

Helping young children to read:

When a child is very young he / she will enjoy hearing familiar stories and rhymes over and over. It is by repetition that the child begins to become accustomed to the conventions of the spoken word. The child feels comfortable and secure with the predictable nature of the story and the concepts of everyday life that these stories recount. Children do not draw a distinction between fact and fiction easily and will readily accept the idea that an animal, object or alien can speak to them. Themes in these stories tend to concentrate on the importance of right and wrong. It is at this stage that the interest and time given by the child's parents / guardians is so influential in developing their responses to written language.

As the child grows they become increasingly aware that there are words on the page and that these words tell the story. When encouraged to do so the child will begin to notice names such as mum, dad, their own name etc. As their awareness progresses they will then notice that some letters in these words occur in other words in the text. It is crucial that the adults continue to share the story with the child, introducing new stories regularly. Children respond well to bold, clearly defined pictures that in part tell the story. Simple questions about the pictures encourage the child to think about how the story might develop and what could happen.

Shortly after this stage the child will begin to point at some words and guess their meaning. Children can be encouraged to make progress with deciphering text by the adult re-reading familiar stories and omitting obvious words, clearly expecting the child to fill in the missing word. As the child becomes increasingly confident they will begin to lead in the story telling with a particular book. Never make reading difficult, when asked for assistance give it willingly.

Research carried out into how children learn to read shows that they make significantly better progress where their parents and guardians are actively involved in their learning. Role models for children are very important and that means both male and female examples of adult readers. Even if time is short it is vital that some time is found to sit with each child and read something they are interested in. It is also important that children see reading as a pleasurable, relaxing and informative occupation and need to see it modelled at home and at school by the adults that they are familiar with.

As the child begins to recognise whole words, parts of words, contextual clues and phonic blends, it is a temptation to expect instant progression. The brain needs to rehearse to learn. It is not imperative that a child moves from 'green' to 'red', or from level 3 to level 4 on any particular reading scheme. It is however crucial that the child is gaining meaning from the text AS THEY READ. Cliff Moon did a lot of research into children's reading. He discovered that where a child had to stop to figure out a word, or omitted or mispronounced more than 10 words in every hundred, they lost the meaning of the text and were unlikely to be engaged in the content of the story. Ideally a child will be able to read 95% of the text with little or no help. When the child is reading he / she is reading for meaning and deciphering the text can be tackled at a different time.

One method of helping children to maintain the momentum of the text is to ask them to:

- 'Choose a book that you can read with a little help.'
- Talk about the book before opening it, guessing what might happen, or what is good about the story.
- Ask the child to read a few pages to themselves – 'in your head' – the amount will depend on the fluency of the reader and the difficulty of the text.
- Tell the child that if they can't read a word, or don't know what a word means they are to ask and you will tell them.
- Let the child begin reading
- Initially the child will pretend they have read every word, but in reality may have missed out, or skipped over the more difficult ones.
- If the child asks or points to a word, tell them what it is and if necessary what it means. Do not make the child sound out the word.
- When the child says he / she has finished go back to the start of the section and point at the more complex words in the section just read by the child.
- If the child cannot read a word that they asked for earlier, tell them again and move on.
- If the child cannot tell you a word you point to, and they didn't ask you during their reading what it was, say 'Ah I've caught you out. Did you ask? Remember if you don't know a word, ask and I'll tell you. Read that section again.' You must be strict about this so that the child sees that they need to ask for words they can't read and not just skip them.

- Once you have pointed to a range of the more complex words in the passage, suggest a new section and allow the child to read again.
- Next time the child finishes repeat the above procedure, but go back to the words the child got stuck on before.

N.B. Children very quickly understand that you will tell them words they might get stuck on if they ask, and if they don't ask there is a definite downside because they have to read the passage again.

Remember using the above technique is designed to aid fluency and comprehension of the text, it is not primarily concerned with helping children decipher text.