

Reading



The importance of reading scarcely needs stating. Written language is actually increasing in importance with the rapid spread of television, video and computers. Few people have not at some time experienced the frustration of being unable to work out the meaning of signs, notices or other written information in a foreign language. It is easy to imagine how difficult it would be to survive in everyday life, if unable to read one's own language. Beyond a certain point, reached in a very few years by the majority of children, education is impossible without the ability to read and that ability has to grow as education progresses and, of course, reading is a source of pleasure that should be available to all.

Parents are children's first teachers and children do an enormous amount of basic learning in their first four years, before they begin any kind of formal education. Think of the things a four year old can do and compare a new-born baby, then compare the four year old to an eight year old! Children learn what they learn by imitation and experiment and the more opportunities they have to imitate and experiment, the better they learn. Children whose parents talk naturally to them long before they can say anything themselves, and go on talking to them, generally learn language the fastest. These children may then be the quickest to learn to read.

A child is never too young to be spoken to and is ready for books before he or she can hold anything. The first books will obviously be small board books, rag books or bath books, more toys than books but they will give the experience of turning pages and seeing what comes next. If they can be read aloud by a parent (or talked through if they have no words) they establish important first ideas about the special nature of books, pictures, words and stories.

Reading aloud and the routines of the bedtime story can soon begin. Hearing stories read aloud, children naturally learn a great deal about books and "book language". They learn how to follow the story in the pictures while they listen to the words, and they can then use the pictures to help retell the story themselves, just as they may create their own story out of a book without words. Nursery rhymes and songs appeal to very young children and are of great value. A growing sense of the patterns of sound and rhythm prepares for the more precise tasks that children's eyes, ears and tongues have to tackle when they start to read.

What are the right books? Children quickly become the best judges and their enjoyment is the best test. They like bright, lively illustrations. They like satisfying, short stories and simply-patterned rhymes. A book for reading aloud at this stage should have plenty of pictures and not too many words on each page. Do the pictures tell a story by themselves? It is a good picture book if they do. If the words are easy and enjoyable to read aloud, then the book will be good to listen to.

It is not necessary to try to teach words and letters at this stage but the world is full of written language and important early lessons can be learned about print and writing from signs, notices, lists, advertisements and so on. Young children should be given every chance to see the written word in use and in action and it is important to excite and satisfy their curiosity about sounds and meanings. Most children can soon identify the letter their name begins with as a sound and as a shape and are easily encouraged to look and listen for it in other words. Other letters can be learnt in the same way and the main sounds of the alphabet are soon sorted out. There is no need to push this or to move on to the much more advanced stage of working out words from the sounds of the letters in them. The decision on this important step should be left to the teacher and ‘phonics work’, as this is called, is generally introduced very gradually during the Reception year.

Scribbling, drawing and colouring should be encouraged, as they are good preparation for writing. Many children want to do some ‘real’ writing before they go to school and like to begin by writing their names. It is essential to start with lower case (‘small’ letters) and to avoid capitals except for the first letters of names. The letters should be printed rather than joined up at this stage and the way the letters are formed is much more important than the shape they turn out. So a lot of demonstration and copying is needed, paying close attention to starting and finishing points, and direction. At first the letters should be formed with a finger in clay or sand, or in paint so that their shaping can be felt.

Finally, all kinds of games and play are a preparation for reading. Games such as “I spy” and “I packed my bag for America...” establish letter sounds. Games involving sorting and matching of shapes, colours and objects, jigsaw puzzles, Lego, dot-to-dot, card games such as “Snap”, Go Fish and “Happy Families”, simple memory games, riddles, jokes, songs, finger rhymes, skipping chants – the list could be endless – all in various ways develop hand, eyes, ears and minds, and the use of language. The more of this kind of experience children take to school with them, the better prepared they are for school and learning to read.

At school a variety of “pre-reading” and “early language” activities are used to prepare children for reading, including a collection of story books without words. Initially, the children share these books with their teacher, assistant teacher or a parent helper and then take them home to ‘read’ to Mum and Dad. The pictures tell the story and the “reader” puts the story into words, while learning how to handle the book carefully, in which order to turn the pages and how to look for meaning in them. At the same time, the children will be acquiring a ‘bank’ of instantly recognized ‘sight’ or ‘key’ words.

Once the teacher ascertains that a child is ready, then texts containing simple ‘key’ words will begin. At Horizon, we use both Oxford Reading Tree and Ginn as core reading schemes throughout the school.

Tonight’s Reading Workshop is designed to help parents to help their children achieve and enjoy this exciting stage of development

