

Letters and Sounds



A guide for parents and carers of children in Early Years settings

The first steps to reading and writing

Introduction

Children learn a great deal from other people. As parents and carers you are your child's first teachers. You have a powerful influence on your child's early learning.

From a very early age your child will need to experience a wide range of activities and experiences with you, for example, singing and saying rhymes, making and listening to music, listening to them and joining in conversations, painting and pretend play, to develop their early reading and writing skills. These activities will help your child take the first important steps towards reading and writing.

At Sandcastles children take part in a high-quality communication, language and literacy development programme (CLLD) designed to promote every child's learning through a play-based approach.

A phonics teaching programme called *Letters and Sounds* is used to support the teaching of Communication Language & Literacy in nurseries and schools. It builds on the activities the children have already experienced in the setting.

The children learn through lots of play and activities and are encouraged to use their increasing phonics knowledge in freely chosen activities.

If you can be involved in helping your child we know it can make a big difference to your child's learning.

Learning to read and write in the Early Years Foundation Stage

Children's spoken language supports reading and writing

From a very early stage, children develop an awareness of the different sounds in our spoken language. They learn to use their voices to make contact with you and to let people know what they need and how they are feeling. As parents and carers, you best understand your baby or young child's communications; you are key people in helping them develop their speaking and listening skills.

Children need lots of opportunities to talk with others as they develop and practise their speaking and listening skills. This helps to build their confidence and improves their ability to communicate with other people. This is a really important aspect of learning to socialise and will help your child feel confident when the time comes to make friends.

In order to make a good start in reading and writing, children need an adult to talk to and listen to them.

Everyday activities such as preparing meals, tidying up, putting shopping away and getting ready to go out, offer you chances to talk to your child, explaining what you are doing. They hear the way language is put together into sentences for a purpose.

Books are a rich source of new words for your child – words you would not use in everyday conversations appear in books. Children need to have a wide stock of words (*vocabulary*) to understand the meaning of books, so read aloud and share books as often as you can. They will enjoy it and it will be useful to them when they come across these words in their own reading later on.



Ways you can support your children at home: talking and listening

- **Make time to listen to your child talking** – as you meet them from their nursery or school, as you walk, or travel home by car, in the supermarket as you shop, at meal times, bath times, bedtimes – any time!
- **Switch off the TV, radio and mobile phones** – and really listen!
- **Show that you are interested in what they are talking about** – look at your child, smile, nod your head, ask a question or make a response to show that you really have been listening.
- **Make a collection of different toy creatures** – for example, a duck, a snake, an alien, say the sound it might make as you play together, for example, 'quack-quack', 'sssssss', 'yuk-yuk', and encourage your child to copy you.
- **Listen at home** – switch off the TV and listen to the sounds both inside and outside the home. Can your child tell you what sounds they heard, in the order in which they heard them?
- **Play-a-tune** – and follow me! Make or buy some simple shakers, drums and beaters, then play a simple tune and ask your child to copy. Have fun!
- **Use puppets** and toys to make up stories or retell known ones. Record your child telling the story and play it back to them.

The importance of speech sounds

As children grow older they begin to understand more about the sounds of our language and they are able to join in with rhymes, songs and stories by clapping, stamping and skipping. This is an important stage as the children's ears are learning to tune into all the different sounds around them. Playing with sounds and tuning your child's ears into sounds will develop phonological awareness that is the ability to discriminate different sounds. Over time, this will help your child develop an understanding that words are made up of different sounds (*phonemes*) and they will be able to hear the different sounds in a word. Gradually they will learn to match sounds to letters (*graphemes*). This is phonic knowledge. They use this knowledge when they are reading and writing.

You may find it helpful to talk with the setting management to find out about phonics and how to say the sounds correctly with your child.



Ways you can support your children at home: sound talk

This is a very supportive activity to play with your child.

Try exaggerating the sounds within simple words when you are giving instructions or asking questions, such as 'Can you find your h-a-t hat?' 'Where is the c-a-t cat?' 'Sit on the s-ea-t seat' 'Eat your f-oo-d food'. It is really important to say the sounds (*phonemes*) aloud, in order, all through the word. *Keep it fun, this is just a game - with practice your child will be able to recognise what you are saying and eventually be able to break down his/her own words.*

Speaking and listening are the foundations for reading and writing

Letters and Sounds – Phase 1

In this ongoing phase, your child will be learning to:

- have fun with sounds
- listen carefully
- develop their vocabulary
- speak confidently to you, other adults and other children
- tune into sounds
- listen and remember sounds
- talk about sounds
- understand that spoken words are made up of different sounds.

You can help your child develop in each of these by trying some of the ideas below. Remember that all these activities should be fun and interactive. Give your child lots of encouragement and cuddles as you play together. Smiles and praise will help develop a sense of achievement and build confidence.

This is all oral (*spoken*). Your child will not yet be expected to match the letter to the sound. The emphasis is on developing the ability to distinguish sounds and create sounds.



Ways you can support your children at home: environmental sounds

- Go on a listening walk – when walking down the road, make a point of listening to different sounds: cars revving, people talking, birds singing, dogs barking. When you get home, try to remember all the sounds you heard. You could try taping the sounds, to listen to them again, or try reproducing them yourselves, using your voices or instruments.
- Make sounds, using a range of props, such as running a stick along a fence or tapping on the bin lid.
- Invent a secret family ‘knock’ for entering rooms.
- Play ‘Sound lotto’. A commercial version of this can be purchased from many children’s toy stores but making your own, from your sound walk, would be far more rewarding. (or borrow Sandcastles “Whatever Next!” Book bag)



Ways you can support your children at home: instrumental sounds

- Make your own musical instruments, using cardboard rolls, tins, dried peas, beans, stones. Shake these loudly, softly, as you are marching, skipping or stomping. Play ‘Guess what’s inside the instrument’.
- Sing known songs loudly and then softly, stretch words in known songs and add new words or sounds.
- Listen to a range of music with your child, from rap to classical. Encourage your child to move in response to the variety of musical styles and moods.



Ways you can support your children at home: body percussion

- Learn some action rhymes, such as ‘Wind the bobbin up’.
- Play some commercially produced tapes and CD-ROMs. Clap along with familiar rhymes and learn new ones.
- Listen to the sounds your feet make when walking, running or skipping: slowly, softly, fast, stomping hard, in flipflops, boots, high heels.
- Try different types of clapping: clap your hands softly, fast and make a pattern for your child to follow. Do the same, clapping your thighs or stamping your feet. Tap your fingers. Click your tongue.
- Invent a special family clap routine for when someone does something really well.



Ways you can support your children at home: rhythm and rhyme

- Get into the rhythm of language: bounce your child on your knee to the rhythm of a song or nursery rhyme, march or clap to a chant or poem.
- Help your child move to the rhythm of a song or rhyme.
- Read or say poems, songs, nursery songs and rhyming stories as often as you can, try to use gestures, tap regular beats and pause to emphasise the rhythm of the piece.
- Add percussion to mark the beats, using your hands, feet or instruments.
- Try out some rhythmic chanting such as ‘two, four, six, eight, hurry up or we’ll be late’ or ‘bip bop boo, who are you?’



Ways you can support your children at home: alliteration (words that begin with the same sound)

- Alliteration is a lot of fun to play around with. Your child’s name can be a good place to start, for example, say: ‘Gurpreet gets the giggles’, ‘Milo makes music’, ‘Naheema’s nose’, ‘Carl caught a cat’, ‘Jolly Jessie jumped’, ‘Tina is talking’. Encourage other family members to have a go, for example: ‘Mummy munches muffins’, ‘Daddy is doing the dishes’.
- Emphasise alliteration in songs and stories, for example: ‘Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers’.
- Play around with familiar songs, such as ‘Old MacDonald had some sheep, shoes, shorts, with a sh sh here and a sh sh there’, to emphasise alliteration.
- Identify the odd one out, for example, *cat*, *cup*, *boy*, *car*.
- Make up little nonsense stories together, using lots of alliteration.
- Collect items that start with the same sound from the park, the garden and around the house.
- When shopping, think about items you are buying and say: ‘a tall tin of tomatoes’, ‘a lovely little lemon’. Encourage your child to do the same.



Ways you can support your children at home: voice sounds

- Repeat your infant's vocalisations.
- Make fun noises or nonsense words.
- Say words in different ways (fast, slowly, high, low, using a funny voice).
- 'Sing' known songs using only sounds, for example, 'la, la, la', and ask your child to guess the song.
- Vary your tempo and pitch when reading stories.
- Make different voices for characters when reading stories.
- Read or tell sound stories. Your local library or bookshop will be able to point out some very good books that encourage sound-making as you read the story. This is huge fun and can involve all the family.



Ways you can support your children at home: oral blending and segmenting

This is all oral (spoken). Your child will not be expected to match the letter to the sound at this stage. The emphasis is on helping children to hear the separate sounds in words and to create spoken sounds.

Oral blending and segmenting is a later skill that will be important when the time comes for your child to read and write. Being able to hear the separate sounds within a word and then blend them together to understand that word is really important.

Blending is a vital skill for reading. The separate sounds (*phonemes*) of the word are spoken aloud, in order, all through the word, and are then merged together into the whole word. This merging together is called *blending*. For example, the adult would say **c-a-t = cat**.

Segmenting is a vital skill for spelling. The whole word is spoken aloud, then broken up into its separate sounds (*phonemes*) in order, all through the word. For example, the adult would say **cat = c-a-t**.

The importance of mark-making

Your child will notice adults around them reading and writing and they will want to copy them. Mark-making is the first step towards writing. Mark-making in the early stages is closely linked to physical development. The more opportunities your child has to develop large and small movement in their arms, hands and fingers, the easier it will be to make marks with a variety of tools.

Activities such as digging, 'painting' outdoor surfaces with water and a large brush, sweeping, and swishing a scarf through the air in different shapes will help develop large motor movement. Small or fine motor movement will be needed to hold pencils and pens correctly. Hanging out the washing and playing with pegs, using a pegboard and picking up grains of rice with fingers and tweezers will help develop the pincer grip needed for writing.

In the early stages of learning to write, your child will like to experiment, making marks on paper with a variety of writing tools such as brushes, pens, pencils and felt-tip markers. They will often include drawings with their writing. Sometimes you will write for them. It is a good idea at this stage to use lower-case letters when you write for your child, introducing capitals only for names.



Ways you can support your children at home: what to do if your child is reluctant to read or write at home

Relax! It is important not to worry if your child shows no inclination to write at home; the important thing is to keep on sharing books and talking together. There is no need to insist that your child does some writing – more often than not they will choose to do so when they have a real reason to.

Reading

- Make sure your child sees you reading.
- Read **to** your child. Show you like the book. Bring stories to life by using loud, soft, scary voices – let yourself go!
- Leave books around your house for your child to dip into.
- Let your child choose what **they** would like to read – books, comics, catalogues.
- Read favourite books over and over again. Enjoy!

Writing

- Make sure your child sees you writing.
- Compose an email together inviting a friend over to tea.
- Make words together using magnetic letters.
- Make up a story together about one of their toys. You write for them, repeating the sentences as you write. When it is complete, they can draw pictures to go with it.
- Buy stickers of a favourite film or TV programme and make a book about it.