

Advice for Parents

Supporting Literacy at home



Talking underpins the development of reading and writing. Children need lots of opportunities to talk and to listen.

A wide oral vocabulary helps to develop confidence and is the key to your child developing as a writer:

- Reading stories to children improves vocabulary
- Talking about words helps to extend vocabulary
- Vocabulary is key to reading comprehension
- Using new words repeatedly is important

Games

Try developing vocabulary through amusing games such as 'I went shopping and I bought' or 'I Spy'.

I went shopping ...

How to play

You say, 'I went shopping and I bought an orange.' Your child says, 'I went shopping and I bought an orange and an apple.' The next person adds, 'I went shopping and I bought an orange, an apple and a banana,' and so on.

Variations

Pick a theme – only 'buy' items of clothing, modes of transport, animals, etc. Each item has to be described (for example, 'I bought a red teapot', or 'I bought a shiny metal bucket'). Change the key sentence to, 'I went travelling and I saw ...' or 'I went into town and I met ...'

The 'If' game ...

How to play

You'll need a list of sentence prompts (see below). Take turns to complete a sentence such as, 'If I could fly I would ...'

Suggestions for prompts:

- If I were Prime Minister I would ...
- If I were an explorer I would ...
- If I could go into space I would ...
- If I travelled back in time I would ...
- If I were in charge of my school I would ...
- If I were invisible I would ...

Word of the week

This could be a word you come across while reading with your child, or it might link with a current school project. How many times does each of you use the word, in the correct context, in a week?

With older children, develop the word hunt further by looking up words with similar meanings using the internet or a thesaurus.

Talk boxes

Have a 'special box' in which unusual objects are collected. They make a good talking point and this helps to develop imagination.

Story boxes/sacks

Many schools have ready-made story sacks that match a particular book and include a range of objects from the story. You might try gathering a few props for some favourite tales.

Link reading and writing

Schools try hard to make the link between reading and writing. They encourage children to 'read like a writer' so they can 'write for the reader'.

You can help to make these links more explicit when reading with and to your child. You can do this by:

Reading a range of books to your child

Some of these could be more challenging texts than they'd manage alone. This will help develop vocabulary and language sophistication.

Giving each character a different voice when you're reading

This is a good model for your child and makes the story more interesting.

Pointing out words they may not have come across before and explaining what they mean.

Talk about books

Talk about the books you are sharing – discuss the characters and the story. If it's a picture book, it's important to discuss the pictures with your child.

Authors and illustrators work very closely together and sometimes part of the story can actually be in the pictures rather than the text. Several author/illustrators play 'games' with the reader and have parallel stories – one in the text, the other in the pictures.

Some examples of questions you could ask when talking about books with younger children are:

- What do you think will happen next?
- Which part of the story did you like best? Why's that?
- Who is your favourite character? Why?

If it is an information book, you could ask your child to tell you two new facts they have found. Perhaps they could ask you a question and you could find the information in the book. This is much harder to do but it helps children to think about the information they've read.

For older children, you may want to ask them more detailed questions. You might also want to talk with them about how the writer keeps us reading. How does he/she keep us guessing? Why do we want to find out what happens?

Some other possible questions for fiction books are:

- Who is the most important character in the story?
- What sort of character is he/she?
- Where does the story take place? Is the setting an important part of the story? Why/why not?
- What are the problems in this story? How do they get sorted out?

For non-fiction books:

- What's the purpose of this book?
- Why would you read it?
- How has the author organised the material in the book?
- What could you find out from this book?
- How do you know if the information is accurate?

Visit the library

Visit the library regularly and encourage your child to borrow a range of books including fiction, non-fiction and poetry, as well as DVDs and CDs, which you can discuss.

Supporting writing

Writing is more difficult than reading because children need to use several skills simultaneously: handwriting, spelling, grammar, punctuation and composing (deciding what to write).

All these elements are important but the writing composition is the key to good writing. Children can often get stuck when composing a piece of writing so it is this aspect where your help is most useful.

Children need a wide range of experiences to help build a bank of ideas for their writing. So make sure you talk, sing, play, read books and go on family outings with your child.

Retell well known or favourite stories together so your child becomes familiar with sequencing ideas. This will be of great help when they come to sequence their own stories.

Storytelling games

Play games that encourage storytelling and speaking and listening. Make up a story together by taking turns to say a sentence. For example:

Parent – Long, long ago in a far-away land there was a boy who never smiled.

Child – Every day he would look out of the window and see the other children playing.

Parent – They all looked so happy together and he longed to join in. (etc ...)

Help with planning

It is often very useful for children to talk through their ideas before they write. This helps them to organise their thoughts and supports the writing process. When helping young children to write a story, get them to draw three pictures – beginning, middle and end. They can then tell you the story and you can help them to extend it by asking them questions. For example: Who is the main character? Where do they live? What happens to the character? How do they feel?

Older children could draw a storyboard. This is similar to a comic strip and can be used to talk through their ideas. Some questions you can ask are: Where is the story set? What is the place like? What is the main event? How are the problems sorted out? What have the characters learned at the end?

The process for non-fiction writing is very similar in that it is vital children have an opportunity to talk through their ideas. You could ask them what facts they know or you could do a 'Tell Me' activity.

For example, if children are working on

writing instructions: 'Tell me how to make a [...]'

recount writing: 'Tell me what happened [first, next, last, etc.]'

explanatory writing: 'Tell me how a [...] works.'

persuasive writing: 'Tell me why you think [...] is a good idea.'

