

Ready to Read: Developing Essential Pre-reading Skills

Geraldine Taylor

In my work as Educational Consultant to Ladybird Books, and in my work with parents of young children, and with teachers, I'm frequently required to summarise the *key* points of current research into reading and to talk or write about developing the *essential* skills for pre-reading. Interestingly, as more research is focused on children's reading, the more difficult my task is becoming. Research often appears to be contradictory and it is becoming harder to say without qualification that this or that pre-reading skill is one of the absolute *essentials*. My title here, *developing essential pre-reading skills*, therefore, is a challenge and I believe a useful one. All of us as educationalists need to be able to identify priorities, and to simplify - and this is especially the case if we develop our work to embrace parental involvement.

“We need to help young children to distinguish picture from print”



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I would like to identify three elements which I believe are essential for the successful development of pre-reading skills and which I believe can themselves be regarded as skills:

The ability to engage with story books
An understanding of the purposes of print
Having some phonic knowledge

The ability to engage with story books

There is research evidence (Sulzby 1985) that children's pre-reading skills develop significantly through interacting with story books during the period preceding and leading up to conventional reading. The key word here is *interacting*. Children's attention, enjoyment and involvement needs to be engaged and if it is, then I believe this ability to engage can justifiably be regarded as an essential pre-reading skill.

Other important pre-reading skills will come from this engagement if, in our sharing books aloud with children, we are conscious of the need to foster them: a developing vocabulary, the ability to concentrate, to remember, the ability to predict, an understanding of what a story is and the enjoyment it brings, and a knowledge of the outer workings of books (which way to hold books, how we turn the pages, the direction of print, the fact the story is the same each time).

If we are careful to select some books which have a sufficient level of repetition - and few words, printed clearly, then we are also giving children an opportunity to begin to develop a sight vocabulary. Above all, from the skill of engaging with books comes the motivation of having a place in books, and the enthusiasm to learn to read which underlies concentration, persistence and stamina.

To develop this skill of engagement with story books

- offer a wide variety of picture story books

- encourage children to choose favourite books for you to read aloud to the class

- encourage discussion of what is happening in the pictures

- ensure that favourite books are often read aloud to the children and that the children's predictions of what will happen next - their ability to remember and supply some of the words - is a valuable and entertaining part of the re-reading.

- draw attention to the printed words and explain that these words are telling you what to say, what the story is about - and that when they can read, the story will tell the children what to say, too

An understanding of the purposes of print

In order to benefit fully from formal reading instruction, children need to understand what words and print are for. *Emergent literacy is concerned with the earliest phase of understanding about print that enables the child to generate hypotheses about the nature of reading and writing.* (Riley 1996). At first, print appears to young children as additional detail, as black squiggle patterns alongside or underneath a coloured picture! We need to help them to distinguish picture from print, and to understand that words are a written down form of communication. Encouraging early writing helps enormously here, of course, and is itself another highly valuable pre-reading skill.

To develop an understanding of the purposes of print

- Use your own resources to bring the post office into your classroom! Paper, re-used envelopes and 'stamps' can be put to use to help children write letters and messages to each other. Drawn messages are fine to begin with, as are drawings interspersed with words. Can you make or improvise a post box?

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“Some knowledge of the alphabetic code (the letter sound link) enables children to begin to process graphic cues in words, and reduces their reliance upon sight vocabulary.”

- Develop the children's ability to write their own names - and to use their names both to sign their letters and to 'address' the envelopes.

- Write a very simple daily letter to the class - let children take it in turns to open it, and then you read what it says to the class - and pass it round so that all the children see it.

- Make opportunities for the children to tell stories to you while they watch you write their words down. Make these stories into simple books and begin a class library!

Having some phonic knowledge

In the UK, an increasing amount of faith is being placed in phonic understanding to help improve reading standards. There is evidence (Riley 1996) that the ability to identify and name some letters of the alphabet at school entry is (along with writing one's name), the most powerful predictor of successful reading by the end of the year. Some knowledge of the alphabetic code (the letter sound link) enables children to begin to process graphic cues in words, and reduces their reliance upon sight vocabulary and for this reason, I am including phonic knowledge in my three essential skills. Phonics is an area which benefits from specific teaching.

To develop phonic knowledge:

- play sound games (I hear with my little ear something beginning with the sound *t*)
- sing rhymes and play audio tapes with rhyming songs
- use alphabet books and look for activity

books and worksheets which develop the letter-sound links and which give children the opportunity to write the letters

- help children to understand the difference between letter names and sounds. The letter name is B (as in ABC) and its sound is b (as in bus).

Finally, I'd like to look at another area which is perhaps more in the category of *highly desirable* than *essential* for the development of pre-reading skills. This area is one over which we, as teachers, may feel that we have no direct control, but the implications are worth examination: an early start with books - books for babies!

An early start with books

Evaluating the *Bookstart* Project in which children from inner cities who had participated in a pilot project of book gifting when they were babies, were followed up in their first year at school and matched with a comparison group whose families received no book gift, Wade and Moore (1998) argue that early *book sharing* plays a central role in laying the foundations of literacy. (In fact, Wade and Moore demonstrate that the children who had received the *Bookstart* pack in infancy, had been better prepared for learning right across the curriculum).

Why should sharing books with babies produce this powerful boost for all skills, and especially for literacy? Wade and Moore argue that an early start with books *provides the reciprocal interaction, experimentation, practice and motivation that lead to learning.*

If we accept this early start as a highly desirable for the development of pre-reading skills, then the implication is clear: we must involve children's parents and carers. We need to make available, at school (and elsewhere):

- accessible, friendly information on how very young children learn
- suggestions for using picture books with babies
- suitable *first* books (board, plastic). Appropriate picture books and books of rhymes.

References

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