

Play Tip 9 - The ‘no pressure’ road to early literacy

- the best road to follow!



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The race towards early literacy is something that it is all too easy for us parents to become caught up in. I remember feverishly reciting the alphabet, practising name writing and letter formation and recognition before my girls started school. I felt a compulsion to give them a ‘head start’ in the literacy marathon, and I don’t think that I was unusual!

What I have since learnt since training and working in early years’ education is that such a pressurised and, to them, irrelevant introduction to literacy is simply not appropriate for most young children. In fact, if they are not ready for such prescriptive learning, the evidence is that they can become locked in a cycle of fear and worry about learning and school. The process of ‘getting ready for school’ that I tried to make sound so exciting, could have actually made them very fearful of adult expectation at school, and could possibly even have turned them off the idea of going altogether!

Instead, what we should be doing as parents, if we really want to give them a positive head start, is to get them so excited about the idea of reading and writing that when the time comes they are **desperate** to become part of the literate world because they understand the exciting doors that reading and writing can open for them.

They need to see the relevance of literacy to their young lives, which means that it needs to be introduced to them in as meaningful and exciting a context as possible. Here are some great ideas that will get them raring to go when they are ready!

Firstly, take every opportunity to let them see what 'being literate' means to you, but also make it relevant to them. For example...

- Show them recipes in the book before you cook them together.... "it says here to let the cakes cool before we ice them, that is really useful information because...." or... "we need to look at the map before we set off for Grandma's house. It will be useful to help make sure we don't get lost.." ?.. or ..."we must leave a note for the milkman as we are going on holiday, what do we need to say to him?"
- Read them stories that they may enjoy which you may occasionally come across in your newspaper " it says here that this giant rabbit is four times as big as normal rabbits...that's interesting, I wonder how much it eats"

Make opportunities for them to notice print and words as part of their daily lives. A great idea, if you have a digital camera, is to take pictures of all the road name signs that you pass on your way to nursery or pre-school. Print them all on a sheet and get them to tick them off as they see and recognise them – like a word treasure hunt! No pressure, just fun, and importantly **relevant** to their world.

Watch their play, and look for opportunities to include books that will interest them. For instance if you have a child that is keen on role play and loves using a play kitchen, give him/her some old recipe books to use as part of his/her play. Perhaps you have a child that is fired up by playing pirates, if so, look for some story books on the theme and leave them around where he/she is likely to be playing. If you have a child that loves playing with his/her toy cars, then look in some charity shops for old car maintenance books. It is all about keying into **their interests** to show them that books can be interesting, useful and fun to them.

Also, look for books that appreciate a young child's need for activity and fun. Books that have actions which children can join in with, or rhymes that they can recite along with you as they get to know them, are great for this. Young children need to know that books can be fun and that they can fulfil a need in them even if they are not yet ready to sit and listen quietly. Books like [The Animal Boogie](#) or [I Dreamt I was a Dinosaur](#) are great.

Another idea is to have some [textured alphabet cards](#) around. These are often used in pre-schools and nurseries to give children the opportunity to play with letters during story time. The children can trace the letters with their fingers which is a low pressure way of introducing letter formation to them.

Finally, try to make paper and [pencils](#) readily available for them to use in all of their play scenarios. Children learn much through imitation and role play, and letting them 'write' as part of their play helps them to practise and make sense of the role of writing in the adult world. So, for instance, if they are playing cafes they might like to 'write out' their menu. To us it may look like scribble, but it shows that they are beginning to understand that marks on paper can symbolise their needs and ideas. This is a great first step, which, if it is celebrated and valued, will eventually give them the confidence and excitement they will need in their journey towards becoming literate.

Remember, no pressure, lots of relevance and most of all FUN, will ensure that they start school raring to go and fired up about literacy. This is the only 'head start' that they need!

In Play Tip 10. I'll be re-capping the key principles that you should be familiar with. They will help you set great play opportunities for your young children. Opportunities that will help them learn and develop while they have FUN!

Best wishes

Sally.

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