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# Talking with parents and carers about communication and language development

All through this book there are references to children communicating, developing language and learning about literacy with parents, carers and families in a variety of local communities, home languages, cultures and traditions. This final chapter will pull together these central issues in child language development and make some suggestions for working together in children's best interests. However, this is not primarily a book about parental involvement in education and for a full background to the topic I would recommend an earlier volume in this series which is focused on Pen Green Centre for the under-fives and their families: *Learning to be Strong* (Whalley, 1994) and a study of further work with parents in the same centre, *Involving Parents in their Children's Learning* (Whalley, 2007). The role of parents and the extended family in the lives of babies and children under three is explored in detail in *Parents Matter: Supporting the Birth to Three Matters Framework* (Abbott and Langston, 2006). Practitioners who are concerned mainly with the early years of statutory schooling will still find powerful evidence and insights in *Parents and their Children's Schools* (Hughes, Wikeley and Nash, 1994). Research and legislation are now united in an awareness that children thrive in care and education settings where there is a close working relationship between home and setting (DfES, 2005a).

The focus in this chapter will be on the nature of the partnership with parents and carers; the role parents and carers play in early literacy; and ways of talking about language development for parents, carers and practitioners.

## Partnership with parents and carers

Worthwhile talk about children's language development depends on a sound approach to practitioner and parent partnerships, so it is crucial that we examine our ideas about partnership.

## ***Partners***

Partners are equals, although they often have different roles and different kinds of expertise, and partners can be as unlike as any other individuals. When the partners are parents or carers and the practitioners who work with their children in a range of early years settings, there is lots of scope for misunderstanding these different roles and lots of scope for improving mutual respect and insight. We all need to understand the distinctive roles we play as parents and practitioners.

## ***Parents and grandparents***

Parents are as different as the rest of humanity and cannot be lumped together as 'the parents' – indeed, many of them are early years students, practitioners and other professionals! They bring many cultures, traditions, languages, temperaments, histories, strengths and weaknesses to their parenting roles, as we all do.

Parents are more knowledgeable about their own children than anyone else can ever be: they have a deeper emotional commitment to them and a wider background of experiences shared with them than can ever be achieved in settings which have the children for a comparatively few hours. Even when parent–child relationships are apparently poor and ineffective, they are still a potent factor, to be respected and handled with great sensitivity.

Grandparents are beginning to appear in the research literature on attachment in infancy, emotional development and early learning. It is some years since I published a lengthy case study of my grandson Dylan's very early experiences with picture books (Whitehead, 2002), but the UK Basic Skills Agency now has a Learning with Grandparents project and support materials (BSA, 2006). One small study in east London also highlights the emotional, cognitive and linguistic gains from learning to garden with grandparents (Ruby et al., 2007) and Tricia David (2006) has written sensitively about the role of grandparents as emotional buffers for young children and carriers of family intimacy and attachment styles across generations.

Parents and grandparents care about what happens to their children, now and in the future, and they are particularly concerned about what happens to them in early years care and education settings.

## ***Practitioners***

Practitioners who work with children are expert in relating to large numbers of children; they can observe them closely, manage and organise them in

groups, and they develop warm professional relationships with them as individuals.

Practitioners have considerable knowledge, both practical and theoretical, about children's normal development and deviations from these norms. They understand how to engage children's interests, how to structure learning and how to provide worthwhile activities for them. The best practitioners know when to intervene and when to stand back in children's learning and investigations.

Practitioners are as individually different as parents – many of them are parents – and can be limited by their own histories, backgrounds and languages. Practitioners may have more access to, and understanding of, government legislation and the many official agencies that affect the care, education and lives of young children and their families. What are the implications for partnerships between such different and interesting people?

Clearly such diversity can only be handled successfully and in children's best interests if the partnership is open, democratic and based on consultation and respect. We have to know what our partners are doing and what their aims and aspirations are for the children who have brought us together. This means that creating effective channels of communication and sharing information will be crucial (Hurst, 1997). It is easy to give examples of the ways in which many early years settings do this, but the danger is that this can become very one-sided, with the flow of information and arrangements always coming from the professional side. Of course it is good to have family rooms on the premises, family noticeboards and newsletters, open sessions and workshops, talks and outings, and even a prominent description of the curriculum followed and the current focus for play and learning. But there must also be a more open kind of permanent invitation to parents and carers to say what they want, ask for particular activities, identify what puts them off coming to the setting, or what they find to be pointless, or even offensive. I have in mind here the occasional objection to finger-painting, or a deeply felt disapproval of children being allowed to play naked in very hot weather. Good partners respect such feelings, talk about them and explore possible compromises. This is particularly important for families who are new to a setting. Furthermore, they have a right to be fully consulted about their level of involvement in the gradual settling in of their children and about any home visits prior to their children's first attendance at the setting. Partnerships depend on mutual respect, trust, some shared goals and the acceptance of differences. These are not achieved instantly – we all have to work at being good partners.

## Co-workers

In most early years settings and statutory schools, parents can be found working alongside professional practitioners. This makes for unique opportunities in partnership approaches to early years care and education, because there is nothing like hands-on involvement with groups of children alongside a colleague, to make sense of routines and curriculum activities. In these kinds of situations it is much easier for co-workers to ask each other questions, challenge assumptions, demonstrate how to do something, share their expertise and experience, or talk about ideas and anxieties. This approach deepens and broadens the idea of parental involvement so that it becomes 'a triangle of care' (Ball, 1994, p. 45) in which parents, professionals and the community work together for young children.

When we are working for children as a mixed group of parents, practitioners and multi-professionals, we learn an important lesson about education: it is social and collaborative. This is just as true for adult learning as it is for young children's learning. Every solitary scholar has a back-up team of tutors, librarians, family, friends and fellow scholars waiting to talk it all through, disagree and offer comfort. Similarly, every child in the sandpit wants someone to pretend to eat their 'pie', identify the ingredients and discuss the best method for cooking it. Parents and professional workers at the Pen Green Centre are successfully blurring many of the old 'them and us' dividing lines by taking seriously the claim that parents are their children's first educators and acting on it (Whalley, 2007). They *all* study together and share the latest child development research, keep child observation records at home and in the centre, and plan new curriculum initiatives together. Many other early years settings have begun to make similar moves towards full partnership by keeping 'open house' for families; supporting parents and very young infants in their homes with toys, books, advice and friendship; and de-mystifying early years practice by open and honest discussions about the 'whys' and the 'wherefores' of what goes on in early years settings. The rapid growth of integrated Children's Centres and extended schools is opening up many more opportunities and challenges for parental co-workers and multi-professionals to work and learn together (DfES, 2005b).

As co-workers we may also have the beginnings of an answer to the problem of finding enough practitioners of high quality to work with young children. We can create networks of learning and self-improvement. We can, for example, undertake shared action research into our own practice and seek to raise the quality of our work with young children. There are many historical precedents

for this kind of self-help; perhaps we would not wish to re-create ragged schools and hedge schools, but we could take a pride in becoming paint-smearred and clay-daubed scholars and partners!

## Parents, carers and early literacy

### *First educators*

It is obvious that the great majority of parents are their children's first carers, but we now find a broad agreement that parents are also their children's first and most enduring educators. This consensus has been reached partly because of Piaget's pioneering studies of infant thinking in the earliest weeks and months of life, a period when it is parents, or other primary carers, who create the child's environment and the resulting stimulus for the rapid development of the brain. Modern brain studies (neuroscience) have strengthened these earlier theories by confirming that the brain literally changes as it is exposed to social and cultural experiences in the earliest months and years of childhood (Bruce, 2000; Blakemore and Frith, 2005). Linked to this evidence for the continuity of human learning from birth are the powerful modern studies of babies' sociability, and their ability to share feelings and states of mind in partnership with their parents and carers (Trevathan, 1993; 2002). Another piece of evidence for learning with parents and carers is the everyday but stunning achievements of almost every baby: learning to communicate, talk, use narratives and become aware of marks and print. These achievements have been discussed in detail in this book and the point to be made here is that the role of parents in early learning, particularly language learning, is the foundation of all later educational success.

Many parents, across all social and economic classes, are very active in their role as first educators of their young children. Research in several cultures (David et al., 2000) has demonstrated that they talk in stimulating and challenging ways to their children; introduce them to second and third languages and written systems; share books, songs, stories and jokes with them; teach them to play card games, make cakes, count and identify letters; and keep them supplied with markers and scrap paper (Wells, 1981; Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Pen Green/SureStart, 2003). This evidence that parents teach their children has not always been welcomed and developed in early years settings. However, when professional practitioners have invited families to take an active part in monitoring and supporting their children's cognitive developments the

outcomes for children, parents and practitioners have been very positive (Athey, 2007; Nutbrown, Hannon and Morgan, 2005). In no area has this been more fully developed than in early literacy and the claim that 'literacy goes to school' (Weinberger, 1996) is now widely acknowledged.

### ***Babies and books***

Perhaps there have always been 'bookish' families who share books with their babies (White, 1954; Butler, 1979), but in recent years there have been some determined efforts to help many more parents and grandparents do this (Figure 18). One of the most well-planned and carefully evaluated was the *Bookstart* pilot project in Birmingham which involved the city's library services and the South Birmingham Health Authority. *Bookstart* packs containing a book, a poetry card, a poster, an invitation to join the local library and information were given free to 300 parents/carers of nine-month-old babies in three areas of the city by the local health visitors. The project covered a wide ethnic and social-economic cross-section of the city and the families were asked to complete questionnaires at the start of the project and six months later. The evidence from the parents was that sharing books with baby spilled over into an enthusiastic sharing of books with all the family, including toddlers, older children and adults. In some families it also sparked off, or renewed, an interest in joining the public library and even buying books. The *Bookstart* scheme has now been extended to many parts of the UK and librarians and families report the same enthusiasm for sharing books, buying books and joining libraries. The evaluators of the Birmingham pilot study draw our attention to its significance by pointing out that it is about more than early reading and school achievement, or even combating adult illiteracy and crime:

*Books are sources of shared and repeated pleasure, of insight and new knowledge and of new possibilities for living.*

(Wade and Moore, 1993a)

The ongoing monitoring of *Bookstart* revealed that at eight years old the original *Bookstart* babies had increased their initial gains in literacy throughout the early years of schooling. They also demonstrated sustained high achievements in reading, mathematics and scientific thinking at the end of Key Stage 1 (age seven). The researchers conclude that their findings affirm the central role of parents and carers in educating children in the pre-school years and that *Book-*



*start* is a cost-effective way of ensuring a confident start at school and continuing higher standards through the primary years (Wade and Moore, 2000). This project has gained international recognition, for example, the Better Beginnings project (Rohl and Barratt-Pugh, 2006) in Western Australia supports parents from diverse communities in their role as a child's first teacher of communication and literacy.



Figure 18 Reading for pleasure, Dylan (17 months) with Grandad

### ***Charting early literacy***

Increased knowledge about the emergence of literacy (Hall, 1987; David et al., 2000) in the earliest years of childhood has aroused a great deal of interest in the part played in the process by families, communities and cultural beliefs and activities. One powerful example of involving families on a full partnership basis is the Sheffield Early Literacy Development Project, 'Raising Early Achievement in Literacy' (REAL) (Hannon, Nutbrown and Morgan, 2005). The approach of the researchers was based on asking families to share with them the ways in which they already helped their young children to get into literacy. Not surprisingly the parents talked about looking at labels on tins and in shops,

writing notes together, looking at books and making words from alphabet spaghetti (Nutbrown, 2006, p. 88)! In return the researchers helped the parents to link their existing good practices to the broad patterns of language development and some major aspects of early literacy: environmental print, books, early writing and oral language. They also provided families with a literacy progress chart. This was designed as a sheet of interlocking jigsaw shapes, each of which named an achievement that could be coloured in by a parent or carer once it was noted. The chart covered looking at environmental print, beginning to write and sharing books; it provided a record of progress, from making marks to writing own name, or from telling stories about the pictures in a book to recognising the name on a food wrapper. The project also gives families separate jigsaw sheets for recording developments around environmental print, books and early writing (Nutbrown and Hannon, 1997).

This research noted that parents supported early literacy in four ways: they provided *opportunities* for literacy for their children; they *recognised* their children's efforts as readers and writers; they shared enjoyable *interactions* around literacy with their children, and they were *models* of what it means to be literacy makers and users. Similar findings emerged when the parents of children from several different language communities brought examples of everyday literacy into the nursery and reception classes of a London school (Kenner, 2000; 2005) and created relevant multilingual learning materials and contexts for their children. Without this kind of literacy home-school partnership, young bilinguals often find the transition to early years settings and reception classes confusing and their powerful language and thinking resources remain unused as they struggle to make sense of these strange new worlds (Gregory, 2007; Brooker, 2002; Drury, 2006).

### ***Reading at home***

The previous examples have been focused on babies and children under five, but perhaps the largest number of projects about parents and literacy are concerned with reading in the early stages of primary school. There are many ways of doing this (Wolfendale and Topping, 1996), but some consistent attempts to ask parents to hear children read at home and share books with their children are made by most infant/primary schools. The sight of young children taking their 'book-bags' home each afternoon is now a part of the national scene, as is the classroom morning session of 'changing' books and handing teacher a parental comment card on home reading progress. These important partner-



ships in reading have a common ancestor in the research in Haringey in the 1970s which indicated that reading at home with parents was more effective in improving children's reading progress than any other kind of school support (Hewison and Tizard, 1980). Research continues to indicate that pre-school literacy experiences and long-term parental interest and involvement in children's reading at home, combined with genuine consultation between teachers and parents/carers about school-based help such as Reading Recovery (Wade and Moore, 1993b), make all the difference to progress in reading. However, common sense and sensitivity is required here as it would be disastrous if parents felt pressured into doing 'teachery' things like phonic drills and 'sound blending', instead of having fun with stories, rhymes, messages and books.

The storysacks approach has already been outlined in Chapter 4, but it should not be forgotten that the aim of the approach is to involve parents and local communities in the making of the sacks and their contents, the organisation of storysack lending libraries and, above all, in reading at home for pleasure with their children. There is a high level of play and pleasure potential in the storysacks approach and there is also considerable learning about language and literacy. Storysacks usually contain parent prompt cards, an example of which is shown in Figure 19. Cards like this enable parents to talk about books and language with their children in a relaxed and enjoyable way.

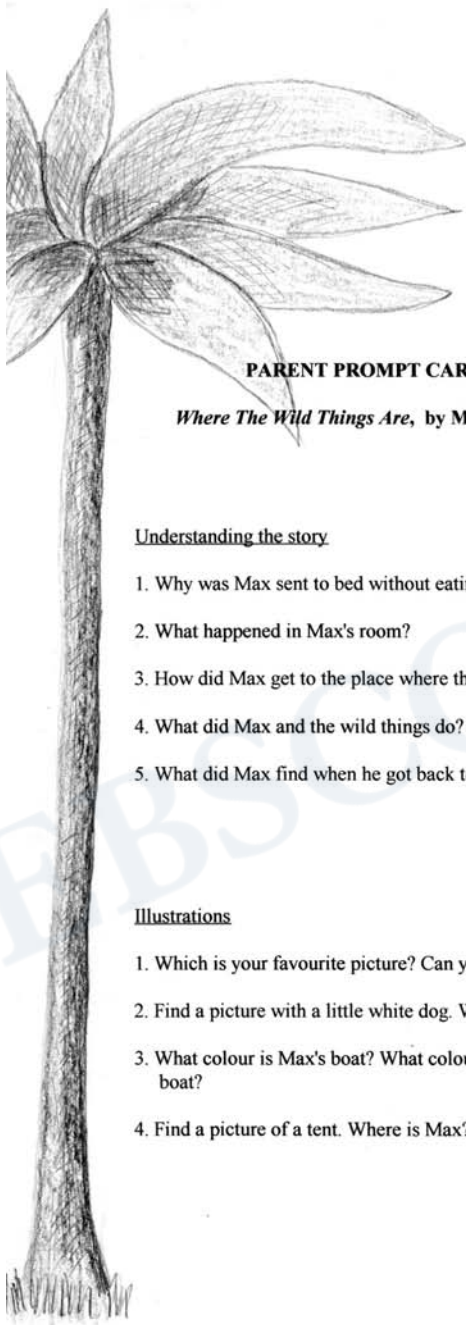
## Talking about communication and language development

Finding the right form of language in which practitioners, parents and professionals can talk together about children's language development is a continuing challenge. It has been one of the main difficulties of writing this book and the problem it has set remains. How do we use straightforward language and yet do justice to the complexity of individual language development in the years before eight? There does not appear to be an easy answer, but we have to keep on talking.

## Our children's language

### *About communicating, talking and listening*

We are all conversational partners for our children. We are all models for our children of how to use language. The daily caring, talking, playing and routine



**PARENT PROMPT CARD**

*Where The Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak

Understanding the story

1. Why was Max sent to bed without eating anything?
2. What happened in Max's room?
3. How did Max get to the place where the wild things are?
4. What did Max and the wild things do?
5. What did Max find when he got back to his very own room?

Illustrations

1. Which is your favourite picture? Can you tell me why?
2. Find a picture with a little white dog. What do you think is happening?
3. What colour is Max's boat? What colour are the sails? What is the name of the boat?
4. Find a picture of a tent. Where is Max? How do you think Max feels?

Figure 19a A parent prompt card from a storiesack

Letter fun

1. How many names do you know that start with 'M' ?
2. Can you say this chant with me?

*'Wicked, wobbly, wild old things,  
Wearing wigs and woolly whiskers'*

Now say it as fast as you can!

Word fun

1. Think of any words that rhyme with 'still' .
2. Tell me what your favourite wild thing looks like.
3. What do you think 'terrible' means?

Other activities

1. Paint or draw a picture of your favourite wild thing.
2. Make up a wild rumpus dance.
3. Dress up as a king or queen.  
Do you know any rhymes about kings and queens?

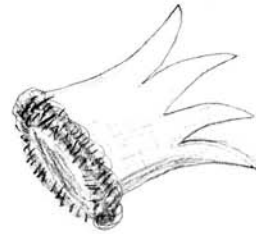
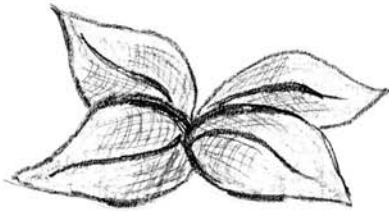


Figure 19b

reading and writing we do with our children shapes their language development and their thinking.

Our babies communicate with us long before they talk – they do it from birth. They get in touch by gazing at us, making faces at us and by moving their hands, arms, legs and toes in response to our attention and our voices. We become skilled at listening to our babies and watching them closely. This helps us to get to know them and interpret their messages and their meanings; it helps us to share our lives and activities with them. Our babies become talkers by communicating without words and by constantly watching and listening to all that goes on around them.

We tend to share our conversations and little stories about the ups and downs of daily life with wakeful and attentive babies and toddlers. We even expect responses from them. So we look at them, pause in our talk and give them time to find the appropriate sounds or words. Later, we tell them the words they ask for or seem to need, and we repeat important words or phrases frequently. We really make it possible for them to give names to their world and talk about it.

Our children begin by talking about the people they know, the events of their days, their own feelings, the food they eat, their toys, animals and family pets, and their own feelings and ideas about things. These topics of conversation remain very important all our lives and our children learn to talk about them by telling stories. Their conversations with us are full of little tales about falling down, losing things, meeting people, seeing animals or cars, feeling frightened or finding something interesting. These are everyday stories of ‘what happened and how I feel about it’; they are not very different from the stories in family reminiscences, television ‘soaps’, novels and myths.

There are many people who worry that television, digital versatile discs (DVDs) and video have changed all this talking between children and carers. On the positive side, we know that television is an important part of all our lives and our children grow up with it. They learn an enormous amount about the wider world beyond their homes and they hear a wide range of languages, voices, accents and plenty of standard English on it. However, it is still a one-way kind of communication in most homes and we should think about trying to watch as much as possible with our babies and young children. We can talk to them about what they have watched and even try to follow up some programmes by drawing and making things, dressing up, going on visits, finding books, singing songs, repeating rhymes and poems, doing some cooking or dancing round the room!

Television can be an excellent child ‘minder’ and entertainer, although too

much sitting and watching is not healthy in terms of children's physical development and their need for frequent exercise. But any potential threat to very young children's language development is only likely to materialise if watching television totally takes the place of playing, helping and talking between young children and caring adults – and older children.

### ***About writing and reading***

It is not an exaggeration to say that learning to become a writer and a reader depends on already being a talker and listener (or a signer if deaf), and a gossip and storyteller. It also depends on finding out what is involved in writing and reading.

So, once again it is clear that children's first literacy teachers are their parents and families, followed by their surroundings and communities. We demonstrate writing for our children every time we scribble a shopping list, sign a document or fill in a form. We demonstrate reading for them every time we open a letter, read the instructions on a food package or flick through a newspaper. And these are only the most basic examples of daily literacy. Surroundings and communities swamp all of us with examples of what print looks like and how it works. Everywhere we take our children we can find exciting, free reading materials to point out, talk about and play with: from leaflets and carrier bags to road names and advertising posters. And we should not forget to talk about 'reading' the meanings of colour signs like traffic lights, the symbols on road signs, and familiar logos in supermarkets and fast-food restaurants.

But our babies and toddlers do not just wait to be taught, so let us think about them, in a sense, as their own best teachers. They show us what they have noticed and what they are interested in every day and they can teach us a thing or two about becoming literate in any language.

*What are the signs that our very young children are starting to write and read the languages of our homes and communities?*

They will show some interest in print and notice it everywhere, including: letters, numbers, the writing on clothes labels, in shops and on buses. They point to print and ask about it.

They will try to make print-like marks when they are drawing and painting, or using raw pastry or plasticine, or writing with their fingers on steamed-up windows and in spilt drinks or food! One little girl was filmed making elaborate



patterns with a broom and a small brush as she swept a large pile of dry sand in the nursery garden (Figures 20 and 21).



*Figures 20 and 21 Creating patterns in dry sand (four years)*



They may ask us for help and advice, saying: 'Read that letter to me', 'What does that say?' 'Can I write something?' They will almost certainly want endless supplies of paper scraps, notepads, felt pens, biros, pencils, paints, chalks and crayons. And they will love plastic and magnetic letters, or rubber letter and date stamps and ink pads. With these materials they will be keen to write 'pretend' lists, letters, cards, labels, invitations and little books.

They will really enjoy owning and borrowing picture books, story books, information books and, even, mail-order catalogues. They will often show great affection for the books, or the pictures and characters in them, sometimes stroking the pages lovingly. These favourites are frequently hidden in special places or taken everywhere – to the potty or lavatory, to bed, or into the child's own preferred hidey-hole like a cupboard or under a table. Of course our children will ask us, or other special people, to read these precious books to them and we might have to struggle if it is a seed catalogue or a car handbook!

Our young children will be fascinated by listening to people and will tune in immediately to stories, jokes, gossip, poems, common sayings, songs and rhymes. They will also ask for some of these to be repeated again and again. They will insist on listening to favourite stories and books repeatedly and soon know them 'off by heart' and begin to join in with repetitive or amusing bits. They may also talk about favourite characters and their adventures, and some children will act out, dress up as, or draw and 'write' these stories.

They will certainly play and have fun with languages, especially with rhymes, nonsense, songs, tongue-twisters, brand names, advertising slogans and any rude words they come across. They will love dancing and twirling around at any time or place, as well as singing, stamping and clapping rhythmically, and taking part in traditional games, pastimes and rituals such as parties, carnivals, festivals and religious ceremonies. Mobile phones are now a significant part of many cultures and young children's play and talk also reflects this fact, as I observed when my 22-month-old grandson, Mattias, held a LEGO wheel base to his ear and had an intense conversation as he wandered in and out of the garden.

They will begin to recognise and name some letters, particularly the initial letters of their own name, or letters in the names of family, friends, favourite sweets, drinks and food, or popular television programmes. This will mean that they know quite a number of letter names and some of their usual 'sounds', so it is a good idea to start looking at really attractive alphabet books, as well as making home-made ones for fun. This can be started by cutting letters from magazines and leaflets and sticking them in scrap books, or on scrap paper.

They will begin to write their name, or special mark, on their books, draw-

ings and other property and cover sheets of paper or the margins of newspapers and the covers of magazines with what almost looks like writing. There will probably be identifiable letters, or numbers, or even the child's name among these important scribbles. At this point, many children ask adults and older children to write down names and brief stories for them and clearly enjoy this chance to dictate to a helpful secretary.

### *What difference will compulsory school make?*

In one sense it should not make much difference, because all that has gone on and just been described here is the very best kind of language and literacy development. Teachers should be planning to continue and build on all the good things that have gone on in homes, early childhood centres, playgroups and nursery settings. They will also be extending what we as parents, carers and early years professionals have begun with our children. The influence of the Early Years Foundation Stage in England should continue to ensure that many young children in the reception classes of schools experience an appropriate early years curriculum. The underlying principles of such a curriculum emphasise the need for sustained play opportunities, informal teaching styles and adequate outdoor space in which a rich hands-on curriculum can be experienced.

Teachers and teaching assistants should still be setting up classrooms with ample opportunities and materials for talking, drawing, reading and writing. They will aim to show children all the many uses of literacy and find enjoyable ways of presenting them with the need to read and write every day. One of their top priorities will be to inspire children with a love of stories, poetry and books: they may tell us that they want our children to be 'hooked on books'!

Teachers will be good listeners, tireless secretaries and enthusiastic publishers. They will always be willing to write for our children, listen to them read and tell stories, and make attractive books with them. This is where they may ask for our help as occasional classroom listeners, readers and secretaries to the children. One enthusiastic teacher with more than 30 children can almost work miracles, but parents and teaching assistants working alongside teachers can definitely transform children's lives.

Teachers will introduce our children to computers and word-processing programs, not just for speed and smart copy, but as one way of teaching them more about how the written forms of language work. Teachers will emphasise the spelling, grammar and punctuation of written standard English, but only as our children become more confident and enthusiastic as writers. However, children

who do not use English in their homes and communities should be supported and helped in their first language in school, if at all possible, while they develop some level of bilingualism. Talking, reading and writing in their home languages are central to children's thinking and self-respect and should be encouraged in every way possible. Furthermore, this actually helps with the development of fluency and literacy in English.

Most experienced teachers are unlikely to believe that there is only one way to teach reading that will work for every child, despite the changes to the literacy strategy in England. This is because reading is a very complicated mix of thinking skills and experience. Consequently, teachers of reading prefer some carefully planned mixing and matching of methods. They do introduce children to the sounds of letters and groups of letters like 'th', 'ch' and 'ing' as children's confidence with reading and sharing books increases. Plenty of experience with everyday print and books is essential because children need to recognise instantly many English words that cannot be sounded out and blended. Just imagine trying to sound out 'said', 'thought' or 'night'! As a reader of words like this you are also helped enormously by the sentence or situation in which you meet the word. This is a warning to all of us to let children read interesting material and not just meaningless lists of words or phonically regular nonsense. The most important help for our children comes from having a good idea of what a whole book or story is about, what the pictures are suggesting, and what is likely to happen. So, do not restrict your children's reading at home to phonics 'books', worksheets and schemes.

It is now absolutely clear that if parents and carers share books with their children at home they make a huge contribution to their success at reading. When teachers hear children read at school they have a different responsibility. They must keep careful notes about how our children use clues such as the whole context of the book, the pictures, the meaning and sense of words, their knowledge of sounds and ability to sound out unknown words, and their ability to go back and correct themselves. This is how teachers have always assessed children's reading development and decided what help and what kind of reading our children need next. Reading from a 'reading scheme' or phonics book is only one way of assessing reading progress and these books do not actually 'teach' reading. Children have to learn about print and books for themselves and many will find the process slow and boring if they only meet school scheme books.

The best cure for some problems in the early years of reading is to return to all the approaches used before compulsory schooling in order to rebuild a

child's confidence and enjoyment of books and print. Go on sharing books and writing together as much as possible; struggling, uninterested readers need more books, more stories and lots more being read to. Most of all they need to know that someone who loves them believes in them totally and knows that one day they will be a reader.

We cannot separate communication and language development from the rest of our lives and teach them separately to our children. What children do successfully with language, they do as part and parcel of doing really important things. Things like telling us about their quarrels; shrugging, gesturing and pulling faces; celebrating their good times; reading their names on labels; or writing a message of kisses on a letter to a far-away grandparent. Throughout our lives language development is bound up with just being ourselves.

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