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## **Links between early language development and literacy**

Successful development of literacy depends upon good spoken language skills.<sup>1</sup> If children struggle with these skills at an early age it puts them at risk for literacy difficulties later on.

Language skills are amongst the best predictors of educational success and language development at the age of two years predicts children's performance on entering primary school.

Some of the key skills for reading are good speaking and listening abilities, which develop from birth, but these are often taken for granted. These skills include:

### **Attention: being able to focus and concentrate**

Reading books involves concentrating on one task. Attention is a skill that children develop from birth and if they find this hard they may struggle to concentrate and focus later on.

Listening to other people tell stories and read books with them develops children's understanding of how stories and books work, which will help them with reading skills later on.

### **Vocabulary: knowing and using a wide range of words**

- Children need to have a good vocabulary so that they can understand what the words they've read relate to. A weak vocabulary leaves children with a smaller reserve of sound and word knowledge and increased difficulties with decoding real words when they read.<sup>2</sup>
- Vocabulary is vital for comprehension, crucial for writing and content-area learning; and is an area of weakness for poor or reluctant readers<sup>3</sup>.
- This is particularly worrying for children from disadvantaged background as they may be exposed to fewer words. Research has shown that by the age of 4 children from disadvantaged backgrounds may have been exposed to 19 million fewer words.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Palmér S (2004) Literacy Today No 38

<sup>2</sup> Wellman R.L., Lewis B.A., Freebairn L.A., Avrich A.A., Hansen A.J., and Stein C.M. (2011) *Narrative Ability of Children With Speech Sound Disorders and the Prediction of Later Literacy Skills* LSHSS 42;561-579

<sup>3</sup> Snow C. (2011) *The Potential of Discussion to Improve Reading Comprehension* – Lecture IDA New York

<sup>4</sup> Hart, B., & Risley, R. T. (1995). Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes



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### **Narrative skills: knowing how stories work**

Narrative skills at 3-6 years are a powerful predictor of literacy skill at 8-12 years.<sup>5</sup>

Knowing how to tell stories and have conversations will also help children make sense of what they read so that they can read for meaning. Children need to hear stories so that they can understand how stories are structured and organised when they are reading.

This awareness helps them to be more aware of story content.<sup>6</sup> The ability to make inferences, understand story structure, and understand what is happening in stories significantly predict reading comprehension.<sup>7</sup>

### **Understanding social rules**

Children have to be able to understand the unwritten rules of conversations and social situations so that they can apply this to stories. For example, knowing that we take turns in conversations helps children know that different characters are speaking.

Being able to infer what characters are feeling, know about jokes and sarcasm are also important skills that children learn orally first and try out in conversations. If they struggle with this with other people they will find it hard to draw these inferences from books later on.<sup>8</sup>

### **Decoding words**

Reading involves cracking a code and part of this code involves understanding the sounds that words are made up of for example, being able to know what sound a word begins or ends with or knowing and saying words that can rhyme. These are known as metalinguistic skills and these abilities develop from birth and become more sophisticated as children get older.

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<sup>5</sup> Wellman R.L., Lewis B.A., Freebairn L.A., Avrich A.A., Hansen A.J., and Stein C.M. (2011) *Narrative Ability of Children With Speech Sound Disorders and the Prediction of Later Literacy Skills* LSHSS 42;561-579

<sup>6</sup> Wellman R.L., Lewis B.A., Freebairn L.A., Avrich A.A., Hansen A.J., and Stein C.M. (2011) *Narrative Ability of Children With Speech Sound Disorders and the Prediction of Later Literacy Skills* LSHSS 42;561-579

<sup>7</sup> Oakhill, J., Cain, K. & Bryant, P.E. (2003). *The dissociation of word reading and text comprehension: Evidence from component skills*. *Language and Cognitive Processes*, 18, 443-468. As cited in DfES (2006) *Independent Review of the teaching of early reading*

<sup>8</sup> Oakhill, J., Cain, K. & Bryant, P.E. (2003). *The dissociation of word reading and text comprehension: Evidence from component skills*. *Language and Cognitive Processes*, 18, 443-468. As cited in DfES (2006) *Independent Review of the teaching of early reading*



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These skills have their roots in listening to and singing nursery rhymes and songs and playing sound games (e.g. listening for animal noises, listening to sounds out and about).

### **Knowing how books work**

Children have to have experience of books to know how they work - that there is a right way up, the order we turn the pages and to know that the text and pictures have a meaning and tell a story. These are all learned from early experiences of sharing stories and playing with books.

Experiencing books and stories are all vital aspects of a child's communication environment and this has been shown to be crucial for developing language skills as the foundation for literacy<sup>9</sup>.

*All of these skills are developed from birth by young children and combine to enable and support literacy.*

*Supporting these early skills is vital to help children become readers.*

### **Where can people go for help?**

Information and advice can be found at:

- [www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)
- [www.ican.org.uk/achancetotalk](http://www.ican.org.uk/achancetotalk)
- [www.ican.org.uk/help](http://www.ican.org.uk/help)
- [www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk)
- [www.talkboost.org.uk](http://www.talkboost.org.uk)
- [www.ican.org.uk/primarytalk](http://www.ican.org.uk/primarytalk)

If used, please credit: **I CAN, the children's communication charity.**

[www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

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<sup>9</sup> Roulstone, S et al (2011) Investigating the role of language in children's early educational outcomes, DFE