

Talk, play and learn together

Supporting early language and literacy: A guide for ECD practitioners and parents

Children are born wanting to learn and even tiny babies use their senses to explore the world around them. Children's development in the early years is important because it provides the building blocks for later learning and wellbeing.

Parents and ECD practitioners are children's first teachers. Although babies and young children can discover some things on their own, in order to learn and develop, they need warm and responsive relationships.

These relationships support language development, and language is important for early literacy. Learning to read and write also involves other skills and understanding, and children need opportunities to develop these before they start school. There are many things that caregivers can do to help, and this guide provides some tips and ideas.

Why does it matter?

Babies start learning and communicating from the moment they are born, and before they start to speak.

Children need language to build strong relationships and make sense of their world. Language also provides the platform for all kinds of new learning.

Even before they start school, children are gaining different skills and understanding that will help them to become readers and writers.

Children who start Grade R with key early language and literacy skills in place are more likely to do well at school.



Caregivers can make a big difference by talking, playing and sharing stories and books with young children, using their mother tongue.

I am growing, I am learning, I am talking

birth to 18 months

- I try to communicate in lots of ways, using sounds and gestures.
- I like listening to you talk and watching your face.
- I recognise some words and phrases.
- I love repetitive games and songs, particularly if they have actions.



1 and 2 year-olds

- I try to say some words and even short phrases.
- I get frustrated when you don't listen or understand me.
- I learn new words really quickly, even if I can't say them all.
- I enjoy repetitive songs and action rhymes.



2 and 3 year-olds

- I am saying lots of words and starting to use longer sentences.
- I may still find some sounds difficult to say correctly.
- I enjoy conversations with adults I know well.
- I am asking questions to help me find things out.
- I love looking at books and talking about the pictures.



3 and 4 year-olds

- I can say and understand quite complicated sentences.
- I am using my talk to play with other children.
- I can talk about things that I've done and plan to do.
- I ask lots of 'why?' questions.
- I can listen to longer stories and talk about what I've heard.



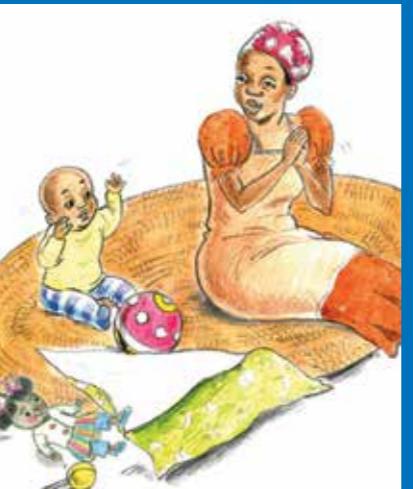
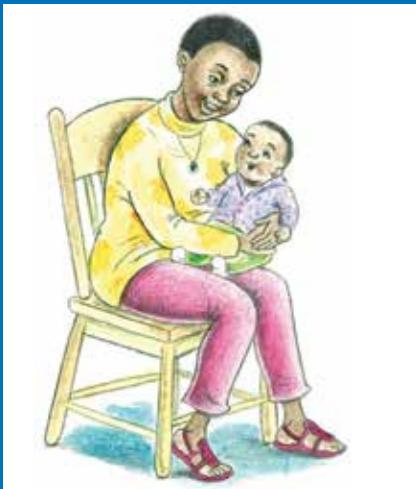
4 and 5 year-olds

- I take part in longer conversations.
- I can express what I need and co-operate with others.
- I am using language to help me think and work things out.
- I am getting better at listening and paying attention.
- I love sharing books, asking questions and pretending to read.



Children develop at different speeds and in different ways. Some children may do the things shown above earlier or later. If you are worried about a child in your care, talk to a social worker, health visitor or clinic.

How children learn



Talking and listening

Playing

Enjoying stories and books

Doing

Exploring

Singing and moving

Everywhere, all the time...

'That's interesting. What did you do then?'

Talking tips

- When you talk with children, look at them, be on their level and use their name.
- Always respond to babies' babble and children's talk.
- Listen carefully, give children time to finish talking, and take turns to speak.
- Think out loud and talk about what you are doing.
- Ask children questions that have answers of more than one or two words.
- Talk with children about their games and ideas.
- Introduce new words and ideas by building on what a child has said.
- Follow what interests a child and comment on what they are doing.

Why children must feel treasured

Loving relationships are the cornerstone of all learning. When children feel cared for and secure it helps their brains to grow properly. Children who feel good about themselves make good learners – they are also happier, make friends more easily, and cope better with problems. So simply by giving children attention and encouragement, and by being gentle and kind, you are playing a central role in children's development and learning.

'That's right, it's a bird. It's flying in the sky!'

'What do you think happens next?'
'Why do you think she did that?'
'I wonder why your tower fell over.'

Ideas for story-time

- Try to have a special story-time together every day, even with babies.
- Stories can be traditional tales or family stories about real events. Children love stories about people and places they know.
- Make story-time FUN and full of conversation and questions.
- Try using different voices and actions to help bring the story alive.
- If you are using a storybook, make sure children can see the pictures.
- Let children hold storybooks and turn the pages. They may want to go at their own speed!
- Take time to explain words or ideas you think children may not understand.
- Re-cap the story at the end and ask questions like 'why did...?' and 'what if...?'
- It's fine to tell the same story again and again. Repetition is good for learning.

'What happened last time you tried that?'

Simple ways to support learning

- Let children experiment, try things out for themselves and solve problems.
- Offer lots of encouragement.
- Use questions and comments to help children think and reflect.
- Let children make mistakes – it's a great way of learning!
- Help children make links between what they know and what they are finding out.
- Try to give children time to finish what they are doing.
- Encourage children to play and work with each other.
- Let children repeat games and activities as much as they want to.

'Well done for trying so hard and not giving up!'

'What made you feel happy today?'

How adults can support early language and literacy



Talk and listen

Through babbling, talking, listening and being listened to, children learn words and how to communicate.

Follow what interests a baby or child and respond using comments, questions and careful listening. Think out loud and talk about what you are doing.



Help children play

Play is fun and the most natural way of learning for children. Pretend play is a particularly good way for children to develop their language.

Encourage children to play and let them take the lead in their games. Give children simple equipment, like a hat or a box, to encourage pretend play. As you play alongside children, introduce new language and ideas.



Enjoy stories and books

Telling and reading stories creates lots of opportunities to learn, as children hear new words, find out about their world and talk about what is going on.

Actively involve children in storytelling by making it a time full of conversation. Welcome children's comments and help them relate the story to their own lives and think about what is going on.



Enjoy songs and rhymes

Children love movement and music. Songs and action rhymes are fun ways for children to express themselves and to hear and use new language.

Sing songs and do action rhymes often – even very young children will start to join in by doing the actions for a favourite song.



Point out print

When children notice the print around them they start to understand that it is speech written down. Children are keen to have a go at writing when they see what it is for.

Point out print on labels and signs and in storybooks, and encourage children if they try to 'read' the print around them. Help children to start noticing letters, particularly the first letter of their name.



Support drawing and mark-making

Children love to draw and paint. Drawing is a way of representing what we see around us or what is in our head. This is similar to how writing works.

Help children to notice how things look and encourage them to draw what they see. Ask children to tell you what they have drawn and give encouragement.

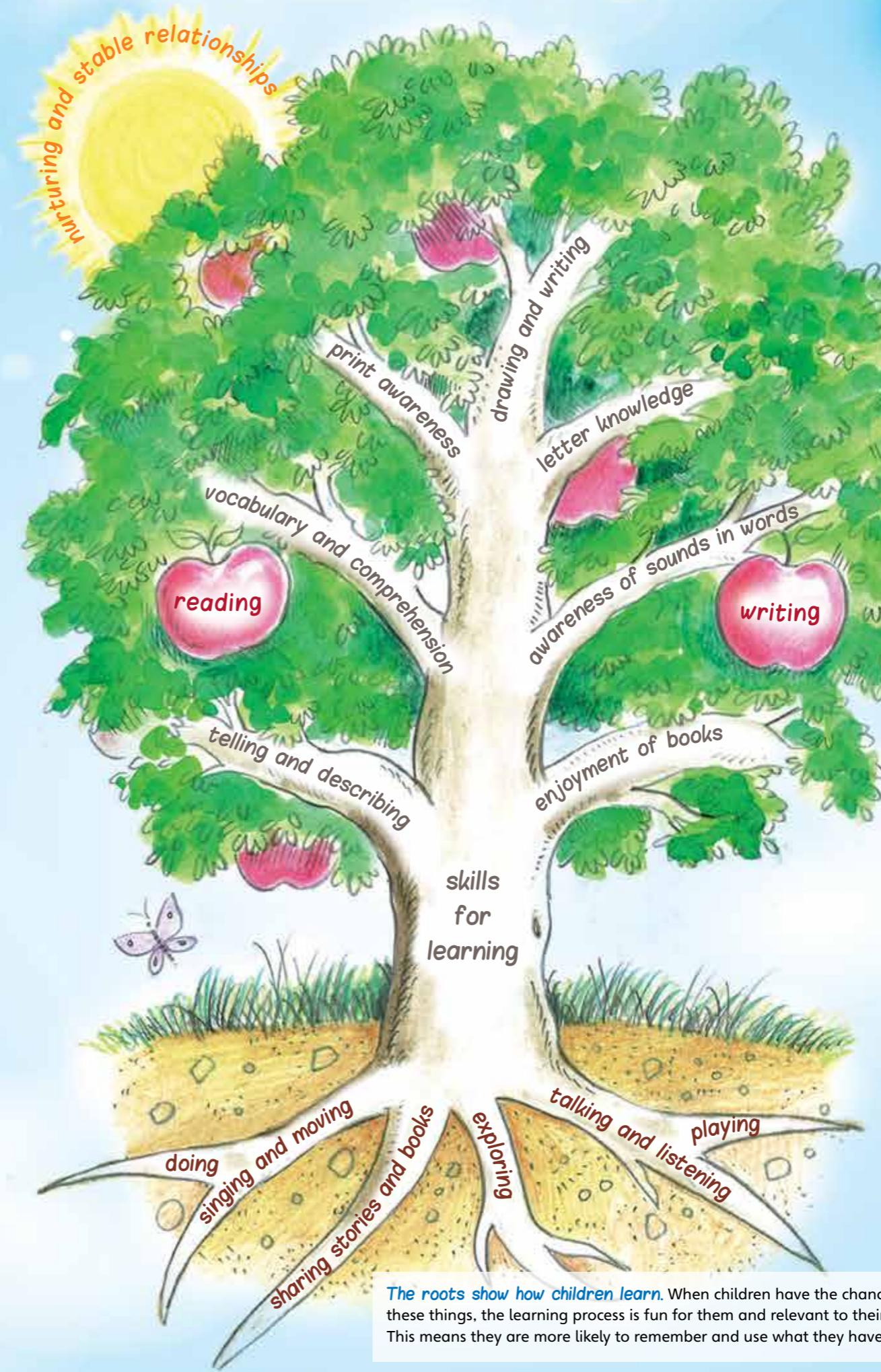


Encourage early writing

Children's early attempts at writing may look like scribbles or marks. It is important for adults to encourage, and not correct, these early writing efforts.

Let children see you writing and write down children's words for them. Give children materials to enable them to include pretend writing in their play. Help children to write their name.

Growing young readers and writers



The branches show the different skills and understanding that children need to become readers and writers. These skills start developing long before children start school.

Vocabulary and comprehension means children can understand and use words and sentences.

Telling and describing means children use language to tell stories, describe and explain.

Enjoyment of books means children see books and print as both useful and fun.

Print awareness means children understand that print is spoken words written down.

Drawing and writing means children use drawing, marks and pretend writing to represent things.

Awareness of sounds in words means children can hear the different sounds that make up words.

Letter knowledge means children can recognise and write some letters.

The trunk shows skills for learning.

For children to become good learners, they need to have some important general skills. These include the ability to concentrate, to adapt their thinking, to hold different bits of information in mind, and to control their impulses.

Caregivers can help children to stay focused by ensuring an activity is the right level of difficulty or by modelling a task. Caregivers help children to do important brainwork when they encourage them to think ahead, reflect, and consider different approaches. When children receive encouragement, they learn to persevere and will become enthusiastic learners!

The roots show how children learn. When children have the chance to do these things, the learning process is fun for them and relevant to their world. This means they are more likely to remember and use what they have learned.