

Books and stories



What the EYFS says: *Communication and language* development involves giving children opportunities to experience a rich language environment; to develop their confidence and skills in expressing themselves; and to speak and listen in a range of situations.

As with the other prime areas of learning and development, communication and language development advances rapidly from birth, fostered by relationships and experiences that in turn help to establish and support the specific areas of learning.

Children are ready and active partners in communication even before birth. Research suggests that babies are able to recognise and respond to their mother's voice in the womb, such is the power of language and communication. Once a baby comes into the world, they initiate communication with others as they respond to interaction and stimuli, much of which involves the caregiver's voice, crooning softly, telling stories, singing rhymes, or listening to other sounds and speech that surrounds them.

The phrase 'learning to talk and talking to learn', coined by early years author Gordon Wells, brilliantly sums up the role of communication and language in children's learning as perhaps the singular most important aspect of development that affects future learning. Good practitioners will understand that in order to support this vital area of development they must foster close, caring relationships where feelings, thoughts, ideas and emotions are expressed and understood; and where opportunities to enrich children's play enables them to reach their full potential.

For practitioners who are working in partnership with parents and/or carers to promote children's learning and development, the opportunities to

do so in the area of communication and language are limitless. Every interaction involves some form of communication, every element of play generates a new opportunity and as children grow and learn they develop specific skills and knowledge that provides important contexts for all learning.

One of the many resources guaranteed to harness the imagination and curiosity of a young child has to be books and stories. Books span the generations – as adults we continue to interact with them, whether reading for pleasure, relaxation or to learn something new, a book fulfils many needs. While it is often said that as we 'grow up' we leave behind childish things, the unadulterated pleasure of losing oneself in a good book remains with many of us throughout life.

From the very first time a parent shares a board book with a young baby, pointing to pictures, running a small finger across a textured surface and making animal sounds that baby soon learns to imitate, the 'learning to talk, talking to learn' process is being established. As such, it makes sense that exposing children to all of the benefits that books and stories bring should be valued greatly as a particularly rewarding aspect of our work with children.

As practitioners, we should aim to promote a love of books and stories in every child we care for. And yet, as with many 'common place' items and activities, there is a danger that books can be taken for granted or not given

equal prevalence across the play and learning environment.

Whilst some elements will be very strong, others will be poor. For example, a good selection of age appropriate books might be available, but the area provided for children to enjoy books in may not be conducive to them sitting comfortably in ways which suit the individual child. On the other hand, a so-called 'book-corner' full of books that are dirty, damaged and not age appropriate, crammed into a box or rack provides absolutely nothing at all.

In baby rooms, books are often seen as a resource that adults share with babies at 'special times' but for the rest of the time are placed out of reach so that babies cannot mouth them or tear the pages.

Characteristics of effective teaching and learning

As communication and language is one of the most important aspects of learning, it is clear that providing for it through the medium of books and storytelling deserves to be given meaningful consideration. The characteristics of effective teaching and learning that are described in the EYFS are provided for in a language-rich environment whatever the age of the child and are explored here in some more detail:

Playing and exploring

There are so many aspects to be explored when a child holds a book in their hands, how it looks, how it feels, what the marks on the paper mean. When a child picks up a book and opens it, they are immediately seeing images that may

tell a story, show them something new or familiar or confirm an idea. It teaches them at an early age that books are interesting and a source of pleasure.

When an adult is also involved, this then becomes a shared experience, building on the adult-child relationship and further enhancing their understanding of what they are seeing and hearing. The experience of the child is partly a physical one: the friendly contact with an adult, the warmth of a cuddle, the shared rhyme of story that generates laughter and the sensation of being rocked or 'jiggled' in time to the words.

Active learning

From the earliest age, access to books and stories allows the child to concentrate and keep on trying as they learn to turn pages or hold the book the right way up. As they get older, they begin to anticipate the sequence of events in a story. They will come to recognise some parts of the text and to pick out familiar letters, words and phrases.

Children get a huge sense of satisfaction from pre-empting a repeated phrase in a familiar story when it is being read to them: "'You can't catch me,' said Jack", when repeated several times in the story, becomes a joyous chant. Babies will squirm in anticipation knowing that the next page turned will reveal the button that when pressed quacks or croaks. Active learning involves motivation – what can be more motivating than that for a six-month-old?

Of course as children grow and learn, their motivations change. For example, the three-year-old child who picked up an interesting item on the beach will be fascinated to learn that it is in fact a shark's egg case – they might bring it

into the provision and, with their key person, 'research' it further, hopefully finding a book that has photographs.

Creating and thinking critically

Using imagination is a skill and, like any other skill, needs practice. Stories arouse a sense of wonder, which challenges children to speculate "What if...?" or "Can I do that?" As children develop their imagination they are able to create and respond to stories, music and other arts too. They are also able to envisage new ways of doing things and new possibilities as they solve problems and begin to understand concepts.

We as practitioners understand that using books and stories provides an ideal opportunity for children to find their own ways to represent and develop their ideas. If you want a child to discover something for themselves, a book can give a glimpse of another life, and other ways of thinking or living, helping the child to extend their experience and understanding by means of their imagination.

Some of the very best aspects of childhood are encompassed by the combination of a small child, a good book or story and a willing adult. The other ingredients needed are opportunity and enthusiasm: are you really valuing the wonder of books and stories or have they just become routine? While it does not take a genius to see how important this is, it's worth finishing with a quote from Albert Einstein himself on the power of stories:

"If you want brilliant children, read them fairy tales. And if you want them to be more brilliant, read them more fairy tales."

Adapted from *Let their Imagination Soar*
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Useful publications

Listening Together (Pre-school Learning Alliance 2008) looks at the development of children's language and how early experiences underpin vital skills for language development, thinking and literacy. For further details please visit www.pre-school.org.uk/shop.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is the largest and most representative early years membership organisation in England. An educational charity, the Alliance represents the interests of over 14,000 member settings who deliver care and learning to over 800,000 families every year. We offer information and advice, produce specialist publications, run acclaimed training and accreditation schemes and campaign to influence early years policy and practice.

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