

This initiative focuses on the importance of shared reading in the preschool years, and underlines the State Government's recognition of the need for appropriate early literacy education in the preschool years.

Early childhood educators who work in kindergartens and child care know that learning to read and write is not just about engaging with books. In this edited version of an article first published in **Resource**, Issue No. 64 (F.K.A. Multicultural Resource Centre), Rosemary Milne emphasises the relationship between early symbolic play and learning to read.

About Reading

Rosemary Milne

Emphasis on trying to teach children to read as early as possible should be replaced by a determination to bring all children to reading in ways that will keep reading linked to feelings of interest and competence. There are early steps in this process which are not always recognized as being part of the child's own natural developmental preparation for learning to read.

There is still not enough recognition of the importance of early symbolic play and its relationship to learning to read. When this early preparation through play is not understood, methods of teaching reading which are appropriate at a later stage may be imposed at the early childhood level. '

Children are learning many things ABOUT reading before they "learn to read". And they practise many other ways of using symbols before they come to understand the use of word symbols in reading. Reading involves manipulating symbols. Symbols stand for or represent something else. Spoken and written words are symbols; for example, the spoken or written word 'dog' is a sound or visual image that stands for one of a class of animals with certain 'doggy' characteristics.

Young children play spontaneously many games of pretense and make-believe involving different kinds of symbols. This play gives them marvellous practice in symbolic functioning, so it is an ideal tool for language and literacy development at the early childhood level.

Here is a simple example of symbolic play where cardboard cartons are being used as symbols for furniture.

Anna and Vicki are playing in the home-corner at a child care centre. They have two large cartons.

Anna. Say this is your bed, Mum, and this one is mine.

Vicki. No. Mine's the TV. Here's the new TV, Dad.

Anna. O.K. Where does the TV go, Mum?

The role-playing that is going on here is also using a form of symbolism – Vicki represents a “Mum” and Anna a “Dad.”

In the following example a younger child, playing alone, without using speech, is also displaying this capacity for symbolic functioning.

Con, 17 months, walks up to a large piece of crumpled white drawing paper on the floor. He spreads it out, then lies down, positioning his head on the paper as if it were a pillow. Con closes his eyes, screwing them up tight. He opens his eyes, smiles at the caregiver, then closes them again in an exaggerated fashion.

Here Con is not only using the paper to stand for a pillow, he is also using his own body to symbolize an action - going to sleep

Practice in inventing and using personal symbols in play helps children understand the use of more arbitrary social symbols. In the next example a child is learning that abstract visual signs can convey shared meaning.

Father and child are at the street corner, waiting for the traffic lights.

Father. We can't go yet; the light's red. When the green light comes on that means we can cross.

Here the child is being helped to understand that the traffic signals have an agreed-upon social meaning; in a sense, they can be 'read'.

A further level of abstraction is necessary to understand a written word symbol.

A teacher and a child at kindergarten are looking at a book of animals.

Teacher. This is a hippopotamus.

Child. ' ocerus.

Teacher. No. This one is a hippopotamus. That other one was a rhinocerus. See , this word here, underneath this one, says hippopotamus'. And this word here, says 'rhinocerus'.(Pointing to words)Hippopotamus..... Rhinocerus. Let's look at the pictures and see how they're the same and how they're different.

The teacher is not primarily concerned about teaching 'reading', or even teaching the names of animals. This child is gradually being brought to understand that both words and pictures *can* convey information, each in a different way. Children also learn that people can read hand-written information, as well as print. In this next example, Sally shows that she already has some understanding of what reading is about. Her mother's spontaneous interaction helps Sally refine this understanding

- Mother* (reading letter) *Gran says she's bringing you a present when she comes home.*
- Sally.* *What is it?*
- Mother.* *She doesn't say.*
- Sally* (demands). *Read me what it is.*
- Mother.* *I can't read you what it is because Gran doesn't say what it is. She just says, 'Tell Sally I'm bringing her a present.*
- Sally* (taking hold of the letter). *Where does it say that?*
- Mother.* *Here. There's your name, see, 'Sally' (Then pointing to each word as she reads) 'Tell Sally I'm bringing her a present.*
- Sally,* (letting go of letter). *She's bringing me a present.*

Being read to frequently is one of the strongest influences on learning to read. Children from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) need to be read to in both English and in their family language. It is better that they hear each language from a native speaker of that language, if possible. Storybooks in many community languages are available for borrowing from the *FKA Multicultural Resource Centre Library* * The centre also has audio tapes so, if no native speakers are available to read to children, they can listen to the tape as they look at the book.

It is good for children to hear some stories read over and over again. Children may memorize some of the text of their favourite books if they hear them frequently.

Ann, 5 years and Bevan, 8 years are at home. There is some sibling rivalry going on.

- Ann.* *I can read this page.'*
- Bevan.* *No you can't. You can't read. Go on then, read it. Show me.*
- Ann.* *The little dog got dirty and he ran away.'*
- Bevan.* *That's not reading.*
- Ann.* *Tis. 'Little dog got dirty and ran away.'*
- Bevan.* *You're just guessing.*

Ann. No I'm not. I remember.

Bevan. That's not reading then.

Ann. 'Tis. I can read. (Said with satisfaction.)

Ann is right: She is beginning to read. Memorizing and guessing are legitimate strategies children may use while they are learning to read. Children need access to the books after they have been read to, if they are to 'read' them in this way



When reading to children, adults often interrupt the story with spontaneous little conversational breaks. This is a natural technique for relating what is going on in the story to a child's own experience: linking the strange to the familiar. These breaks also provide a rest from concentration on listening to the reading.

Caregiver. Then he came to Bunny's house.' Look, Thanh, Bunny has a cot like yours

Thanh. Cot

Caregiver. That's right. And Bunny's cot has a blue blanket like yours. Can you show me Bunny's blue blanket? Yes. (She then continues reading, in her 'reading' voice rather than her 'talking' voice.) 'He couldn't see Bunny anywhere in the house so he...'

There is a complex difference between the oral language of a conversation and the language of a story that is to be read. In the above example the young child is being exposed to this difference in a way which makes it plain. Just as children spontaneously employ many ways of preparing themselves for reading, adults often spontaneously use many techniques that are highly effective teaching methods with young children. Older children, when reading to younger siblings, also adapt their style in ways like this.

These examples show how literacy development is taking place long before some people would think of children as 'learning to read'. They reveal that there are some fascinating processes going on, some of which appear to arise naturally on the part of both the young children and their caregivers.

In the preschool years, our main responsibility is to ensure two things:

- That all children are learning ABOUT reading by being read to from a variety of materials and in a manner that encourages pleasurable interaction;
- That children's symbolic play of all kinds is encouraged and recognized as a natural tool for the growth of symbolic functioning - a key developmental process in early literacy.

* Contact the F.K.A. Librarian for more information about how to access the Library on 9428 4471 or library@fka.com.au

References and Further Reading

Perry, Rosemary. 1988. **Examination of two contrasting approaches to teaching preschool children and their effects on linguistic and social behaviour.** Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. University of Queensland. Australian study, linking children's enhanced linguistic abilities with a teaching approach which encourages frequent engagement in social make-believe play.

- Schrader, C.T. 1990. **Symbolic play as a curriculum tool for early literacy development.** *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 5, 79-103. Research which concludes that the best method for teaching and learning reading and writing, in the preschool and kindergarten, is through children's symbolic play.

