learning, and those who do not get a good, early start often struggle throughout school and, ultimately, life. There is a strong correlation between a good command of spoken language and competent reading; this is why it is vital that young children’s communication skills are encouraged and developed.

The term ‘literacy’ is generally applied to the ability to read and write, but it also encompasses the skills of listening and speaking, and the ability to understand text. Worryingly, however, research by the National Literacy Trust recently found that as many as one in six people in the UK struggle with literacy. So, how can those working in the early years sector get those in their care off to the best possible start?

## The role of music

Literacy begins with an awareness of sound; our ability to comprehend and respond to sound builds the foundations for future learning, and I believe that, because of its commonalities with language, music should be an integral part of children’s literacy education, especially in the early years.

The sounds of our language may be recorded as music or as text, and children can learn that sounds may be represented by a variety of symbols by first being introduced to symbolic notation for music. Consider the following example, and have a go in your setting...

## Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

Let children choose a tambourine or set of claves, and give out one cymbal. Copy the diagram below to show to the children. Point to each symbol in turn and ask the children to play their instrument once, when you point to the symbol showing their instrument. You may need to demonstrate the speed and rhythm you require first by clapping and saying “shake, shake, tap, tap, shake, shake, bang”, as you point to the pictures:



## findoutmore

Maria Kay is the author of *Sound Before Symbol: Developing Literacy through Music*. Published by SAGE, this fascinating and informative book demonstrates how musical activities can support the development of literacy skills for young children aged from birth to eight years. Offering a wealth of practical ideas, matched to the requirements of the revised EYFS learning goals, this is an inspirational resource for all early years educators and parents.

Once the children are able to play this, you can add the words to the rhyme *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. The children will be tapping out the syllables for the rhyme.

There are many good reasons for conducting this activity:

- Reading symbols teaches children that symbols have meaning and may represent sounds.
- Reading symbols helps children to learn about the direction of text.
- Reading symbolic notation is a way of practising reading skills.
- Singing and playing an instrument encourages the use of both sides of the brain simultaneously - good exercise for the brain!
- Playing an instrument develops coordination and fine motor skills (required for writing).
- Singing and playing in time encourages fluency of speech and action.
- Children are required to pay attention and concentrate on the task.
- The success of the group performance is dependent upon the participation of everyone, thereby giving children a sense of belonging and achievement.

Helping children to emphasise syllables in a physical way such as clapping or tapping instruments is important for learning to break words down so that they can be read, and so that words can be built for spelling.

Once children have learned the different sounds made by various instruments, ask them to identify which instrument is being played when the instrument is out of their sight. This helps children to 'internalise': to hold the sound in their heads and recall it later, which is a skill that is required for learning letter sounds. Children need to know the difference between the sounds, for example, of 'b' and 'd', even though they are very similar. This exercise also helps children to build their vocabulary as they learn the names of the instruments.

## Sound discrimination

Attending to sound is very important when it comes to learning the sounds made by the



### Reader offer!

*Sound Before Symbol* is priced at £22.99, but to receive 20% off, simply quote the discount code **UK13EM006** when ordering on [www.sagepub.co.uk](http://www.sagepub.co.uk) (offer valid till 15/05/2013 and cannot be used in conjunction with any other discount offer).

letters of the alphabet. Learning the letter sounds is more important initially than learning the letter names. Children should not, for example, be told 'bee' for 'ball', but 'b' - the letter sound. This enables children to 'synthesise' letter sounds and blend them together to read words. This way of teaching children to read is termed 'synthetic phonics' and is currently advocated strongly by the government. In June 2012, 600,000 Year 1 children in England undertook phonics screening checks. These tests aimed to check children's ability to recognise and blend sounds within words. Only 58 per cent of the children tested were found to have reached the required standard (32 out of 40 correct answers).

Children's ability to identify different sounds may be developed throughout the preschool years by participation in musical activities. Helping them to match and reproduce sounds will help them to focus on the sounds in words. Tongue twisters are a particularly useful exercise, for example...

*Sister Suzie sews sacks for soldiers.*

*Round the ragged rocks, the ragged rascal ran.*

See if it is easier if you add a tune! Additionally, these tongue twisters can be used for syllabification practice. Clap out their rhythms and then play them on a drum. Tapping along and chanting will help to develop children's fluency of speech. Children can also be encouraged to tap out the rhythms of their names or favourite foods or games.

Children need to develop a facility for hearing differences between sounds. Like any other skill, regular practice is required. If children are having difficulty, start with sounds which are clearly different and ask children to identify them. For example, record sounds from around your building such as the washing machine, a toilet flushing, a creaking door, a piano, footsteps, a computer whirring, or a room leader's voice. Take photographs of each item and ask children to match the sound with the picture. This exercise could become increasingly difficult as sounds become more similar: try recording the children's voices and then

match them to photos of the children. Record sounds of different methods of transport. Take a sound recorder (any smartphone will record and play back sounds) on a walk outside and record the sounds you hear. Take photos too, and match them to the sounds.

Helping children to discriminate between sounds is vitally important to later literacy development and one which all playgroups, nurseries and other preschool providers should strive for. Music is the perfect medium through which to achieve this.

## MAKING LINKS

**THERE ARE A NUMBER OF SIMILARITIES BETWEEN MUSIC AND LITERACY, AND THERE ARE A VARIETY OF ASPECTS OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT THAT ARE COMMON TO BOTH TOO. BOTH...**

- require listening to sounds;
- incorporate vocal expression (good oral skills are a predeterminant of good literacy skills);
- involve language - music has notes as text has letters;
- require visual discrimination and physical coordination;
- involve sound-symbol correspondence;
- are subject to prescribed rules of structure;
- require memory;
- involve rhythm - musical rhythm = syllables in language;
- exhibit patterns;
- employ a variety of pitch/intonation;
- require anticipation and prediction, and focus and concentration;
- tell stories and communicate ideas and emotions;
- involve common processes in the brain.