

Foundations of Literacy



**A balanced approach to language, listening
and literacy skills in the early years**

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EDUCATION

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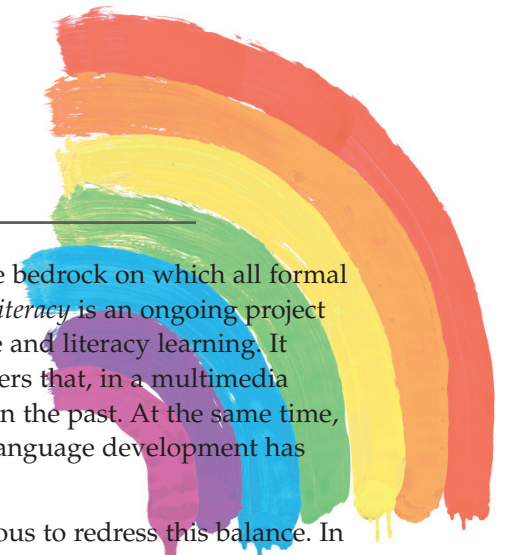
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Introduction



The importance of language in education cannot be exaggerated. It is the bedrock on which all formal learning is based, not least the learning of literacy skills. *Foundations of Literacy* is an ongoing project aimed at providing the best possible basis for young children's language and literacy learning. It has been developed in response to concern among early years practitioners that, in a multimedia world, children's language and listening skills are less well-honed than in the past. At the same time, the 'academic' demands of early education have increased – so, as oral language development has become ever more important, less and less time has been available for it.

This book is offered as a starting point for practitioners who are anxious to redress this balance. In consultation with a wide range of experts in early years, music, literacy and language development, we have devised a seven-stranded approach, based on successful practice. For each strand we have defined:

- key skills, concepts and knowledge that can be used in the preschool education of three to six year olds (these are described on the left-hand page of each spread)
- examples of the types of activity that should develop these skills, concepts and knowledge (these are given on the right-hand pages of each spread).

These activities are designed to be attractive to young children, but by their nature are generally adult-initiated. However, studies have found that the most effective learning occurs when there is a balance of adult-directed and child-initiated activities. We have therefore also tried to illustrate throughout the book how learning from group activities can be extended into child-initiated play.

As illustrated on pages 115–126, many 'stepping stones' and early learning goals are covered by the activities recommended in *Foundations of Literacy*, particularly those in:

- **personal, social and emotional** development (especially Chapters 1 and 2)
- **creative** development (especially Chapters 3, 4 and 5)
- **physical** development (especially Chapters 3 and 7).

And, of course, this book as a whole covers goals in **communication, language and literacy**.

We believe that over-emphasis on the following goals has been instrumental in increasing the formalisation of early years, and generating inappropriate practice:

- to read a range of familiar and common words and simple sentences independently
- to begin to form simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation
- to form recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed.

In a well-organised and resourced early years setting, many children will achieve these goals 'naturally' by the age of six through their own emergent reading and writing activities. However, children who do not achieve them naturally are unlikely to benefit from an early emphasis on formal learning. They are the very children who, in the preschool years, need a greater emphasis on language and listening skills and the physical skills required for handwriting. The *Foundations of Literacy* curriculum provides such an emphasis, as well as activities to develop literacy skills and understanding, which should allow most children to achieve the goals easily by the age of six or seven years old.

To change the emphasis in this way is not by any means to recommend a 'dumbing down' of early years practice. Indeed, the practitioners who have been trialling these ideas say they have never worked harder! The *Foundations of Literacy* approach is very rigorous and structured, with a strong theoretical basis – it simply recognises that there are many other skills to be developed in the early years if formal teaching is eventually to succeed. These factors have long been recognised in successful European countries such as Sweden, Finland and Switzerland, where children do not start

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school until they are seven years old, after three years in preschool following a highly structured, orally based curriculum.

This begs the question of whether education systems in other countries should delay the onset of 'formal' literacy teaching. Clearly, different children in different schools will acquire the skills, concepts and knowledge of *Foundations of Literacy* at different rates. For instance, children from language-rich backgrounds, where many *FoL* activities are familiar before they even arrive in a preschool, may well be quite secure in all seven strands by the end of the Prep/Kindergarten year. For others, it may be that another full year is needed to cover the *FoL* curriculum, and formal literacy should not begin until their second year. Our feeling is that *most* children would benefit from following the curriculum we describe until they are at least six years old.

Some children in any group will, as we have already mentioned, start reading and writing before their peers under their own steam. They should, of course, on no account be held back – practitioners should encourage and celebrate their achievements and give individual help where it's wanted. These children will probably then form a 'top group' once formal learning starts. But we're sure that they too would benefit from increased attention to speaking, listening, music and social development, and a more informal approach to their interest in reading and writing, until they are at least six years old.

As we said at the beginning, *Foundations of Literacy* is an ongoing project and this book is merely a starting point. We hope practitioners will use it to develop practice in strengthening the linguistic, cognitive, physical and emotional foundations for literacy learning in the children in their care. We also hope they will want to share their findings with others, and we are currently in the process of setting up a *Foundations of Literacy* website with this aim. In the meantime, the DfES Innovations unit has included *Foundations of Literacy* on its website <www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit/imagination/innovativeideas/738791> and we also welcome feedback to <FoL@suepalmer.co.uk>.

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Authors' note

This is not an academic book, so we have not included academic references to the research which often underpins our thinking. However, anyone requiring a specific reference should email <FoL@suepalmer.co.uk> and we'll do our best to provide further information.

Learning to listen

There can be little doubt that, in terms of literacy, and perhaps all school-based education, the most fundamental skill of all is *listening*. Unless children can listen, discriminatively and with growing attention, they will be slow to understand and slow to talk. As they grow older, they'll have difficulty relating and attending to their teachers, which easily leads to behavioural problems and disaffection, blighting the ability to learn throughout their school career.

For many years, it's been clear to early years practitioners that, in an increasingly noise-filled world, children's listening skills are being steadily eroded. Television, video and computer games now fill homes with day-long noise. Shared family mealtimes, once a daily opportunity for conversational speaking and listening, have given way to television-dominated grazing. Nowadays, even prams face outwards, so parents don't even chat to their children as they wheel them down the road; but with the level of traffic noise these days, would the children hear anyway? Gradually, and scarcely without noticing it has happened, our society has stopped teaching its children how to listen.

It is, therefore, extremely important that, as soon as possible, we make learning to listen (and its counterpart, learning to speak – see Chapter 2) a major focus of attention. For children from 'language-poor' backgrounds, with little experience of listening and being listened to, this may not be easy. It requires informed, structured attention over an extended period. We therefore need to take our lead from colleagues in Europe, who provide structured listening skills programs, starting when children are three and continuing till they are six or seven.



Foreground sound against background noise

Dodgems

Familiarise children with a particular sound (e.g. clapping, tambourine, bell), which is the signal both to 'start' and 'stop'. On hearing the 'start' signal, children pretend to be cars, speeding around (avoiding each other!) and making an appropriate noise. Make the sound again to signal 'stop', and wait a few moments for all the children to respond. Give praise for recognising the signal, and continue the game.

Traffic lights

Explain to the children that they are going to be vehicles driving along the road and that they are to respond to the traffic lights as quickly as possible! Further explain that you will shout out a colour, and that when you do, they must respond with the appropriate action. For example, when you shout 'amber' they are to bend down and touch the floor, when you shout 'red' they must stop and stay completely still, and when you shout 'green' they can begin to move again. They particularly enjoy this game if you give out paper plates for them to use as steering wheels!

Statues

Play some lively music with a strong beat and explain to the children that they can dance to the music, but that when you shout 'stop' over the top of the music, they must freeze like statues. Go on to explain that when you shout 'go', they can begin to dance again. If you prefer, you can use musical instruments for the 'stop' and 'go' signals!

Widening the range of aural discrimination

Listening walks

Take children on a walk around the school building or grounds, or out in the local area. Explain that you are going to listen for any sounds, such as cars, birds, people talking and so on. Tell the children they have to walk very quietly and if they hear a sound, put up their hand, whereupon everyone must stop. Invite the child to say what sound they heard. Once they get good at this, your walk will be frequently interrupted, so get them to stop every so often instead and 'collect' as many sounds as they can hear. You can integrate a 'listening section' into any outing.

Spot the sound

Choose a number of items with recognisable sounds, for example: a music box, a ticking clock, an automatic timer or sounds recorded on tape. Gather the children together and explain that, while they close their eyes, you are going to hide a 'sound' somewhere in the classroom. On your signal, they have to listen hard and guess (a) what it is and (b) where it's hidden.

Who is it?

Sit one child on a chair with their back to the rest of the children. Explain to the remaining children that if you tap them on the head they are to say, 'Who is it?' The child on the chair attempts to identify the voices of the children as they ask the question. Whenever they play the game, they can try to break their own record.

Games on tape

There are many commercially available games using taped sounds for use during child-initiated learning. It's also fun to make your own, using sounds familiar to the children, especially snippets of their own voices for them to guess who's who.