



# 2

## Literacy for Babies

It may be hard for some readers to believe that we have written a serious chapter about literacy for babies, but we have! We hope to convince you that babies can be involved in sharing some enjoyable activities that are, in fact, the real roots of literacy. But that's as far as the 'seriousness' goes, because we are *not* suggesting that early years practitioners, or families, try to teach babies to read and write. However, you may still be puzzled by this chapter's title. Perhaps you associate literacy with 'sounding out' letters, looking at primers (reading scheme books) and tracing over writing. These methods are probably familiar to you. They are sometimes known as 'formal literacy instruction' and are often used in schools and some early years settings, as you may have seen or remember from your own school days. They are *not* suitable activities for babies and preschool children and we would go further and argue that they are of very limited use in the early years of schooling. What we do in the final part of this chapter, however, is give practical advice on how to start sharing picture books with babies from birth to 18 months. Our main focus is on babies in care and education settings, but the approach we describe is just as suitable for babies when they are in their family homes.

The two themes of the chapter are the amazing abilities of babies and the real roots of literacy, in other words, human communication.

## Brainy babies

Recent investigations into how babies think and how their brains develop in the first year of life are at the cutting edge of modern developmental psychology and medicine. In fact, the scientists are just about catching up with the instinctive beliefs of generations of parents, grandparents and childminders around the world that babies:

- understand the people who look after them every day;
- think about what is going on around them;
- enjoy new things and new experiences.

Scientists have known for some decades that babies are born already prepared to find other people interesting and worth communicating with from the start. They are now also able to show that babies' brains are highly adaptable. The main connections in the brains of newborns are not pre-wired or fixed, but are actively linked up as babies respond to being cuddled, fed, changed and talked to by regular carers. This very ordinary stimulation from a few caring people is crucial to brain development, but babies are also stimulated by suitable toys, movements, sounds, shapes and strong colours. Brainy babies develop as caring adults talk to them, cuddle them and have lots of fun with them.

This upsurge of interest in the amazing abilities of babies and toddlers is reflected in a new government-funded project in England, *Birth to Three Matters. A framework to support children in their earliest years* (DfES, 2002). This is a resource pack consisting of guidance cards and a poster, a video, a booklet and a CD-Rom, intended for practitioners who work with and care for children aged birth to 3. The framework is not an official training package, nor is it a formal curriculum for the under-3s. It is clearly focused on the individual child and on celebrating the young child's potential and competence. It is organised around four aspects of 'the child':

- A Strong Child;
- A Skilful Communicator;
- A Competent Learner;
- A Healthy Child.



These are broad aspects and they look at some very complex aspects of child development. For example, a Strong Child includes the baby's growing awareness of being an individual, the development of self-esteem and a sense of belonging and being cherished. Similarly, a Healthy Child refers to emotional and psychological well-being and the ability to make choices, as well as staying safe and keeping physically fit. Perhaps the complexities of being a Competent Learner and a Skilful Communicator are more obvious and more familiar to early years practitioners. They are certainly central to the approach taken in this book and we will now look more closely at babies as communicators.

## Real communicators

The picture of Mattias and his mother demonstrates that pre-verbal babies are skilled at communicating. You can see that at this special moment they only have eyes for each other. You can also see the pleasure on the baby's face, the way he opens his mouth in rhythm with his mother's speech, as if he were about to speak, and you can imagine the special things she is saying to him. It is also



2.1 *Mattias, 4 months, and his mother communicating*



clear that the baby is an equal partner in the 'conversation' and is encouraging his carer to keep on communicating.

Here is a list of clues that can help us to understand how babies are getting ready for literacy by developing some powerful communication skills.

*Always listening*  
*The eyes have it*  
*Making faces*  
*Getting excited*  
*Talk to me*

*Always listening...*

Babies are able to hear before they are born, in fact they have amazingly sensitive hearing in the weeks before birth. Immediately after they are born they show a real preference for the sounds of human voices, picking them out and preferring them to all the other noises in what may seem a noisy and confusing world. Within a very short time babies can identify the voices of their regular carers and turn towards them, or towards the direction from which a familiar voice is coming. Have you noticed that a crying baby can be soothed by a carer's voice, even if it is coming from some distance away? It is clear that baby communicators start with impressively selective hearing skills and begin to take part in little conversations with their regular carers in homes and in care settings.

Babies who are born deaf are also communicators but they will depend on using other senses, such as smell and sight. Several signing systems can be adapted to use with these babies. Parents and professional carers of hearing babies are also finding that a few signs for people, animals, food and everyday activities can be used in conjunction with words in the early months to encourage easy and playful communication. See the 'sing and sign' reference at the end of the chapter.



### *The eyes have it...*

The picture of Mattias and his mother gazing into each other's eyes shows what language and child development experts call 'non-verbal communication'. It reminds us that to get into a conversation with another person usually involves catching their eye to get their attention and frequently looking at them while we communicate. We do know that newborn babies find the eyes the most interesting part of the human face and they gaze into the eyes of their carers when they are wide awake and ready to communicate and play. Interestingly, babies can also let us know that they are tired or bored by switching their focus elsewhere, closing their eyes or turning their faces away.

So baby communicators know how to use eye contact to hold the attention of their carers in a 'conversation' and they know how to switch off.

Babies with impaired vision will start to communicate by reacting to the voices of their regular carers and to the feel of their skin and their familiar smell. Touch and smell are very important ways for *all* babies get to know and recognise their families and a small number of professional carers. However, it is easy to forget that these senses are important starting points for babies' social interactions and the development of other communication skills, like language and literacy, for example.

Babies with impaired hearing will rely on the use of eye contact to get in touch with their carers and should be helped to enjoy lots of close face-to-face talk and play, including appropriate touching, exaggerated facial expressions, natural gestures and a few simple signs taken from international systems such as British or American Sign Language (BSL, ASL) or Makaton.

### *Making faces...*

Adults do tend to go in for exaggerated facial expressions and noises when they talk to babies and play little games with them. We might notice this as we watch other people communicating with babies, or see it on videos and in photos. What is going on here? Well, most parents, carers, professional early years workers and even older children seem to concentrate quite naturally on helping a baby get over the initial problem of not understanding the actual words people are using. So, we are all likely to go in for



a bit of over-acting to get across the meanings of our words and intentions – it is a bit like communicating with a person who does not speak our language! We particularly exaggerate the kinds of facial expressions that reflect the feelings and meanings behind our words (raised eyebrows; eyes wide open; mouth gaping; lips pouting; frowning and smiling). We also repeat words much more frequently than is normal in a conversation and pronounce them very slowly. All this dramatic behaviour helps to hold a baby's attention and it makes early communication exciting and full of meaning.

### *Getting excited...*

All the fun and excitement of communicating with a baby makes it easy for adults to want to get involved and babies usually respond totally to this attention, with their whole bodies. You can actually see the excitement and energy pulsing through them as they wave their arms, open and shut their fingers, stiffen and arch the trunk, kick their legs and wriggle their toes. Perhaps this level of whole body communication and excitement will never again be as noticeable after conventional words develop, but it can still be found in the dancing, the drama and the ceremonies and rituals of human cultures around the world. Later in this chapter we are going to suggest that carers can dance, sing and enjoy many kinds of music with babies.

Another way in which the pleasure and excitement of communication is expressed by babies is with the sounds they can make with their mouths. This can be anything from squeals, grunts, blowing bubbles, hiccups and giggles, to babbling, gurgling and crying for attention and company. You may have been told that these are just accidental noises, indigestion or 'wind', but they can become real communication if you respond to them enthusiastically and treat them as a baby's way of getting into a conversation with you.

### *Talk to me...*

Yes, it's as simple as that! If you can treat the babies you care for as interested and interesting communicators you will give them the best possible start to literacy. The one thing that makes a difference to children's language and literacy development and later success



at school is the amount of ordinary daily talk directed especially to them. And we really do mean the ordinary talk about what's going on, where you're going, what you are doing, and comments on what you see as you walk out, visit the store or supermarket, enjoy bath-times, use the computer, prepare food, wash clothes and clean the nursery or home. It is particularly important that the staffing levels and routines in care settings make it possible for key practitioners to direct their talk to individual babies and toddlers and share interactions with them. Basic daily routines like nappy changing can be transformed if we take the opportunity to talk to the baby, offer a small toy or bunch of keys to hold, explain what we are doing and make the baby feel special and valued. Bathing babies after a session of body painting can offer the same chance to turn a care routine into a stimulating social, emotional, linguistic and cognitive experience!

On those occasions when the television is on you still need to watch with babies and toddlers and, afterwards, talk about what you have all seen. Try to join in with any songs and rhymes and link the TV activities to things you and the children know about in your world and organise some similar follow-up activities.

## Sharing books with babies

You may be tempted to ask, 'What is the point of reading to babies? What sense can they possibly make of books?'

In fact, there are many good reasons for reading to babies. Just sharing a picture book with a baby is a great opportunity for getting into more communication, more talk, lots of cuddles and a really close look at pictures. A book is also one of the simplest and best toys we can offer a child, after all, it doesn't need a power supply or lots of storage space.

*The best reason for sharing books with babies is that it is very enjoyable and this great pleasure shouldn't ever be spoilt by pressure from anyone to teach babies and toddlers to read.*

Of course, books are 'educational' and sharing them from the earliest months of life will give a baby an excellent start to communicating, talking, reading and writing. Books will also help you and the babies in your care learn a lot about the wider world and you will never be stuck for something to talk about!

You can also rest assured that there is plenty of reliable evidence that sharing picture books with babies and toddlers lays the foundations for success with school literacy. If news about this important 'root' of literacy doesn't seem all that surprising, you might be interested in some rather more unusual 'off-shoots'. Babies who have shared books at home with their carers also make a flying start in mathematics and science by the time they are 7 and 8 years old. This information comes from a careful study of parents and babies in the city of Birmingham, England, who were given free books and poetry cards and asked to share them every day at home and join the local public library. This project is called Bookstart and has spread throughout the UK and involves families from all kinds of different ethnic, educational and economic backgrounds.

We believe that books are wonderful for babies but we would not want them to push other toys and experiences out of their daily lives, so care and education settings, as well as homes, should never deny babies the pleasures of soft toys, old bags and boxes, mud, sand, water, leaves, shells, cooking pots and lids, bricks, rattles and blankets!

*What do babies get from books?*

*Cuddles and stories*

The babies in your care will soon associate books and storytelling with love, security, closeness and pleasure. They will also hear a special story language that has very satisfying rhythms and repetitions. These good feelings about language, stories and books can last a lifetime.

*Pictures*

Looking at the pictures in books and talking about them helps babies make sense of what is going on in a book. It is the start of learning to create stories that give meanings to pictures. Looking very closely at pictures also develops the useful literacy habit of concentrating on tiny details. This becomes very important when older children start to become readers and look at words, letters and small changes in groups of letters.

*Black marks*

The little black marks we call print are of great interest to many





babies as they can see them very distinctly. Babies who are shown lots of books, magazines and other print gradually begin to understand that the 'black marks' are also telling a story.

*Remember that enjoying cuddles and stories and pictures and print with professional carers and family members helps babies to get the message that literacy is about communication and pleasure.*

*How is sharing a book with a baby done?*

It is usual to make a start once you judge that a baby has become adjusted to your setting and knows one or two key practitioners (see below). Babies at home can be introduced to some books just as soon as their carers have settled down to life with baby!

Find a calm moment when a baby is awake and ready to communicate and play.

Find a fairly quiet place – try it without the TV on whatever the setting – and avoid any other distractions nearby, like musical instruments or crashing building blocks! This is a special time just for the baby and a familiar carer. If you care for several babies, still try to organise times when you can share books with individual babies.

Keep it very brief, especially at first, and let the baby's interest guide you.

A little singing, bouncing, tickling or dancing around makes the book even more fun.

Be really comfortable indoors and outdoors – you and the baby can lie down, curl up under a blanket or in the shade, or just sit how and where you like. Books are to be enjoyed.

Hold the book close to the baby's focus – just a few inches in the early months – and close enough to be touched or sniffed by the baby. Books are for touching, smelling and even tasting!

Turn the pages slowly and talk about what is going on in the story and the pictures. Watch the baby closely and try to let her set the pace for when to turn over and how much to talk. Change bits of the story in the book so as to make it seem to be about this baby and her world. Ask the baby a few questions and point out some interesting things in the pictures. Don't forget to enjoy making a bit of a fool of yourself by using different voices and animal noises, this all helps to bring the book to life.

You will only need a few books that you use again and again in

the early days of book sharing. Babies and toddlers love to get really familiar with their books and will soon demand lots and lots of re-readings of their favourites.

As you are going to do a lot of re-reading, try to choose some books that really appeal to you and make you want to talk about the pictures, or the things that are going on.

Store the collection of books for babies low down in a basket or on a shelf so that once babies start to crawl they can find the books and look at them at any time of the day.

#### *Key practitioners*

Babies and young toddlers who come into a group setting for the first time need a very gradual introduction to the non-family adults who care for them. They cannot cope with varied numbers of adults who come and go and they must have one 'special' or key person to relate to in the early weeks and months. This person will remain special for them, even when their social contacts increase, and provide a bridge between home and group setting. The key practitioner can be thought of as the person who keeps all the special intimate knowledge about the child (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994). This is the person who welcomes and settles the child every day, does many of the essential care routines, and gets to know the child's temperament, her likes and dislikes, little habits, cultural background and home experiences. The key practitioner is *not* a parent substitute but a wonderful additional carer who always looks out for the child in the group setting, liaises with any outside agencies (like welfare or health specialists), and enriches the life of the individual child and her family.

#### *Problems?*

##### *I'm not very good at reading*

Don't worry, a baby doesn't know this and will still love this special time. Let the books and the pictures do their work and turn you into a creative storyteller who is having a good time.

##### *I can't read English easily*

You can use the pictures to help you invent your own stories and many picture books do not have any text (print) at all – or very little. Be confident about talking about books in your home



language, or other languages you share with the children, and tell the children the traditional stories of your childhood, your community and your culture. Invite parents and family carers from specific language communities in to the setting to tell stories and sing lullabies and songs with the babies and toddlers.

*I have several babies in my early years setting*

You can certainly have some enjoyable times with a small group of babies and toddlers who are sharing books together, turning the pages and telling each other what is happening in the stories. But try to make it possible, as we suggested above, for each baby to have a short time alone with a key adult and a book. These special times do make a difference to later literacy success in school and should be given a high priority.

*We can't afford to buy many books*

Try to borrow books, or video and audio story tapes from libraries. Take small groups of children to library storytelling sessions. Ask about local schemes to give literacy advice to carers and free books to young children (there are lots). Make your own simple group books using photos and drawings stuck in scrapbooks, photo albums or even on sheets of paper stitched or clipped together. Invite the children's families in to make simple books about their own babies.

## **A case study**

***Dylan and his books*** (Whitehead, 2002)

This is a study of a baby boy living in London with his English mother and American father who shared picture books with his parents and grandparents from the age of 8 weeks. The study follows Dylan's development and adventures with books up to his 3rd birthday, but there are some interesting observations of what went on in the first 18 months. Right from the start Dylan was involved with all kinds of print, not just picture books, because his carers often held him while they looked at newspapers, magazines, TV listings, adult books, etc. From 3 months Dylan was a very noisy and pro-active book sharer! He would gurgle, squeal, kick his legs, bang the pages and scrabble on the paper with his fingers. By 8 months a real sense of humour emerged as Dylan



*2.2 Dylan, 9 months, looking at a catalogue on his own*

giggled helplessly when the animals in his favourite book fell out of a big bed with 'thuds', 'bumps' and 'crashes'. Dylan would watch the face of anyone reading to him very closely and also scan the illustrations slowly and thoroughly, as if searching for clues about how the story was going.

By 9 months Dylan liked to read quietly on his own and his favourite position was on his back with a book or magazine held up over his head. He now sounded as if he was reading because his vocalisations were varied, rhythmic and very expressive. At the start of his second year Dylan had a few favourite books that he looked at and listened to over and over again. Some of these were so important to him that he took them to bed with him and could not settle unless he knew exactly where they were. He always liked to sit with a little pile of books to look at, especially after meals, naps and bath time. By 16 months he made all the appropriate noises for the animals in his books and started to name the objects in book illustrations and he particularly enjoyed 'First Word Books' and ABCs. When Dylan was 18 months old the household reflected his passion for 'books with everything' as little



collections of books appeared everywhere. In his bedroom there were books in a box alongside two comfy floor cushions; there was a magazine rack of books in his parents' bedroom for early morning visits; a basket of books was next to his toy-box in the living room and more picture books were on the family book shelves. Then, of course, there were little books attached to his buggy and plastic books among the bath toys.

## Deep literacy roots

In the first year of a baby's life we can make sure that the roots of literacy go deep by doing some other fun things, as well as sharing books.

- **Play with language** – really enjoy the sounds that babies make and try mucking about with language yourself. Just exaggerate words, names and noises and go in for lots of rhythm and repetition.
- **Sing and dance** – enjoy all kinds of songs, music, clapping, stamping and dancing with the babies in your care. Use these songs, noises and rhythms in the stories you tell or read.
- **Share rhymes and poetry** – sing or recite verses that have good rhymes, nonsense words and tongue-twisters (these rely on words starting with the same sounds), or bits of songs, poems, chants and hymns you remember.

These may seem strange things to do, but they develop young children's love of language and their understanding of how it works.

## A first year with books

You might enjoy keeping a record of a baby's first year with books. This can be done for a baby at home or in a care setting. If you are a key practitioner for one baby, or several, in a setting you should share this record with the child's family and with your professional colleagues. Parents who choose to do this at home might like to share it with the child's first professional carers or teachers.

## Our first year with books

Some books we liked \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Favourite pictures in our books \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What BABY'S NAME liked to do with books

\_\_\_\_\_

Our favourite rhymes, songs, dances, music \_\_\_\_\_

Baby's first sounds \_\_\_\_\_

Baby's first words \_\_\_\_\_

Baby's favourite games, noises, actions \_\_\_\_\_

What BABY'S NAME laughed at \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Further information

#### *Brainy babies*

Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A. and Kuhl, P. (1999) *How Babies Think*.  
London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

#### *Signing with hearing babies*

Video: Felix, S. (2001) *Sing and Sign. Help your baby to communicate before speech.* [www.singandsign.com](http://www.singandsign.com)