

Helping your child at home – 2

Starting Literacy



We are often asked questions by parents about how their children are developing in literacy – communication, reading and writing. We thought you might appreciate a little information and lot of reassurance.

The two most frequently asked questions are:

1. My child seems to know some letters. Has s/he been learning them with you?
2. We've been doing letters at home and s/he is learning them / is not interested. What do you find?

Both indicate parent's particular interest in this area, and we appreciate this – we all want our children to enjoy reading, and we all recognise that the skill is fundamental to later and life-long learning. It is also (let's be honest) a quantifiable 'yardstick' with which we can measure the success of their pre-school experiences. However, we would add a note of caution: there has been much research suggesting that too formal an approach to teaching literacy in the early years can be counterproductive. Children can resist learning to read with the potential for them to lose the enjoyment of reading in later years.

Consequently, as in every other area, we choose to follow the child's natural inclinations. This is not a *laissez faire* approach as the environment lends itself to all the child absorbing information that s/he is not specifically being taught. In a vertically age grouped class, younger children are surrounded by older children 'doing literacy'. They may be reading verbs and doing the actions, finding letters in labels around the class, word building, etc. It is a natural part of the session, to which younger children will be exposed and absorb for themselves. This may be the answer for the first question. 'Yes, your child is acquiring knowledge of letter sounds, and *no*, we have not been specifically teaching them.' However, we are extremely grateful for these comments as it tells us that your child's natural interest may be awakened. It will prompt us to be vigilant and maybe try something.

Almost every element of learning language and literacy is implicit in all the earlier activities. It is often the case that those children who have 'played' longest with practical life, sensorial and creative activities will progress most rapidly when introduced to literacy later on.

For example, pouring, using tools such as tongs and screwdrivers and grading circles etc. prepare children subtly for literacy. These activities teach them to use left-right and top-bottom directions consistently. They learn to trace anticlockwise circular movements, which is what we all do whenever we form a circle – or letter 'o' for that matter. Finger strength is gained through many of these exercises, which develop and practise the pincer grip. In addition, concentration is being built as they become absorbed in tasks. All of these are highly valuable preparations for literacy – this progressive accumulation of skills, following the child as they develop and are ready to progress, is a fundamental of the Montessori approach.

When we start literacy – we will tell you! We can tell you the 2 or 3 letter *sounds* (phonics) we have taught that day. They should be able to finger trace them as well as recognise them, and they will have fun with you if you can resist adding more, but just let them ‘show off’ what they know. We tend to start with letters that are meaningful in some way, such as letters in their name, and we tend to continue with letters that begin with the same direction (anticlockwise movements – c,o,a,g,d...or downward movements l,h,m,r,k,b...). If this pattern is not followed, it is because their interest has dictated what they want to be learning next.

So, in answer to the second question, we suggest that together we wait for the right time to start formally teaching letter sounds – please let us know if you have a cue from your child, and we will do likewise. It can take a long time for some children to permit themselves to enjoy literacy – so please don’t worry! It is important to recognise that all children reach this point in different ways. I remember a child who declared that he *would not* read until he was at school. Once we recognised and respected this decision, he busied himself with our cultural materials and happily matched (read?) words, such as Neptune, Earth, seed, flower etc! My own son – now a ‘readaholic’ – learnt by memorising his favourite Postman Pat books. One day it was an act of memory, the next he was actually reading.

The next stage is usually *not* reading but word building, using small objects and plastic letters or sometimes writing. As we all know, children are naturally active, and reading is a sedentary occupation. Many first reading activities are, in fact, verb and noun games – again this will attract the pre-reader.

We all want our children to enjoy reading. Maybe the best way to help your child at home is to maintain an environment which is rich in literacy, where they will want to learn spontaneously. For example, let them ‘write’ their own list or note when they see you writing one, ‘read’ a letter when you read one, find an ‘o’ (treasure?) in a word etc. It is a magical moment when children first realise they can read or write, and we want you to enjoy these moments with your child.



Literacy involves communication. We encourage children to listen to and share their experiences with one another. Often this is acted out in mini drama sketches. At home, sharing stories together, social snack and meal times, encouraging children to meet and greet visitors and even answering the telephone are all opportunities where we can help their emerging communication skills.

And finally...look back and think what amazing literacy skills your child has gained over the last six months – it is enough to make us all celebrate on the milestones they have achieved and not worry about the ones they have not yet reached!