

BRIEFING # 3

Early language and literacy: How do children learn – and how can adults support them?

From birth, every child should have access to high quality learning opportunities for language, literacy and mathematics. These should be available in all early years settings, including the home, and facilitated by parents and ECD practitioners who are equipped with the right knowledge and resources.

Children are born learning. In the earliest months and years, infants are acquiring language, as they seek to make sense of their environment and communicate with those around them. The gains made during this unique period of early brain development provide the building blocks for later learning and help to ensure that all children have the chance to reach their fullest potential. It is therefore essential that in the early years, children's opportunities to learn keep pace with their desire and capacity to learn.

Learning to read and write are processes that involve different knowledge and skills. These include vocabulary and comprehension, narrative skills, print awareness, enjoyment of books, awareness of sounds in words, letter knowledge, and drawing and writing. While all children should have opportunities to start developing these competencies before they start school, formal teaching or isolated skill development is not appropriate for this age group.

Improving knowledge about how young children learn and the kinds of activities and experiences that promote early language and literacy must therefore be a principal component of any strategy to boost literacy rates.

The importance of stable and nurturing relationships

Stable and nurturing relationships provide the anchor for early learning and development.

Because healthy attachments with adults and other children are fundamental in the creation of brain architecture, they not only promote wellbeing, but have also been shown to be linked to cognitive and language development and later academic achievement.

Experiencing emotional attachment and responsive interactions with other people cultivates children's thinking and reasoning, as well as their motivation and self-confidence. This is sometimes described as a reciprocal 'serve and return' dynamic: As children solicit attention through babbling, body language and actions, adults respond and affirm through words and gestures, and in so doing nurture new understanding and abilities.

Surrounding children with caring and reliable relationships is therefore likely to be one of the most effective ways of helping them to become happy and active learners.

The importance of supporting a child's mother tongue

In the early years, young children should be encouraged to use their mother tongue as much as possible. Building a strong foundation in a mother tongue has been shown to have benefits for learning a second language. This is because key language skills, such as creating narratives and attending to sounds in words, are transferable and not restricted to the language in which they are developed. New concepts and the words that describe them are also best learnt in the mother tongue in order to ensure that children properly grasp their meaning.

Understanding how young children learn

Children learn and develop in different ways and at different rates. However, there are some features of early learning that tend to be true of all children. Understanding these can help adults to frame activities and experiences that are developmentally appropriate and therefore support learning outcomes.

Six catalysts of young children's learning

Talking and interacting

All children want to interact with attentive and responsive adults. Babies seek to communicate with those around them through crying, babbling and gestures. Later on and even as their language is still emerging, toddlers will want to share their ideas, observations and questions.

Playing

Children love to play and play provides rich opportunities for learning. Play can mean many things and includes children's self-initiated games as well as adult-framed activities. Pretend play is particularly important as it fosters certain kinds of skills and language.

Doing and imitating

Children learn best by doing and by being involved in hands-on activities. They love to participate in 'grown-up' tasks, to imitate the behaviours of older children and adults, or to be involved in guided participation where they have the chance to practice new skills.

Exploring

Children are intrinsically curious and relish opportunities to engage in open-ended exploration. In a supportive context, they will initiate many activities spontaneously and employ all their senses to investigate the world around them and find solutions to problems that they encounter.

Singing and moving

Children use their bodies from the earliest age to orientate themselves in their surroundings and to explore, and for most children, it is therefore more natural to move and dance than to sit still. Songs, rhymes and drama create fun opportunities for the type of movement, dance and 'acting out' that capture children's imagination.

Engaging with stories and books

Children love stories and books that ignite their imagination or relate to their world. Stories and books can also be the bridge into new and unfamiliar contexts. When adults and children read and tell stories together there are abundant learning opportunities, as new language and concepts are introduced, and ideas and interpretations are talked over.

Four themes in young children's learning:

- **Context is everything.** Learning in the early years should be embedded in children's everyday experiences and encounters. Where the learning context is culturally and personally meaningful, children are likely to be highly engaged and motivated. Learning occurs continuously, in the home, at preschool, at the shops, on trips, in the street, at the clinic, in the car or bus, at the library, in the yard, at church and mosque, and in many other everyday contexts.
- **The child's perspective is paramount and is often different to an adult's.** Young children do not necessarily see play and learning as separate. They are most interested in 'here and now' questions that help them to make sense of their immediate experiences and surroundings and arise through activities that are fun and echo their natural interests.
- **Children learn from the concrete to the abstract, and from the abstract to the concrete.** Not all new understanding is discoverable for them. This means adults need to be alert to opportunities to link everyday experiences and what children already know to new concepts. This often happens through 'sustained shared thinking' – occasions when adults and children work together to understand something, develop a line of thinking or solve a problem.
- **Children thrive on repetition.** They are happy to read the same storybook or to play the same game over and over again. Repetition is beneficial because it helps to consolidate learning and eventually gives children the confidence to extend an activity and try new approaches.

Adults have a powerful influence

What adults do is rich with meaning for children. Opportunities to participate in certain types of activities and interactions have a powerful bearing on whether a child learns to read or write successfully. Some activities are a simple deepening or extension of everyday moments, and require no extra time or resources: often, adults just need to be made aware of the value of things they are already doing. Other activities are harder to deliver without books and basic materials, or require equipping adults with the knowledge, skills and confidence to practice new approaches. Access to training, guidance, books and simple learning materials is therefore essential.

Why everyday talk matters

One study found that three-year-old children who were talked to more by their parents had a bigger vocabulary. What is more, the positive impact on their language skills was still evident seven years later.

How adults can support early language and literacy

Below are some of the core activities that adults (parents, caregivers and ECD practitioners) should ensure are a part of every child's daily experiences.

Talking with babies and children

Talking and listening to children should be a habitual part of the routines, activities and play of every day. Talking with babies and toddlers begins with noticing and responding to their interests, vocalisations and attempts to initiate communication, and offering them the words they need. Talking can also involve commenting on what a child is doing, repeating a child's words, expanding on what has been said or asking questions in order to extend the conversation.

Links to: Vocabulary and comprehension; narrative skills.

Sharing stories and books

Adults should encourage children to participate in interactive book-sharing from a young age. In communities where books are scarce, adults can tell traditional tales or recount real-life events, and encourage children to participate. Books and stories should be a platform for wider conversations, by using comments and questions to engage children and encouraging them to make predictions and inferences. Sharing books is also an opportunity to help children understand how print works and to introduce conventions of print.

Links to: Enjoyment of books and print; vocabulary and comprehension; print awareness; narrative skills.

Singing songs and playing games with sounds

Singing songs and reciting nursery rhymes are fun ways for adults to introduce new language as the familiarity of favourite songs gives children the chance to join in. Songs and rhymes can also help children to begin to discern sounds and syllables in words, as can games such as 'I spy with my little eye...' or clapping out syllables in words.

Links to: Vocabulary and comprehension; awareness of sounds in words.

Facilitating pretend play

Adults should encourage children's pretend play and participate in a respectful way, by commenting on what children are doing, following the child's lead and using careful prompts and questions. Adults can also support pretend play by showing children how objects can represent other objects or by taking on a role. By providing crayons, paper and books, adults can encourage children to include literacy behaviours in their pretend play.

Links to: Vocabulary and comprehension; narrative skills; drawing and writing; print awareness.

Pointing out print

There are abundant opportunities throughout the day for adults to point out print in a child's everyday environment, for instance on labels and signs. In this way adults help children to realise that print has a purpose and tells us something. Later on, adults can help children to start noticing letters in words and to use the letters and context as cues to work out what a word says.

Links to: Print awareness; letter knowledge.

Providing opportunities for drawing

Adults should create a supportive environment for young children to experiment with representing their world through drawing and painting. In order to help children grasp the principle of symbolic representation, which is key to writing, adults can encourage children to use drawing to express and represent what they think about or imagine, as well as what they see around them.

Links to: Print awareness; drawing and writing.

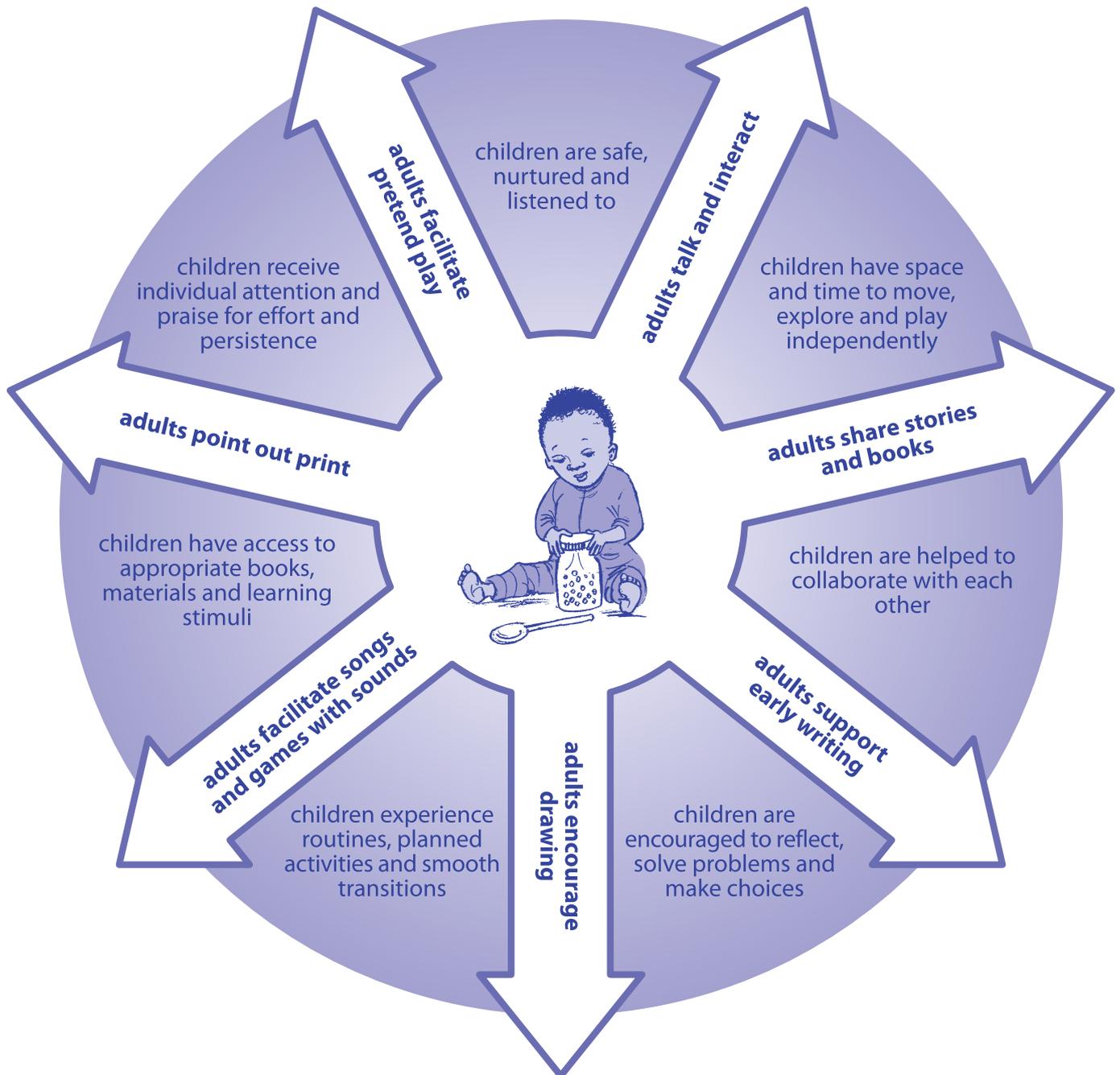
Supporting early writing

It is useful for adults to model for children some of the day-to-day uses of print, such as writing a message or a shopping list. Adults should appreciate children's early attempts at writing, which are likely to include a mixture of scribbles and letter-like shapes. As they develop letter knowledge, it is better for children to write big letters in sand, in the air or on a concrete floor, rather than on lined paper. Early efforts to write should be supported by encouraging children to 'have a go' and to try to write words as they sound rather than by copying.

Links to: Drawing and writing; awareness of sounds in words; letter knowledge.

The vital role of adults in supporting early literacy learning

The diagram shows activities that support early literacy and that require the active involvement of adults. It also indicates some of the key features of an effective learning environment.



This briefing was written by Rebecca Hickman and Shelley O'Carroll for Wordworks, with funding from the DG Murray Trust. Wordworks aims to strengthen early language and literacy learning among children from historically disadvantaged communities in South Africa. By sharing our materials, know-how and enthusiasm with teachers, parents, volunteer tutors and home visitors in a respectful and inclusive way, we seek to ensure that all our children can learn to read and write successfully. For a full list of references for this briefing and more information about our work, visit our website at www.wordworks.org.za.

In partnership with:

DGMT
THE DG MURRAY TRUST

