

Promoting Reading *for Pleasure*

Polly Atkinson

These materials are designed for parents and carers but you may find them helpful for discussion with colleagues and fellow practitioners.

- *What is reading?*
- *How do we learn to read?*
- *How do children become better readers?*
 - Reading to children*
 - Talking about reading*
 - Motivating reading*
- *What does reading do for us?*
- *Supporting your child's reading*
 - Being a role model*
 - What to read?*
 - Choosing books to share/read with/to children*
 - Selecting texts for children to read independently:*
 - Sharing books*
 - Talking and questioning*
 - Reading the Illustrations*
- *How to help if your child chooses not to read*
 - Creating positive attitudes towards books*
- *Suggestions for further reading*

UKLA

The United Kingdom Literacy Association

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This resource is designed to highlight and promote reading for pleasure, distinguishing between how children learn to read and how they can be helped to become readers who choose to read for their own satisfaction. Inspiring children to love reading, to choose to read and to grow and develop into ardent and avid readers is perhaps the greatest gift any adult can pass on.

The 2014 National Curriculum for English in England emphasises 'reading for pleasure' - a move which is very welcome and long overdue. Recent studies (see, for example, Save the Children, 2014) have shown that those children who choose to read, enjoy reading and read regularly reap the benefits in many areas, not least:

- **academically:** language acquisition; vocabulary growth; reading proficiency; improved comprehension and understanding; greater cognitive development; ability to absorb and understand information in all subjects
- **socially:** gaining an understanding of people, the world, life experiences (and thereby improving relationships and creating connections with the wider world); ability to empathise; sense of humour; ability to interpret situations; making links between content of books and personal life
- **areas of health:** self-confidence and self-esteem; understanding emotions; develop emotional vocabulary.



What is reading?

In our multi-text driven society the ability to read and communicate in a variety of forms, not least through books, screens and other forms of technology is very important.

Put simply, in order to be able to read, children need to have a knowledge and awareness of our alphabet:

- letters and the words they create
- how they look (grapheme awareness)
- their corresponding sounds (phoneme awareness)
- how they relate and what they all mean together (contextual and grammatical awareness).

Of course, these skills can be taught explicitly and are developmental and progressive. Nonetheless there are, and will probably continue to be, many debates and arguments over which methods and strategies are ‘best’.

Being able to merely decode and know what words ‘say’ is pointless unless readers *understand* what they are reading and *make sense* of it. This, in turn, allows them to *reflect upon* and *learn from* their reading.



How do we learn to read?

Learning to read starts long before a child opens a book and reads the words. Understanding what it means to read and how books work begins in infancy when sharing books and being read to: experiencing pages full of words and pictures by following a favourite story, a well-loved nursery rhyme or exciting pictures of tractors, scary dinosaurs, bold knights or cuddly kittens.

This important time introduces children to reading through sounds (directly related to written print), rhymes, patterns and rhythms of speech, intonation of voice, even gestures and facial expressions as they hear and share a favourite book (often repeated over and over again).

Many demands are made on children when they begin independently to tackle and decode the collection of printed squiggles on the pages. They may use one or more strategy at any given time or a mixture of methods throughout a book depending on the word, context or, indeed, their stage of reading development. For example:

Picture cues

Relating the story to the illustrations on the page is one of the first strategies children develop as they share or listen to a book.

Phonemic awareness

Knowing the sounds that a letter (or groups of letters) represents allows a new reader to blend and 'sound out' words. Using a finger to follow each letter as the child blends the sounds together can be an aid to fluency (as well as repeating the whole word after each attempt).

Sight reading

Many children use their memory to recall whole words from one page (or even book) to another. Sight reading allows the child to become acquainted with the shape of a word by recognising the ascenders and descenders or overall shape of words. Some children may even memorise a whole story, asking to share the same book time and time again (an important aid to understanding and retention).



Context

Realising what a book is about, understanding characters and knowing the subject or topic contained in a book are just some of the ways in which a child will be able to use contextual knowledge in order to tackle unfamiliar words. For example, when reading a book about dogs, and coming across a sentence such as: 'A dog needs a walk often', the word 'walk' may challenge an emerging reader. Encouraging the child to read the sentence but leave out the tricky word will enable them to think about a word (beginning with the phoneme 'w') that might 'sound right'. Cue some fun for the adult to suggest: 'A dog needs a *watering can* often?' 'A dog needs a window often?' while allowing the child to gain confidence and a sense of achievement by suggesting 'walk' (or even 'woof' or 'whistle'); all of which can stimulate further talk about letter sounds as well as general needs of a dog).

Syntactic (and grammatical) knowledge

Using the same sentence in the illustration above, a developing reader may recognise that a suggestion such as: 'A dog needs a windy often' wouldn't be possible as it doesn't make sense. Similarly, 'A dog needs a *walking* often' can create valuable discussion concerning verbs, tenses and 'sounding right'.

Analogy

Readers with good sight and memory skills might also use analogy to recognise an unfamiliar word, rhyme or letter pattern. For example, having learnt the word 'dog', a child can be encouraged to compare the look and sound to *log*, *frog* and so on; likewise using the trigraph 'igh' to progress from reading 'right' to 'fright', 'frighten' and even 'frightening' etc.

Bibliographic knowledge

Through experiences of being read to, as well as developing their own reading skills, children learn that texts run from left to right and from the top to the bottom of a page (although other languages may, of course, differ). Likewise, hearing a reader's voice change as they take into account various forms of punctuation allows a child to understand how language and grammar 'work' and the relationship between spoken and written words.

Some picture books challenge the reader to use a variety of skills in order to follow a text that may be written with the words giving a different message from the picture or with different typefaces and sizes of print across the page. (These features make the reading experience all the more enjoyable).

How do children become better readers?

Reading to children

Once children begin to master the many skills of reading, gaining fluency and independence, the ability to understand and take meaning from texts broadens hugely. In other words, they progress from learning how to read to reading for learning (sometimes described as becoming an ‘effective’ reader). It is still, nevertheless, very important to continue reading to children as it enables them to access and experience texts that they may not necessarily choose themselves, for example, longer books that require high levels of concentration and stamina, those with complex sentences and a wider range of vocabulary etc. And, of course, reading to children can be a very pleasurable shared activity, whether it’s with brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents...



If your family can read in a language other than English, it’s just as good to read to your child in that language. Experience in listening to stories and rhymes is great in any language and children cope very well with two (or more) languages.

Talking about reading

Independent readers will continue to require support while their comprehension and understanding of texts develops. This can be achieved through: talking about texts and asking questions; encouraging children to make connections between the text and their own experiences; making links between newly-gained knowledge and previous learning; forming conclusions from texts; furthering their vocabulary. All of these help children to become *effective* readers.

Motivating reading

At this important stage of a child’s reading development there may be a danger of encouraging extrinsic reasons for reading, such as being ‘allowed’ to move on to the next ‘level’ of books at school; being given a sticker and so forth. In these instances the messages being imparted to developing readers must be considered very carefully; although it may be pleasing to receive a sticker/reward, should children suppose this is why they are reading?

Guiding readers towards *intrinsic* reasons for reading by developing an understanding of why we read, what reading is ‘for’ and nurturing a love of reading has been recognised as far more valuable. If children want to pick up a book, comic or magazine, choose their own reading material and enjoy reading, they are far more likely to continue reading, become effective readers and gain from the countless ensuing benefits. Therefore access to quality texts – fiction, non-fiction and digital texts – is crucial.



What does reading do for us?

Children are individuals who necessarily progress, develop and grow in a myriad of ways. As they do, and whether consciously or otherwise, the wide-ranging life skills children gain from books of all types can never be underestimated. While reading independently, sharing a book or listening to someone read to them, children can:

- be transported to other places
- begin to form opinions (and gain an understanding of others' opinions)
- develop a sense of humour
- become acquainted with people and characters (personified animals who talk and behave like humans) and their emotions
- develop empathy
- 'visit' parts of the world (and other worlds!) they had no idea existed
- develop their imagination
- learn facts
- make links between their own and others' lives
- become discerning readers, make informed choices.

and so on...



Supporting your child's reading

As well as being an enjoyable shared activity, reading to children and listening to them read, can provide the motivation to further their own reading whilst also exposing them to a wide variety of genres and texts they may not necessarily choose independently.

Being a role model

Whether a parent, carer, sibling or well-known personality, role models have the power to inspire children to read. If your child sees you (or other people they admire) enjoying a book, magazine or comic, laughing at the characters, hearing you enthuse about the story and valuing books, they will be inspired and more inclined to do the same themselves.

There are many initiatives available for schools, for example involving footballers, sports stars, authors and celebrities, that send strong messages to children that reading is a 'good thing' or 'cool'. Ask your child's teacher if there are any such projects in which you could become involved with your child, either within school or at home.

What to read?

With such a rich and varied choice of children's literature available (and in a variety of formats) knowing which texts to choose might seem a daunting task.

Choice of reading material is, of course, a personal matter. Many adults like to read something light and undemanding: entertaining as opposed to a heavy novel or 'classic' that requires concentration. Children deserve to be offered the same opportunities for choice when deciding what to read so, when selecting books, let your child choose as well. Studies have shown that children develop greater, intrinsic, motivation to read when they can choose their own reading matter. Whether from the school collection, your local library, a book shop, or a charity shop, take time together to look through, consider and choose books, or other materials, that they find inviting; and, most of all, *interesting!*



Choosing books to share/read with/to children

Consider:

- The theme and the content of the book: does it look interesting/fun?
- The length of the book: is it compatible with your child's concentration span? Will you/they be able to read the whole story?
- The illustrations: are the illustrations exciting and attractive? How do they complement or add to the text?
- Has the book the potential to be read over and over again (the sign of a good choice)?
- Have you read other books by the same author? Have your friends told you about a particular book they have enjoyed? Ask your teacher/librarian which books they would recommend.
- Take time to look at the titles on both the longlists (as well as the shortlists) from children's book awards (for example the UKLA Book Awards); there are some excellent books that don't necessarily win awards.



Choosing texts for children to read independently

- Have a chat with your child's teacher; they will be able to guide you and tell you what level of texts your child will be able to read independently as well as those that will offer them a challenge.
- Have a look at the text; is it challenging/too easy/hard for your child? If your child is having to work hard at many of the words, there is a danger they will become disengaged from the text as well as lose the overall meaning...and consequently the enjoyment.
- Likewise if a book is too easy to read they may become bored quickly, although it is important to remember that children benefit from the sense of achievement and satisfaction when re-reading a familiar text.
- Variety is the spice of life! Don't feel you must stick to reading scheme books if that is all your child is bringing home from school. Scheme books are excellent for developing reading skills (with high frequency words and phonetically decodable language that is often repetitive) but there is an abundance of wonderful, high quality texts that will help develop your child's enjoyment of reading ('real books')



Sharing books

Be comfortable. Whether at bedtime, snuggled up on a comfy chair or even listening to a CD on a car journey, sharing books and reading together is one of the most important experiences children can have. Limit distractions to a minimum if possible; create a special reading area (a den or pop-up tent work wonders); allocate ten minutes in the day when everyone in the house stops and reads. Leave a variety of books lying around and accessible so they can be picked up at any time.

When reading to your child have fun (be brave) and use different voices for the characters. Use expressions and inflections in your voice to create suspense and excitement as you read. Vary the speed at which you read sentences and, if possible, always end on a cliff-hanger!

Talking and questioning

Talking and asking questions during and after reading is immensely valuable. Not only does discussion reveal a child's understanding and interpretation of the text but it gives an opportunity to explain reasons and form opinions.



Whilst reading and sharing books, asking open questions such as 'does that make you think of anything/anyone else?' or 'why do you think that character did/said that?' allows a child to share their thoughts and develop a deeper understanding of the text.

Children always like to share their 'favourite': a picture, character, even a favourite page, particularly in information books. Encouraging them to expand on their choices develops their vocabulary and offers opportunities to make links to real-life experiences. Ask them why they like - or dislike - a particular character, section or page.

Try including discussion and questions about the author (and illustrator); ask your child if they would have used a different word at certain points of the text, or what they think the author meant by creating certain characters. When appropriate, try to link your topic of discussion with your child's own life and experiences.

Asking a reader to predict what will happen later in the story opens up further opportunities for talk as well as giving valuable insights into the reasons behind their expectations.



Talking also facilitates an interest in words; collect new, tricky and interesting words in a notebook or use fridge magnets; challenge each other to use one of your newly-discovered words during the day.

Asking questions can reveal not only what children understand but what they have *inferred* from a text, for example how they have interpreted what the author has said. Recognising simple inferences can give an indication that a child is not only an effective reader but an efficient one too; for example when hearing or reciting the traditional poem:

Algy met a bear

A bear met Algy

The bear was bulgy

The bulge was Algy

...a child will be able to tell you that, although not explicitly stated in the text, the last line suggests poor Algy had met his fate because the bear's bulge meant he had been eaten.

Reading the Illustrations

Picture books are wonderfully complex creations. The interplay between the text and the illustrations can deepen the reader's understanding of the story, poem, information etc. as well as offer a background 'sub-plot' in addition to, or alongside, the text. Indeed, wordless picture books are a fantastic opportunity for developing children's imagination: encouraging discussion and extending vocabulary. Asking a child to describe what they see in illustrations offers them further opportunity to create meaning and make connections with their own experiences.



How to help if your child chooses not to read

First and foremost, **don't panic**; it is not uncommon for children to 'go off' reading and it may be for a number of reasons. Try to ascertain the cause without adding further pressure. If children are reluctant to read it may be because they are finding it hard work or they consider the books available to them boring. Focus on reading 'little and often' with high-interest texts, fun comics etc. and suggest that, for a while, *you read to them*.

Consider the following:

- Recognise stages when reluctance to read may occur: children may be aware of friends/peers progressing on to longer/chapter books. Explain that reading is not a competition and that, with some enjoyable practice, they will soon manage similar texts.
- Find books to share that match your child's interests. Browse the children's section of charity shops and ask them if there's anything that takes their interest.
- Look for books with characters that appeal (children aspire to, and like to read about, characters slightly older than themselves).
- Continue role modelling reading: let children see you reading.
- Suggest books with manageable amounts of texts i.e. funny poems, joke books etc.
- Value the collection of cards (i.e. football, Minecraft, Pokémon); ask questions about the information on the cards.
- Keep looking for books that match your child's interests. Keep browsing and inviting them to choose.
- If your child is struggling to read, help by selecting some potentially tricky words from their book, write them on a piece of card and practise/learn the words prior to reading the book. This will give them confidence when they come across those words in the texts and realise that they know them (as well as helping their reading fluency).
- If your child wants to read a book that is beyond their reading level, read it together; allow your child to 'have a go' then repeat back the sentences so they gain a 'flow' in the story/text.
- Persist in trying to find books that match your child's interests. Entice them to choose.
- Try to find texts that link to interests i.e. Lego instructions, short recipes etc. (i.e. have a 'real' purpose to reading).
- Go in search of books/apps that match children's interests in popular culture i.e. the latest Disney film, Dr. Who, their favourite music band etc.
- Talk to your child's teacher if you are worried and ask them, when given a choice, which books your child chooses to read at school.

Creating positive attitudes towards books

Modelling a positive approach to reading is very powerful. Encourage children to take an active interest in your local library. You will find a wealth of knowledge in a variety of forms: book recommendations, information about events such as author visits and signings, upcoming new book releases, storytelling sessions etc.

Create your own book collection/library at home (perusing second-hand book shops as well as charity shops ensures you can keep costs to a minimum). A comfy bean-bag or two will always go down well.

Suggest your child adds to (or starts their own) on-line blogs to share opinions and swap reading recommendations. This could be done in conjunction with a reading group involving friends and family.

Take an active interest in book awards; there are plenty to find on-line. If they haven't done so yet, suggest your child's school creates their own book award (they will, of course, be more open to the idea if you offer to help).

Explore author web-sites; these are often interactive and packed with activities, information and videos of authors reading their own work as well as possible visits to your area. Many authors try to reply to personal letters too.

We hope that all of you involved in children's reading will find these (by no means exhaustive) resources helpful and that they encourage further discussion, argument and debate in order to promote reading for pleasure for all children.



Suggestions for further reading

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