

Preparing for literacy: Improving communication, language and literacy in the early years

Introduction and background

This report is part of a series which the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is producing on the theme of literacy. It focuses on the teaching of communication, language and literacy to children aged between 3 and 5. It may also be relevant for older pupils who have fallen behind their peers, or for younger pupils who are making rapid progress. The report is not intended to provide a comprehensive guide to communication, language and literacy provision. Rather, it focusses on pedagogy and approaches which are supported by good evidence. The guidance provided draws predominantly on studies that feed into the Early Years Teaching and Learning Toolkit produced by the EEF in collaboration with the Sutton Trust and Durham University. As such, it gives an accessible overview of existing research, although it does not cover all aspects of successful literacy provision. Key recommendations are summarised below.

The recommendations

Prioritise the development of communication and language

- All children are likely to benefit from a focus on communication and language with some studies showing larger effect sizes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- A focus on language and communication at a young age supports not only the development of a range of literacy skills, but also wider knowledge and understanding. The development of language and communication is also linked to other outcomes such as self-regulation, socio-emotional development and reasoning.
- One of the key ways on which language and communication is developed is through extending vocabulary, although this is not a cure-all and it should be combined with a range of other approaches. The extending of vocabulary is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Existing evidence points to a number of ways of improving children's vocabulary. These are: provision of a language rich environment (implicit approaches) as well as deliberately extending vocabulary (explicit approaches); selection of high-frequency words for explicit teaching; developing the number of words children know (breadth) and their understanding of relationships between words and the contexts in which words can be used (depth); and providing multiple opportunities to hear and use new vocabulary.
- High quality interactions, particularly those based on children's immediate experiences and activities, are important in the development of language and communication. Strategies such as guided interaction and sustained shared thinking can be deployed. The former occurs when a child and an adult collaborate on a task. Discussion is a key feature and a variety of questions help to extend the child's thinking. Sustained shared thinking involves 2 or more people working together to solve a problem. Teacher may use strategies such as recapping, clarifying ideas and asking children to elaborate.

Using a balanced approach

- Early reading should be developed using a balanced approach which focusses on both comprehension and decoding. Storytelling and shared reading activities have consistently been shown to improve children's language comprehension skills. In terms of decoding, children are likely to benefit from activities which focus on alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness.
- The PEER framework can be used to support shared reading. It involves adults pausing and prompting the child to say something about the book; evaluating their response; expanding their response by rephrasing or adding information to it; and repeating the prompt to help them learn from the expansion.
- Phonics approaches aim to improve phonemic awareness, which is the ability to hear individual speech sounds, and to link these to letter combinations. There is extensive evidence that in key stage 1 systematic phonics teaching should be included as part of a reading programme. There is also evidence that early years programmes which include activities related to phonics skills lead to better outcomes than programmes without these components.

Develop capability and motivation to write

- Extensive practice is needed to develop effective handwriting, so developing children's motivation to communicate through writing is likely to be important.
- Although some studies indicate that the use of attractive writing tools can motivate children to communicate through writing, the effects may be short-lived. Motivation can also be enhanced by encouraging children to write for a range of purposes and audiences with opportunities to 'publish' their writing.
- It is important to develop the foundations of a fast and fluent handwriting style. If handwriting is slow, children are unable to focus on the content of what they are writing.
- Both the product and process of handwriting are important. For example, a child may accurately form the letter 'm' using four separate strokes but begin on the right-hand



side; this may lead to a satisfactory product, but the inefficient process will hinder the development of a fluent handwriting style.

- There is some evidence that, for younger children, unstructured activities - such as drawing a picture of their choice - are most effective at improving writing.
- As children get slightly older, there is some evidence that more structured activities with guidance about what to draw or write, such as copying letters or symbols, are more effective at improving writing.

Embed opportunities to develop children's self-regulation

- Research has shown that children as young as 3 can begin to self-regulate, i.e. to manage their own behaviour and aspects of their learning. There are, however, also indications that children from disadvantaged backgrounds start school with weaker self-regulation and that they are therefore less likely to succeed.
- One strategy for developing self-regulation is to use a 'plan-do-review' strategy. For example, during a building activity with blocks, a pupil might plan to build a tower. An adult might help him to draw a sketch and ask him to consider what worked and what did not the last time he built a tower, thereby activating prior knowledge. During the activity, the pupil might refer back to the sketch, to check if the tower is on track or to consider what his next step will be. At the end of the activity, he might be encouraged to compare his tower to the plan and asked which strategies helped him achieve his goals. This is known as activating prior knowledge.
- Adults can support children to develop their self-regulation ability by explicitly articulating their own thinking. For example, when introducing a counting game, an adult might model how to ask questions to check whether the answers are correct.

Support parents to understand how to help their children learn

- There is robust evidence that the level and quality of parental involvement in learning is linked to a child's communication, language, and literacy capabilities. There is further evidence that efforts to support parents in helping their children learn have the potential to improve outcomes for children. However, not all approaches are equally effective.
- Shared reading is essential and studies highlight the benefits of reading to children before they are able to read themselves and reading with them when they start to read independently. Shared reading should involve parents asking a range of questions. They can ask questions related to the 5 W's (who, what, when, where and why). They should ask a mixture of closed questions with a 'yes/no' response or more open questions. Children may also be asked to summarise what has happened in the book or story so far, and to predict what will happen next. By talking about links between a book and real life, parents can make the story more interesting and help children develop their understanding of ideas in the book.
- In general, approaches that focus on how to read effectively with children appear to be more successful than those which focus simply on promoting reading or providing books. Approaches such as occasional home visits or setting homework tasks have generally been less successful, perhaps because they are not sufficiently effective in helping those parents who lack the expertise to know how to help.
- Successful parental engagement can be a challenge. Four EEF funded studies aimed at engaging parents with their

child's literacy found it difficult to attract and retain the parents.

Use assessment to ensure that all children make good progress

- The available early years assessment tools range in quality, purpose and ease of use. The EEF's Early Years Measures Database is a free online resource that provides an overview of different measures that can be used with young children.
- Although the results of diagnostic assessments can be useful, they should be used to supplement, not replace, professional judgement about a child's current capabilities and the best next steps.
- It is important to avoid using assessments for labelling. Studies suggest that around 70 per cent of children with early language difficulties will grow out of them and catch up with their peers, whereas a smaller number will develop difficulties later. This finding does not mean that early years settings should withhold additional support to children who appear to be struggling but rather highlights that assessment should not be used to divide children into fixed categories.
- There is evidence that undiagnosed sight and hearing impairments can cause difficulties with literacy. It is possible that around 13 per cent of children have an undiagnosed sight need. Reduced hearing can inhibit the development of phonological awareness - the ability to distinguish between sounds. If children respond differently when spoken to from behind compared to when addressed face-to-face, this suggests that they may have a potential problem. Key questions for early years staff are: what screening services are commissioned in your local area?; what do you do to ensure all children with possible sensory needs are identified?; and what do you do to ensure children given glasses, or other treatments, use them?

Use high-quality targeted support

- Targeted support should involve: using the most capable staff to support children with the greatest needs.
- The evidence suggests that interventions delivered by teaching assistants (TAs) can have a positive impact on attainment, but this impact is generally lower than when delivered by a teacher. The positive effects only occur when TAs work in structured settings with high quality support and training. When they are deployed in more informal, unsupported instructional roles, they can impact negatively on children's learning outcomes. The EEF publication 'Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants' report provides more guidance.
- The EEF's list of promising projects identifies the projects that the EEF has evaluated with promising findings. One intervention that has been rigorously evaluated, with positive findings, is the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) which trains TAs to deliver a series of individual and small group sessions to children with relatively poor spoken language skills. The EEF funded evaluation found that children receiving NELI made improvements in oral language equivalent to 4 months' additional progress.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/guidance-reports/preparing-for-literacy/>