



Becoming A Reader

By Becki Ralph



There seems to be a common misconception that learning to read is exclusively linked to being able to understand phonics, and that we should be in some way be hot-housing our children into becoming phonetically aware, sometimes before they can even use the loo! Phonics is a way of teaching children how to read and was created as a method in supporting children to identify different sounds to create words. However, a recent UCL study [1] hit the headlines when its findings brought to public attention that our current national strategy might not be fit for purpose, and this got us talking about what it means to ‘become a reader’.

‘The ultimate goal of reading is to extract meaning from text’^[2]

Ultimately, learning to read is a journey[3] and not a single destination. Studies have noted that the early actions taken within the first five years to support reading can positively support a child’s literacy skills in later life,[4] so what can we be doing to support our children to become readers in the first five years?



Pre-reading skills

As parents, we often are so focused on our children being able to master skills such as reading and writing, that we neglect to think about all the skills that need to come first. Think of them like the bricks that make up the castle and not merely the flag at the top! In this booklet, we are going to share with you some of the skills that need to be mastered before your child can become a reader, and these skills can start to be supported from birth.

It is thought that when a baby is in the womb, they begin to develop phonological awareness, which is the ability to organise sounds as language. [5] The foetus processes their mother's voice and other environmental sounds through the womb, and this is where your baby's journey to reading begins!

Experiences of sounds

From the day your baby is born, they will begin to get to know the sounds of your environment by listening to and feeling sounds vibrate in their body.

They will begin to recognise you and other people they love from their voice and, the more sounds they are exposed to, the richer their phonological awareness becomes. Through you talking to them without any response, they will begin to gain an awareness of serve and return interactions, where you 'serve' them an interaction such as a smile or talk and they respond with a coo, a smile and eventually sounds.



Visual tracking

Following objects with your eyes is something babies learn to do within the first few months of life, as they move their head from side to side to follow you around the room, or follow an object passed in front of their face. These early skills help them to scan and track words when they learn to read.

Be read to

While this might feel obvious, reading to your child is the single most engaging and meaningful way to help your child, in turn, to learn to read.[6] Simply sharing a few picture books regularly can help your child to develop an awareness of all the other pre-reading skills.

A study shows that reading to your baby even while they are in the womb can help to form memory, even before they are born. [7]

Associate reading with enjoyment

For any child to enjoy reading, they must associate it with pleasure, and I bet if you do not read much now as an adult, it is likely you did not enjoy it as a child. So how do children learn to enjoy reading? It starts in those early days of sitting in your lap and listening to you read to them, soaking in the illustrations, and finding humour in the context.

So, simply put, it is about enjoying moments in time with the people they love and learning to notice that pictures, text, and your storytelling can be funny, loving and bring them satisfaction.



Language skills

Children need to have a developed awareness of language and have a plethora of vocabulary to become competent readers and the best way you can promote language skills is by talking. Encourage them to join in with the conversation, make up silly rhymes, sing songs, tell jokes, listen to stories, poetry and nursery rhymes. Encouraging children to join in with the 'language of stories' helps children to feel like readers before they become a reader and, in turn, this will increase their confidence in reading. Joining in with singing, nursery rhymes and stories additionally helps children to understand more complex language skills, such as intonation, pattern, sound differentiation, phrasing and expression. These are all-important skills for the competent reader.

Memory

To read, children need to practise both verbal and visual memory. Verbal memory refers to remembering parts of sentences due to alliteration and repeated refrains. For example, 'A mouse took a stroll through the deep dark wood. A fox saw the mouse and the mouse looked...' (The Gruffalo by J Donaldson).

Stories and rhymes told repeatedly allow children to finish sentences and retell the story, which again makes them confident in their abilities surrounding reading. Visual memory helps children to associate pictures and word placement. This can start by spotting certain details on pages and then recognising when things are missing or out of place. It can also be practised away from books with games like 'What's missing?' and 'I spy'.

Matching

All those games of snap do pay off when it comes to reading, as part of reading is the brain essentially matching, and therefore, before learning to match letters, children must have the opportunity to match objects, shapes, colours and patterns. You can support them in this from very early on by talking to your baby about different shapes and patterns in their environment.

Awareness of rhythm and rhyme

Learning to understand rhythm and rhyme takes lots of practise. Rhyme is a difficult concept to learn and the best way to understand it is through lots and lots of fun, silly and engaging play! Think about silly names for things, for each other, create rhyming stories and songs, and do it with things that are relevant and interesting to your child.



Rhythm is a lot easier to get to grips with, but also needs an understanding adult that doesn't mind a bit of noise and fun. Try tapping out beats on the table before mealtimes or stomping through puddles like a dinosaur. Give your child the opportunity to feel rhythm all through their bodies, with music, instruments and big beats. Nursery rhymes are a brilliant way to promote an understanding of rhyme and rhythm, there's a reason they've stood the test of time!

Motivation to read

This seems a simple concept but is so often overlooked. Is your child motivated to read? Would you be motivated to read a fishing magazine? Well, you might be if that sort of thing interests you. Therefore, we need to think the same about our children. If your child isn't interested in reading books, then it might need to involve characters or scenarios they are interested in. Let them take the lead when it comes to picking stories, even if it is the same book night after night – revisiting books is really beneficial for picking up language, text and meaning. This doesn't have to be constrained to just books either, think of other places your child might read and seek out text on things they care about, for example on diggers, trains, planes or a packet of biscuits!

Understanding that print carries meaning

Print awareness develops over time and starts by children recognising that print carries some sort of meaning. When children are read to and are shown signs, labels, logos and so on, they begin to realise that print carries meaning. This can start very early with children recognising certain packaging means food, for example. From this, print awareness can develop where children begin to understand what is the right way up, and that text is read from left to right.

Letter awareness

Letter awareness means beginning to recognise the shapes of a letter alongside the knowledge that those letters carry sounds. This often starts with more meaningful letters such as the ones that are in their name and can be done through daily interactions and play.

Narrative skills

Narrative skills refer to the ability to describe things, retell stories and recount events. By exploring narrative in contexts that have meaning to them, they begin to understand the construct of stories and storytelling, which helps them to understand what they read.



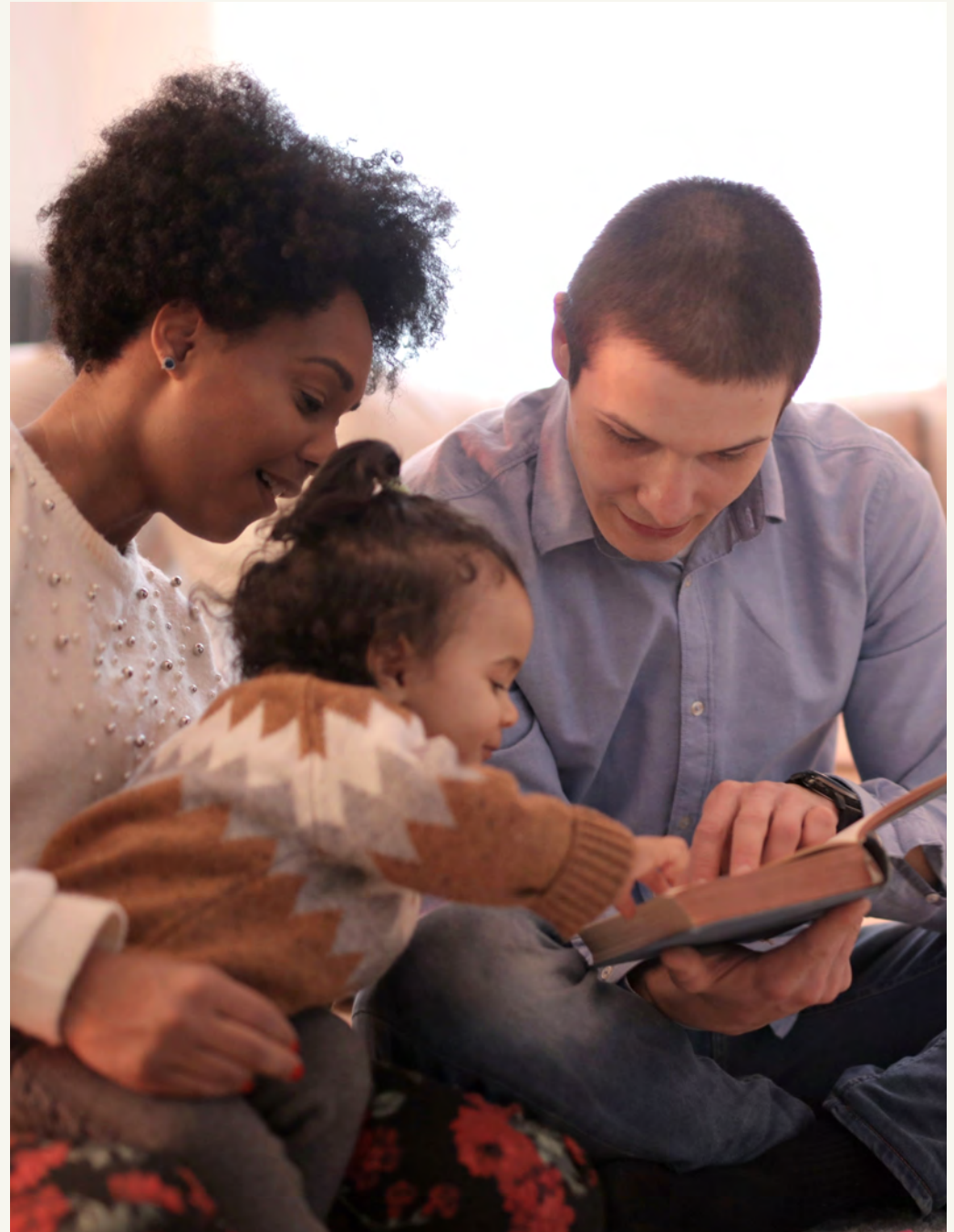
Representation in play

Representational play or symbolic play is when a child uses toys, objects or actions to represent other objects or actions, for example, using a block as a telephone. Symbolic play is really important when it comes to language development as they use similar processes. Language has vocal symbols to represent and give meaning to things in the same way that objects are explored as examples of other things to help them to understand their meaning.

Motor awareness

Alongside reading, children will be beginning to master certain fine and gross motor skills and may be beginning to experiment with making marks. This, in turn, also helps them to become more confident in recognising letters and sounds, and they begin to experiment with forming shapes and letters in their marks.

Learning to read isn't a skill that is acquired in isolation, and many of the skills needed to read also support your child in becoming a writer as well! Becoming literate is a lifelong journey that enables our children to become creative and critical agents.[8]



So, when does phonics come?

Studies have found that the best way for children to learn about phonics is through play, [6] and that, when phonics are introduced in real-life experiences or everyday contexts, they are more likely to be understood and made meaningful to the child. Our pedagogy (our view of teaching and learning) at My First Five Years is just that, and we believe that all acquired knowledge comes through meaningful play-based experiences. Therefore, introducing letter sounds in fun and meaningful ways is the best way to introduce phonics.

Our app was designed to guide you as a parent through the journey to becoming a reader, as well as through 2600+ other skills. It will help you to feel empowered to support your child through play every step of the way and celebrate all their achievements.

For more information, download our app now!



References

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