

Introduction

- *What can I do to help my child learn to read?*
- *How are children taught to read and write at school?*
- *How can I avoid feeling frustrated especially when I have told my child the same word five times and he still does not know it?*
- *How do I eliminate the stress associated with reading at home?*
- *She wants me to read the same book again and again...what can I do?*
- *He says he hates reading ... what can I do about that?*

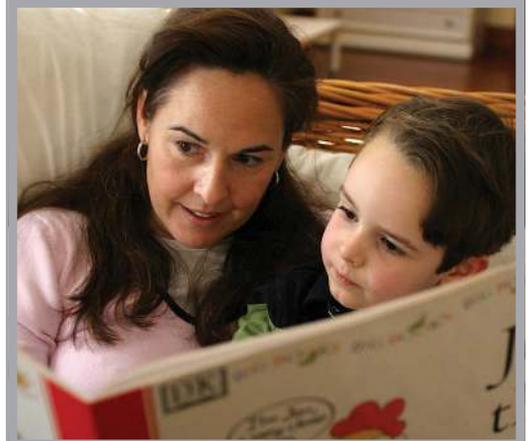
Parents' guide to helping children at home with reading and writing

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These are just a few of the many questions that caring parents ask. Often the only thing parents lack is the information to be able to change home practices that are not working. This guide will give ideas and strategies to address these and other questions in order that the love of a book re-emerges as central to parent and child reading time.

When parents and teachers collaborate to assist children's reading and writing, children benefit. Fundamental to understanding what is happening in today's classrooms is communication, and this guide informs parents about current, effective literacy practices and why they are important. Often, sensational, misconstrued and ill-informed information is perpetuated in the media leaving parents confused and worried. With this guide, PETAA seeks to eliminate some of these fears. Reading and writing together with your child should not be construed as a test. Rather, it is an opportunity for you to get to know your child as a learner who is striving to be literate.

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Learning to read

What we need to know

Reading begins at a very early age when children start to take notice of the print that surrounds them and the talk that includes them. Children begin to engage with reading and writing experiences that attract their attention and interest before they go to school. Children notice street signs and most can recognise a large yellow 'M' sign from a kilometre up the road because it benefits them! They pay attention to books they like and often insist on many re-readings of their favourites.

Include children in conversations because that is where they learn new words that ultimately assist in their reading and writing.

Let children make decisions about the books they choose to read. Keep introducing them to different kinds of books — humorous books, books with beautiful illustrations, rhyming books, pop-up books. Find books that are interesting and fun to share.

Parents who tell interesting stories aloud to their children and spend quality time reading together with them provide the best opportunities for children to learn to love reading.

There is no magical formula for teaching reading. Children learn in their own time according to their own pace. There is no critical age when all children should have mastered reading. When children are learning to walk and talk, we accept different levels of progress — it is the same with learning to read and write. This does not imply, that meanwhile, the parent sits back doing nothing. Children need ongoing quality experiences with books. Providing a regular, reading routine at home assists children in their quest for reading success.

The media often overstates the need to teach phonics. Phonics is the relationship between letters and sounds and is not the only strategy children use when reading unfamiliar words. There are other effective ways to assist children identify unfamiliar words, which includes the practice of encouraging children to look for meaning. Try saying:

- Read on and collect other clues.
- Go back to the beginning of the sentence and reread what you read.
- Look at the illustration and see if there are clues there.
- What do you think would make sense here?

Teachers are aware that they should avoid being the instant word factory where the child continually looks to them for help or advice. They would avoid saying 'sound it out', or giving a clue that takes the child away from the text such as '[That word]...it is the colour of the sweater you were wearing last Tuesday'.

In classrooms, children are at many different stages of learning. Teachers accommodate the various levels by taking into consideration children's interests, abilities and language backgrounds.

Reading time, whether at home or in the classroom must be fun. Learning occurs best when what is being learned is relevant, interesting and has a purpose. Spending quality time with your child reading books, newspapers, magazines, comics, music lyrics, poetry, junk mail, and accessing information on the Internet is what brings your child back to reading night after night — tomorrow night and the night after. The value is in creating readers who want to read rather than creating readers who see it as a chore and hard work. Practising meaningless tasks and reading drills does little to entice the reader to engage with real books.

What parents can do

Reading is not a perfect process and if your child is having difficulty reading a book or feeling stressed, try doing any of the following:

- **Read aloud and together** — the child reads slightly behind you as you read in your normal reading voice.
- **Take turns** — you read a page, sentence, or paragraph and your child reads the next one.
- **Read and reread** — read the page, sentence or paragraph and then your child rereads it.
- If the book is boring, too complex or too silly — find another one. There is no fine for not reading the book and the aim is to build a love for reading. The only challenge is to find books that you and your child will love to read.

Some tips for home reading

- Establish a home reading routine. Read aloud with your child everyday in your home language. Share your excitement for reading and this will be the model your child will adopt.
- Before you read a book with your child, talk about the illustrations and the title. Read the blurb and talk about the author.
- If reading time is stressful, move to a new location. Instead of sitting at the kitchen bench, move to the lounge room floor, or go outside and sit under a tree or take the books to the local coffee shop.
- Find a reading time that works for your family. Limit the time and set the timer if reading in the past has always been difficult. It is better to have an enjoyable 15 minutes than a laborious 30 minutes where everyone is left feeling frustrated.
- Ask questions that encourage your children to talk about what they have read. Questions such as: *What was your favourite part? Tell me about the characters. What do you think will happen next? Where did the story take place? What do like/dislike about this book?*
- Encourage your child to read independently. A bed light is one of the best enticements for your child to read before going to sleep.
- Avoid judging your child's reading with words such as: *'good', 'excellent' or 'getting better'*. Instead say things about the strategies your child uses when reading such as: *'I like how you read on when you came to that difficult word.'* *'I like how you changed your voice to be the voice of the character in the story.'* *'I noticed that you reread the bit that did not make sense.'*
- Visit the local library — make it a family ritual on a set day every week. Let your children select their own books while you select books you are interested in reading. Not every book has to be read cover to cover. Your child might select books on the basis of illustrations or factual information about a topic of interest. Independent readers pick and choose what they read. They are entitled to read some and reject others.
- Turn the television off. Model what it means to be an enthusiastic reader. Create a home of readers where everyone is seen to read. Talk about what you have read. Read aloud what makes you laugh and share it with your child.

Learning to write

What we need to know

Children experiment with writing long before they start school. Their early squiggles and drawings are the beginning of writing.

Books provide a powerful model of what writing looks like. Books convey the understanding that squiggles on a page convey a message. Reading and writing with your children helps them to make sense of how written language works.

We learn to write by writing. In classrooms, children are encouraged to select topics that express their ideas and interests. It is difficult (sometimes impossible) to write about unfamiliar topics or topics that are irrelevant to our life experiences. Before writing, talking about a topic is a good place to collect thoughts and ideas.

Not all writing needs to be edited. We do not edit our shopping lists, diaries or reminder notes!

When children write and freely express their ideas, this is called draft writing. At this stage, worrying about spelling can hinder their styles, expressions and exploration of words that best communicate their ideas. If the draft writing is to be shared with a wider audience, and has been edited for meaning, the next stage is to proofread for spelling, punctuation and grammatical mistakes. Not all writing needs to be edited. We do not edit our shopping lists, diaries or reminder notes! Children need to be encouraged to write for enjoyment and play with words.

In classrooms, children explore writing as a process from drafts to published pieces. Children are encouraged to write for real purposes and utilise a range of different text types such as report writing, narratives and poetry. They are also taught to consider how to appeal to different audiences.

Some parents confuse handwriting with writing. Handwriting is a surface feature of writing and children who are self-conscious of their handwriting benefit from opportunities to write and draw with a variety of pens, textas, paint, magic boards, chalk and 'fancy' pencils. Making available a box of coloured papers, scissors, glue, staples and other construction materials encourages children to experiment with handwriting and writing stories for enjoyment.



What parents can do

- Encourage children to write, write, write! Provide many opportunities such as writing the shopping list, sending letters and cards to friends and relations, writing emails, keeping a diary, publishing personal stories, labelling photos in the family album, and leaving notes. It should be relevant and meaningful writing rather than writing for the sake of writing.
- Give your children opportunities to read their stories aloud (while you sit back and listen). Listen with a focus on the message they express. Comment on what they have done well, for example: *'I like how you started your story. Read the lead sentence again.'* *'I enjoyed how you used interesting words such as X, Y, Z.'* *'The character you created seems so real. I can imagine how he looks.'* Leave comments about spelling, punctuation, and grammar to another time — they are important if and when, it is to be published. If children are encouraged to freely express their meaning and are acknowledged, they are more inclined to want to write.
- Draw children's attention to writing in the environment — street signs, shop signs, labels on food containers, writing on clothing, signs on billboards — these signs and notices are models of writing for real purposes.
- Create a community of writers. Provide a quiet place for writing with lots of writing materials. Leave notes for each other, write poems for your children, send messages in lunch containers. Play writing games, for example, one person writes the beginning, another the middle and the other the end of a family story. Write together.



Work that comes home from school may not have every spelling error corrected, every grammatical mistake rectified or punctuation inserted. It is important to talk with your children about the purpose of the work and what they learned, rather than emphasise the errors. Ask 'tell me questions' such as: *'Tell me about this work...'* *'Tell me how you did this...'* *'Tell me what you liked about this activity...'*

Learning to spell

What we need to know

Spelling is a tool for writing. Reading, writing and spelling are interconnected. Readers and writers are constantly building up images of how words look. Writers become conscious users and consumers of words. They take notice of words in the books they read and the words they see in their environment.

Good spellers are resourceful. When they notice that a word does not look right, they experiment and substitute other letters, find the word in a book, a magazine, the environment, the dictionary, use the spell checker, or ask someone.

Every writing time is a spelling time. Writers compose for meaning first and foremost. They proofread to ensure the intended message is conveyed accurately and appropriately for their intended reader.

Teachers vary the way they teach spelling. Most spelling words relate to the work the children are studying or are selected because children use them in their writing. In order for children to retain correct spellings, they need to use the words in their writing. Most of us have difficulty spelling words that we rarely (if ever) use or seldom see in our reading.

Children need encouragement to use words that they cannot necessarily spell. This is how they learn to spell new words. Children who lack confidence with spelling or are fearful of getting a word wrong, often substitute less relevant and less interesting words, for example, 'exciting' becomes 'fun'.

It is desirable that children become independent spellers rather than rely on you to spell words they don't know. The first step is to encourage them to identify words they think they have spelled incorrectly. When children want to write a word, encourage them to 'have a go' at spelling it and then look again to see if they think it is spelled correctly. You could also show them where they have made an error and rewrite the word showing them the letters that are correct. See if they can correct the word by trying other letters; draw the shape of the word; ask where they saw the word last; or suggest they find the book where the word appears.



What parents can do

- Play games with spelling. Play games like Scrabble, Boggle, crosswords and make words from number plates, letters in your names, words that can be spelled the same forward and backwards.
- Play word games like thinking of rhyming words, opposites, or words that sound like their meanings. The Internet has many fun and free spelling activities.
- Point out unusual words in the books you read together.
- Look for words in the environment.
- Show that you care about spelling. Ask: 'who knows how to spell...'. Say that you will write it down and take a look at it to see if it looks right.
- Children learn to spell by writing and noticing words when they read. Make reading and writing an integral part of your child's day. Take the fear out of spelling by identifying what is right about the word rather than what is wrong. The child's attempt to spell grass, 'grs' is closer than 'gdfh'. Point out that 'gr_s_' is correct and ask what other letters could complete the word.



Take the fear out of spelling by identifying what is right about the word rather than what is wrong.

What we owe every child

In these exciting times education is undergoing rapid change. Classrooms, the role of the teacher and what and how students learn are being transformed with the advent of technology. More than ever before, our children will need to be literate, informed and questioning in order to adapt to the changing nature of education and the demands of society. They will not only need to be readers, writers and spellers — they will be required to be confident, critical thinkers, problem solvers, innovators, effective communicators, collaborators; and importantly self-directed learners.

To support children for the unknown demands of the future, schools will focus on much more than just reading and writing. Happy, caring, creative students of the future will:

- communicate effectively in speech and writing
- identify, investigate and solve a wide range of problems by seeking appropriate solutions
- rapidly and clearly communicate solutions to others
- reason logically, analyse and synthesise information from many sources
- think critically about what they read, see and hear
- understand their own and others' cultures
- co-operate and negotiate with others in work and social life
- create and express through the arts, crafts and sports
- view learning as a lifelong process and adapt to continual change.

Schools are adjusting to changes in learning and teaching. Technology demands that new methods are applied. Traditional approaches of the past will not be sufficient for learners of the future. With blogs, wikis, email, chats, and virtual worlds infiltrating classrooms, the world our children move into is unimagined and will require much more than our experience of being educated. Only through the combined efforts of parents as partners in education with teachers who embrace new ways of teaching, will education extend the learning potential of all students to cope and thrive in a new world. It will take a co-operative effort with effective communication at its core.



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A series of information cards intended to provide parents with specific information about the primary school curriculum and how they can help their child to achieve success at school.

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ABOUT PETAA

The Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA), founded in 1972, is a national professional association supporting primary school educators in the teaching and learning of English and literacies across the curriculum. For information on how to join and to view professional learning resources, visit the PETAA website.

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