

# READING BEGINS AT HOME

## SET YOUR CHILD UP FOR LITERACY SUCCESS

Have you ever thought about when children begin learning to read and write? While we know that a Grade 1 teacher has a very important role to play, would you be surprised to know that the process of learning to read and write begins well before a child steps into a Grade 1 classroom? Children who learn to read and write successfully don't only have good teachers at school, they also tend to be those who have benefited from critical early learning experiences from birth to five years.



✕ Research has shown that skilled reading and writing depends on oral language abilities that begin developing from the earliest days in a child's life. Through nurturing relationships, critical brain connections are made that support a child's language development from birth.

## TALK THE TALK

These early years are an incredibly important time to spend talking with babies and toddlers. However, many people believe that children should be seen and not heard, or feel uncertain about how to go about talking with babies and young children.

Start by building a loving and trusting relationship, appreciating and responding to your baby's attempts to make sounds and communicate. Let them know that you love them and love hearing their voice! Add words to daily routines, so that babies learn to link an action or object to a word. Repeat what young children try to say when they first begin babbling and add more words.

As children get older and their language grows, explain what words mean, follow children's interests and answer their questions. Tell stories together about day-to-day events, and be patient and supportive when children try to tell their first stories – even if they begin with the end of the story!

We know that children who grow up in these language-rich environments have a better vocabulary at age three and four, and are likely to be better at reading comprehension at age nine. Who would have thought that talking with children would be one of the greatest gifts we could give?

## THE WRITE STUFF

In addition to hearing and using language in their early years, children need to learn about print. Written language is different to spoken language, and it is a big step for children to understand that writing is in fact speech written down. By pointing out print in the environment such as signs, names and labels, children start to see that writing has a purpose.

When children have access to paper and crayons and we encourage their mark-making, drawing and scribbling, they feel confident to experiment with expressing their ideas through drawing and "writing". We call children's very earliest attempts to write "emergent writing" as it may not yet look like grown-up writing – and the spelling will be anything but conventional! Learning to write is a process, and as with any new skill, it takes time, practice, and a great deal of encouragement before it is mastered.





**Opening Page:** Start by building a loving and trusting relationship, appreciating and responding to your baby's attempts to make sounds and communicate.

**Second Page:** Fun activities might not seem that relevant for the serious business of learning to read and write, but it is through these experiences that children enter the world of literacy.

**Third Page:** There are many NGOs working on the development of programmes and resources to support early language and literacy learning.

As children begin preschool and go to Grade R, their teachers have an important role to play in building language and early literacy, but this does *not* mean formal teaching. Teachers can do this by sharing stories and books, encouraging drawing and emergent writing and building oral language by giving explanations, introducing new words and encouraging children to ask and answer questions. Listening games such as "I spy . . ." help children to become aware of sounds in words, and letters can be introduced through children writing their names, writing letters in the sandpit, with paint, or making letters with play dough. All of these fun activities might not seem that relevant for the serious business of learning to read and write, but it is through these experiences that children enter the world of literacy.

Children who have grown up in language and print-rich home and preschool environments from birth to five years are likely to begin Grade 1 with a wide and deep vocabulary. They will understand what words mean and will be able to use language to make predictions and inferences. They will start school being familiar with letters and sounds, and will understand that print is speech written down. This means that they will master basic texts early on in Grade 1, quickly moving onto longer and more complex texts which give them exposure to new words and ideas. The more they read, the more fluent their reading will become, and the more their language will develop and enable them to engage with increasingly difficult texts. They are on a path to reading success.

## RESOURCES FOR ALL

In South Africa, very few children have the kind of early learning experiences that set them on this path. There is a great need to invest in quality early learning experiences for children in preschool and in Grade R, in affordable books in local languages, and in opportunities for families and caregivers to become much more actively involved in their children's early learning.

There are many NGOs leading on the development of programmes and resources to support language and early literacy development. They produce online resources that are freely available in most South African languages. As a parent or teacher, you can download free books, stories and games to share with your children and access apps that give you ideas about how to support literacy development.

*Dr Shelley O'Carroll is the Director of Wordworks, a non-profit organisation dedicated to supporting language and early literacy development in under-resourced communities.* ✕

## USEFUL RESOURCES

These websites contain locally developed, free, printable resources, apps and books that parents, caregivers and teachers can use to support young children's language and literacy.

- [www.wordworks.org.za](http://www.wordworks.org.za)
- [www.nalibali.org](http://www.nalibali.org)
- [www.africanstorybook.org](http://www.africanstorybook.org)
- [www.bookdash.org](http://www.bookdash.org)