

Pondering pedagogy...

Early Level Pedagogy in Practice Pamphlet Series

Developing communication and language: Stories

“Literacy has its beginnings in social relationships, movement and the senses, communication and language.” (Bruce & Spratt, 2011:18)

Rich learning experiences are needed for children to become confident and successful readers and writers. How can you use stories to support these aspects of literacy?

Developing communication and language



‘...Our ability to use language unlocks all areas of learning. Children’s language development thrives through exposure to environments of rich and diverse spoken language experiences. We grow a sense of purpose for the child by our own use of language and engaging them with a wide variety of stories, rhymes, songs, symbols and texts in different media all around them. Building this purpose helps to nurture engagement and encourages children to see themselves as readers and writers. This doesn’t just happen by chance.’

Realising the Ambition (2020:70)

Communication skills are developed through relationships with other people and sharing stories helps develop strong, safe and loving relationships and secure attachments. It can be a time to relax, have fun and connect with others. Reading stories aloud and sharing books supports children to develop language and understand new concepts.

“Language is also much more than words. It is understanding and using patterns and cues for interaction, sequencing thoughts and ideas, and making stories that help us understand what is happening, and what is next.” Realising the Ambition (2020:24)

Working with parents and carers

There is lots of evidence that reading stories on a daily basis, has a positive impact on vocabulary development and later reading and other cognitive skills. It is important to work closely with parents and carers to share knowledge around the importance of reading and to explore any barriers there might be. Do families have access to books?

For children with EAL, are books in their own language readily available? Do parents/carers have concerns around their own literacy skills? Are families finding it challenging to create a routine that involves time for reading stories?



If families do not have access to books, you might consider creating a lending library in your setting.

The Scottish Book Trust website also has lots of resources for parents and carers <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/parents-and-carers>

Stories

We can help our children engage with books and stories when they are very young, long before they develop any conscious awareness of print.

Books and stories are a brilliant way to expand vocabulary and help children to develop a sense of narrative, storyline and characters. Time spent sharing books with children will enrich

their abilities in many ways. Exploring the pictures, repeating words, discussing ideas and focusing on talking, looking and listening together helps develop a lifelong love of reading.

Reading stories together can also help children to feel safe, secure and loved.

Choosing Suitable Stories

It is important that the books we choose to share with children are representative of the society we live in. Children often look for characters that resemble themselves and their lives, so it is important to consider whether our books include a range of diverse characters including disabled, LGBT and minority ethnic characters. It is also important to consider gender balance within our books and whether they reinforce gender stereotypes. In a recent gender/diversity audit of nursery book collections, only 14% passed the audit. For more information see the [Zero Tolerance Book Audit](#).

It is also important to think about the language within the books we use. Are there repetitive phrases that children, particularly those with English as an additional language, can learn more easily? Is there a range of interesting vocabulary that can extend children's word knowledge. Is there a rhythm or a rhyming pattern. Knowing this in advance, can help you to prepare for telling the story. You will know whether there is vocabulary that you need to explain to the children or how you might emphasise particular rhyming patterns or the rhythm of the words. All of this supports the development of children's phonological knowledge.



What does Realising the Ambition say?



Overarching themes for literacy learning from birth through the early years of childhood

Literacy develops throughout a child's life from pre-birth and underpins all communication and interaction

- Literacy can be attached to everyday learning experiences and opportunities
- Warm nurturing relationships help open up communication and connect literacy to the child's life
- Literacy experiences should weave, build and grow children's interests, vocabulary and knowledge
- Literacy learning should encourage children to see themselves as readers and writers, through purposeful experiences which build on the way that children use literacy

Realising the Ambition (2020:72)

Realising the Ambition also sets out guidance for practitioners in using stories with children.

When I am a baby...

Encourage my social and verbal interactions with quality picture books (including both pictures and text) and favourite objects, connecting with my interests and family life.

When I am a toddler...

Continue to share quality picture books with me (including both pictures and text) connecting with my interests and family life, encouraging reciprocal story-telling between you and me.

Help me connect with stories on a personal and imaginative level, developing an understanding that text conveys meaning.

Give me sensory and tactile experiences which encourage me to babble, talk and have fun with books

When I am a young child...

Continue to provide me with quality picture books alongside a range of different media, fiction and non-fiction texts, connecting with my interests and family life, encouraging reciprocal story-telling between me and you.

Encourage enjoyment, engagement and meaning of stories and explore the connections between text and illustrations.

Continue to give sensory and tactile experiences by providing resources which support talking about stories and factual texts and having fun with books.

Encourage me to notice the purpose of writing in all environments and to enjoy communicating my ideas through the written word

Excerpts from Realising the Ambition (2020: 72-73)

Some of the following information is adapted from 'Up Up and Away' (CIRCLE Collaboration, Revised 2011) and provides lots of ideas to encourage children to enjoy books, and to make the most of sharing a story together. The resource can be found at <https://www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/CIRCLE-Early-Years.-Up-up-and-away-September-2019.pdf>

What are the key features of high-quality provision for stories?



Interactions

Reading stories to children is a skill that can be developed and practiced and it is important that practitioners build their confidence in reading out loud. Using different voices, dramatic facial expressions and actions, can really bring a story to life.

'Enabling play pedagogy is a skilful job. Interactions are central and key to successful play pedagogy.'

Realising the Ambition, 2020:46

Timing And Engagement

- Support children to listen and focus, try to avoid interruptions during story opportunities.
- Consider how best to engage the children in story opportunities to keep their attention. Some children might need to be more actively engaged.



Let The Child Choose

- Copy each others' words and noises as you read.
- Let the child have a turn: prompt the child to 'read' the story back to you or to join in reading together.
- Let them repeat: read each book many times if the child wants to.
- Encourage but don't force children to repeat key words.

Grab Their Attention

- Make sure the child's attention is on the book as you read and adapt if they lose interest.
- Emphasise certain words to help the child notice them by using your voice or actions.
- Vary the pitch and volume of your voice ie loud and quiet, high and low, harsh and soft, to emphasise different parts of the story. Try using different voices for each character.
- Talk about words shown in pictures; give words for what you see.
- Enjoy and focus on rhyming.
- Explain some useful words on most readings of the book, (e.g., 'He's searching for his Mum, that means he is looking for her').

Repetition Helps

- Words or phrases used many times in a story are more likely to be learned.
- Hearing words repeated in regular, meaningful contexts is particularly important for bilingual children.
- You can pick up to 5 different words to focus on during each reading. Then repeat using the same words.

Make Your Language Count

- Comment on what the child looks at (don't just read the words or just ask them questions). If you keep saying 'what's that?' without adding comments too, the child will repeat that question but not the words he needs!
- Use comments or add more words, e.g., point out parts of pictures.
- Focus on a variety of word types (not just nouns; use verbs, adjectives etc too).

Question Well

- Ask different types of questions, e.g., closed: 'Who's that, what's he doing?', open: 'What can you see? What might happen next?'
- Ask questions about words to help the child learn even more.

Some questions to consider:

- ⇒ Are the length and quality of interactions sufficient to allow children time to think, respond and comment?
- ⇒ Are adults modelling, commenting and questioning in a way that is scaffolding learning effectively and extending children's thinking?
- ⇒ Are children supported to communicate their thoughts, ideas and feelings in a range of ways?
- ⇒ Do children repeat actions, ideas or language that have been modelled or introduced by the adult?
- ⇒ Are practitioners using vocal tone, volume, pitch and gesture to convey meaning?

Experiences

Individual and Group Stories

It is important to have a range of different experiences woven throughout your day. Group story times are just as important as telling stories to individual children.

When planning story times, consider how you might group children to ensure that sessions are appropriate and meet the needs of all. Some children will be able to listen and focus for longer than others, some will need support with understanding simple vocabulary whereas others may benefit from stories with more challenging words. Big

books can be a useful resource to enable a group of children to share a story. Small groups will help you ensure that all children are engaged, able to join in and actively contributing.



Timing And Engagement

- Make sure that children have lots of opportunities to look at books and join in with stories throughout the session
- For planned story opportunities, try to choose times where there is minimal disruption to free play.
- Take the story to the children. Stories can be read indoors and outdoors.

Let The Child Choose

- Let children explore: at first they may want to chew, bash or build towers with the books.
- Use books that are at the child's stage.
- Let them have fun!
- Look at pages in the order they want to.

Grab Their Attention

- Puppets and props help children to interact with the story and embed their knowledge and understanding
- Dressing up and or acting out the story is a highly enjoyable experience and something which children will often continue in their own play
- Big books can help children to engage during group story times



Repetition Helps

- Let children hear a story at least twice. More words are learned, more completely, when books are read several times.
- Choose books with repetitive words and phrases.

Some questions to consider:

- ⇒ Are books available and used both indoors and outdoors?
- ⇒ How do you know that all children are accessing stories?
- ⇒ How are you planning for a range of different story experiences including individual and group stories?
- ⇒ Do children have opportunities to explore stories using puppets and/or small world characters or to dress up and act out stories through both planned and spontaneous experiences?





Spaces

Books can be read anywhere and should be available throughout the spaces in your setting. However, it is also important to have a range of cosy and inviting places for reading stories. Cushions and comfy sofas can be good to snuggle up on and large outdoor beanbags can be used outside.

Creating a wall display or using a floor book is a good way to document children's thinking about stories through drawings, paintings and photos or their written or scribed words.

Potential resources (these are just suggestions and are not comprehensive)

- Books that represent diversity and inclusion
- Nonfiction as well as fiction
- Books connected to current interests
- Books linked to areas of provision or curriculum ie block play, woodwork, home corner
- Tactile books, books with flaps, big books and small ones
- Puppets, props, small world, story spoons, dressing up materials

Self-Evaluation

It is important to self-evaluate your provision on an ongoing basis so that you can be sure that you are meeting the needs of all the children in your setting.

Some questions to consider from a child's perspective:

- ⇒ Do I have a range of cosy and inviting places for reading stories?
- ⇒ Am I sitting comfortably? Am I in a quiet space?
- ⇒ Can my friend sit beside me to share a book? Is there an adult that can read me a story?
- ⇒ Can I read some stories I already know?
- ⇒ Can I find interesting information easily?
- ⇒ Is it easy for me to see what books are available? Have I helped to choose the books?
- ⇒ Are there props to help me recall the story and understand the characters?
- ⇒ If I am listening in a group, can I see the book? Is the story one I can engage with?
- ⇒ Is there more than one story group to make sure my experience is a positive one?
- ⇒ Is the adult helping me to think analytically, evaluatively and creatively, as well as asking me to recall what happened?
- ⇒ Can I predict the ending or create a new one of my own?
- ⇒ Can I join in with rhyme or repeated phrases?
- ⇒ Are there resources handy so that I can make my own books to share?
- ⇒ Am I or is my language represented in the book corner?
- ⇒ Is there an opportunity to share a book elsewhere in the nursery?
- ⇒ Are there books available in all of the places that I play?



References

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