

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

Kaye Lowe

To parents and carers

You make a difference to your children's reading journey. Your role as an advocate for your children's reading success cannot be overestimated. It has a direct impact on the ease and confidence with which they pursue their reading and writing. It is the joy and love of sharing a good book on a nightly basis that sets the foundation for their reading success, and ensures that reading is given the priority it deserves. Reading regularly with someone who cares is the inspiration that all readers deserve.

As parents and carers, you create the home context for reading and set the tone for how reading is valued. Fear, anxiety, stress and humiliation have no place in the reading experience. The 'payoff' for reading together has to be worth coming back to night after night after night. When reading together is the best time of your children's day and the best time of your day, it is worth turning up. The right book infused with fun, laughter, and love goes a long way in creating life-long readers who in thirty years' time recall with joy being snuggled on the lounge with you and their favourite book.



Introduction

When it comes to reading and supporting children's literacy development, parents rightly ask a myriad questions. These questions indicate an interest and desire to know more. The vast majority of parents is committed to their children's literacy success and would do whatever it takes to find a solution if and when their children struggle with reading. They know how important it is. Parents want to know, they ask:

- 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?
- The only thing I know to say is what I remember from when I was at school ...I say 'Sound it out', but it doesn't seem to work with most words. What else can I say?
- What can I do to help when English is my second language and I cannot read well myself? I worry that it will have a negative impact on my child's reading. Will it?

These are just a few of the many questions that parents ask. Children benefit when parents and teachers collaborate to share information and seek answers to these questions. 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 reports are 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 – a learner striving to be literate.



The proven benefits of reading with your child

Parents and carers who read aloud with children in a secure, safe and comfortable context motivate their children to read.

Parents' perceptions, values, attitudes, and expectations play an important role in influencing their children's attitudes toward reading, and subsequent literacy development. When children share a book with someone who makes them feel special, the attitude that reading is pleasurable is transferred to other reading encounters.

Relationship building

At the core of reading is a relationship and it is the bond between children and parents that is enhanced through reading together. It only takes ten minutes a day to build this relationship.

Children's reading improves

The research is conclusive: When parents successfully support their children's literacy learning from an early age, everyone benefits. When teachers and parents work together to support children's reading and academic success, learning outcomes for all children improve.

Children read more

Students who read with their parents are better prepared for school. They begin school with knowledge of book language and familiarity with concepts of print. They understand how books work and have many more exposures to text types and vocabulary.

Children's self-esteem improves

Knowing someone cares enough to take time out of a busy schedule to give you undivided attention around a book makes a significant difference to how students perceive themselves as learners and readers. When parents show an interest in their children's learning, children respond positively.

Reading unites families through shared stories

When a family reads together, stories form a common ground for communicating. Stories bind families and help students make sense of where they fit in the world.

Not only does parent involvement have a specific and profound impact on children's reading, but also on children's language and literacy learning in general. It is through interactions with parents and carers that children learn new vocabulary, seek clarification of new understandings, and learn to comprehend their expanding worlds. Talk is the key to reading and writing success. Talking with children (walking to school, at the table, in the car, bedtime) has a significant effect on literacy learning in general.



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. They learn quickly to find apps on mobile phones and electronic devices because it benefits them to do so.

Talk is a key to literacy learning. Children need opportunities to interact. Recent research indicates that children are becoming more adept at communicating in the language of commands and demands rather than being competent in extended conversations. I suspect electronic devices may be inhibiting the time parents spend talking with their children. Children need to be included in interactions with significant others and to ensure that happens, electronic devices need to be turned off. Parents need to talk with their children! It is in the context of engaged conversations that children expand their vocabularies, increase their understandings of the world, learn about themselves, and learn the nuances of the language and effective communication.

Let children make decisions about the books they choose to read. This implies that there is a well-stocked and suitable range of books from which to choose. It is essential that there are lots of books in the home and that they are readily available. Create a book-flood by borrowing weekly from the local library, buying from garage sales, finding supermarket specials, making your own, and sharing books in the community. Look at how books are stored in the home, for example, bookshelves, book boxes, or shoe boxes. Are the books visible or tucked out of sight? Do the children have a bed light to read at night? Keep introducing children to different kinds of books — humorous books, books with beautiful illustrations, rhyming books, pop-up books, electronic books, graphic novels, and factual texts. With your children, visit places such as the local library, markets and bookstores to find books that are interesting and fun to share. The number of books, the care of books, and the storage of books are all messages regarding how books and reading are valued in this household. What message are you marketing?

Building on the diversity of family literacy practices

Families participate in diverse and successful reading and writing practices. The diversity of these practices needs to be recognised and celebrated. For example, when families from different cultural backgrounds share their traditions and passions for storytelling the literacy learning of their children is enhanced. When parents share a book in their first language with their children, they are building the foundations for a positive attitude to reading and expanding on the child's language skills. When parents and carers just take time to talk about a book, the child benefits.

To accommodate the diversity of home literacy practices, it is essential that parents:

- engage children in many and varied types of literacy experiences not just storybook reading, for example, cooking, newspapers, television information, instructions, street signs, brochures, junk mail, electronic communication, notes, singing, talk, and written communication
- appreciate that different family members, not just parents, play a role in literacy learning, for example grandparents, siblings, extended families
- recognise and celebrate the literacy associated with cultural differences and traditions
- locate resources, for example, interpreters and electronic resources that can assist in decreasing the communication divide and strengthen partnerships between homes and schools.

All parents play a crucial role in supporting their children. Sometimes, parents need reassurance and assistance to find ways to use the skills that they do possess. Focus is on what parents *can* do; not on what they cannot. Spending quality time interacting with children goes a long way to supporting children's literacy development.

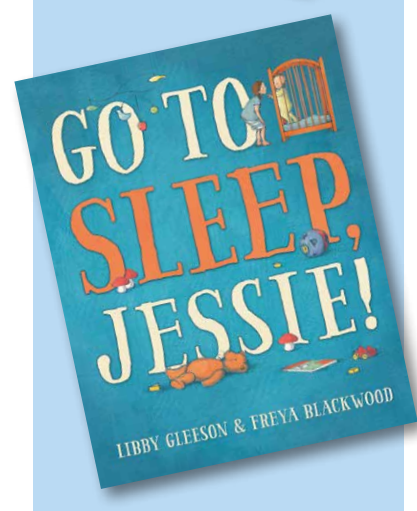
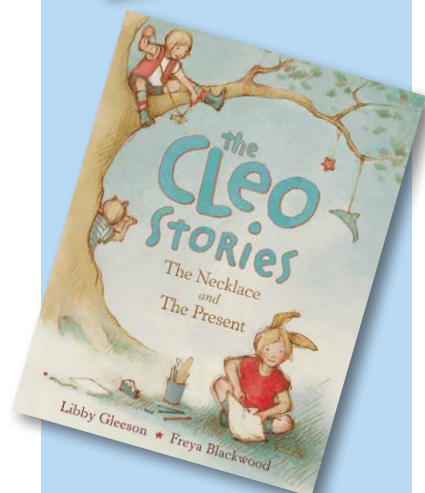
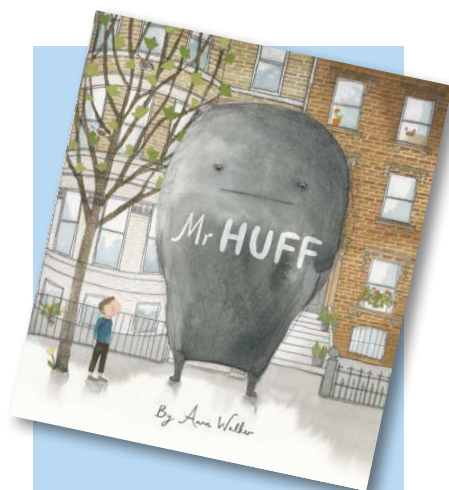
The process of learning to read

There is no magical formula for learning to read. 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. Prior to saying anything to assist the reader, allow sufficient wait time. Readers need to look around for clues. The aim is to move the reader towards independence as quickly as possible and that does mean getting out of the way. The reader has to look around to locate clues. Too often, their only clue is to look to the parent to fill the gap. Rescuing won't help! Keep your eyes on the book and avoid eye contact. After waiting sufficient time, try saying:

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

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'. If the word is an uncommon word or outside of the child's vocabulary such as 'camouflage' drop it in, don't have a vocabulary lesson. Keep the reading flowing because it is paramount that the reader comprehends the text. Keep on reading. The issue was not necessarily a reading issue but a vocabulary problem. If on the other hand, the child fills the gap with a word similar in meaning, for example, 'hide' instead of camouflage, celebrate. The child is telling you that he comprehends what is happening. That is what good readers do! Don't stop and correct it! Avoid poking at words. Struggling readers often think the clue is in the word and fixate. The clue is in looking ahead, re-reading, and making sense of the text. For those words outside the reader's vocabulary, for example, 'camouflage' you can always go back and talk about it at the end.



Some tips for home reading

- Establish a home reading routine. Read aloud with your children everyday. Ten minutes for each child around a book of his/her choice. If English is your second language, read in your home language. If you lack confidence in reading aloud, the fact that you are reading with your child is what matters. Talk about the illustrations and contribute where you can. Share your excitement for reading and this will be the model your child will adopt.
- The reader holds the book! There is a lot of power and control in the world of reading. The reader needs to have the power.
- During home reading time, turn off electronic devices and give each child ten minutes of your undivided attention.
- Before you read a book, set your child up for success. Reading is not a test! Reading time is only ten minutes so do some of the following: Keep the introduction short – one minute is enough. Talk about the illustrations and the title. Read the blurb and talk about the author, talk about any unusual words, read a page here and there as your child flicks through the book, discuss the characters. This is a short introduction, not an interrogation. If the book is already a familiar one, then this step is unnecessary.
- If reading time is stressful, move the reading 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 10 minutes than a laborious 30 minutes where everyone is left feeling frustrated.
- At the end of the 10 minutes, ask questions that encourage discussion, for example: *What was your favourite part? Tell me about the characters. What do you think will happen next? What did you think about that setting? What do like/ dislike about this book?* There is no need to interrogate the reader. Make it a conversation as you would in a book club.
- Encourage your child to read independently. A bedside light is one of the best enticements for your child to read before going to sleep. After the 10 minutes of reading with you, the child can elect to continue reading independently.
- The less you interrupt the 10 minutes of reading, the more you are supporting the readers independence, resilience and confidence. Zip your lips, monitor the miscues, and listen as your child reads.
- 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.'*
- If your child is reading independently and has reached the level of chapter books, it is not necessary for you to read aloud together any more. Your job is done. That is not to say, you cannot continue to share reading time because it is what you love to do as a family or that you sit and read silently together or that you talk about the books your child is reading because you are interested in his reading choices. Readers read differently in their heads as compared to reading aloud.
- Visit the local library — make it a family ritual on a set day every week. Let your children select their 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 based on 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. They are entitled to not complete books because they are boring. Readers make choices.
- Model what it means to be an enthusiastic reader. Create a home of readers where everyone reads – It is just what we do in this house! Talk about what you have read. Read aloud what makes you laugh and share it with your child

Strategies every parent needs to know

The following strategies work for young children through to adults. The only difference is the book choice of the reader.

These strategies are useful when children choose books beyond their instructional levels. They choose books they want to read but as yet, cannot read them independently. Before introducing these strategies, it is always best to allow the reader to read for a few minutes while monitoring the miscues. After a few minutes of reading aloud, and when a pattern in the miscues indicates that meaning is lost and reading is laboured, show the reader any of the following strategies. I usually introduce echo and shared together and then ask the reader to choose. These strategies are not hierarchical. They all offer layers of support to give the reader access to the book of his/her choice. Remember, the reader always holds the book.

Echo reading

Echo reading is simply, parent reads a sentence, paragraph or page (depending on the text) and the child repeats it back. Before starting, negotiate with the child to read a sentence, paragraph or page. The parent reads first. The child re-reads (echoes) the sentence, paragraph or page. Continue in this way to complete the book. Echo reading eliminates the frustration and anxiety that is too often associated with reading aloud. It often happens that once the child becomes confident with the book, author's style, and language, he or she does not stop for the parent to take a turn – ultimately, that is the goal – independence. If it does not happen that the child takes over, echo reading is effective. By 'echoing' your reading, the child has an opportunity to sound like a fluent reader. This is important in building a child's sense of what it feels like and sounds like to be a good reader. The child feels confident, relaxed and enjoys the experience. It is about comprehension and having fun with a good book. During echo reading, parents model good reading. When parents miscue, they share the experience. This allows the child to see that all readers make miscues and self-correct.



Shared reading

With shared reading, the parent reads, the child reads. They take turns to read. The parent negotiates with the child to read a sentence, paragraph or page depending on the book. When the parent reads, any loss of meaning, misunderstandings or mispronunciations that have been made by the child are rectified without drawing attention to the child's miscues. When the child comes to unfamiliar words, he/she will hear it read correctly by the parent and will automatically self-correct the next time the word appears. Shared reading ensures that comprehension is maintained. Shared reading eliminates the frustration of reading because the parent is a partner in the reading of the selected text.

Neurological Impress Method (NIM)

The child reads aloud 'mimicking' the words of the text as the parent reads aloud. The child reads a couple of words behind the parent. The parent tracks with a finger so the child can keep up. It is important to avoid word pointing – instead, the parent's finger moves across the line in a fluid movement. The only reason the parent tracks is because children get distracted and when they drop back into the reading, they know where the parent is reading. The parent reads at a normal reading pace. When the child looks away from the book, the parent does not stop reading. Continue with enthusiasm and the child will return to the book. When using NIM, the child has an opportunity to sound like a fluent reader. This is important in building a child's sense of what it feels like and sounds like to be a good reader. The child sounds like a fluent reader and builds confidence and trust. There is no stress and angst.

Paired reading

Paired reading is an effective support for readers who ignore punctuation, read in a monotone, and/or extremely quickly or slowly. It is also a good strategy when children choose to read their favourite book for the 55th time. Just read it together and love it one more time. Paired reading is simply reading together at the same pace and in the same place. The parent reads in a normal reading voice. It usually takes a couple of sentences for both readers to fall into sync. It is like dancing with a partner and it might feel a little awkward until a common rhythm and rhyme are reached. The child holds the book, turns the pages and enjoys the time together.



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. Children love to write! 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.

When children write and freely express their ideas, this is called *draft writing*. Children need many opportunities to express their thoughts and ideas in writing without being concerned about the mechanics of writing such as spelling, punctuation and grammar. At this stage, worrying about spelling, punctuation and grammar can hinder their styles, expressions and exploration of words that best communicate their ideas. In fact, this level of response often 'kills' off the writer who learns to write less and take fewer risks. Instead, respond to the ideas of the writer – for example, ask: *Where did you get your idea? Are you writing a factual text (poem, recipe, chapter book etc)? What is going to happen next? Read me your lead sentence again because that really had me interested in your story. What is going to happen to your main character?*

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 recipes, factual texts, notes, report writing, narratives and poetry. They are also taught to consider how to appeal to different audiences.

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. Locating writing apps such as Book Creator.
- Writing should be relevant and meaningful rather than writing for the sake of writing.
- Give 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 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.
- Draw children's attention to how writing is presented, for example, on brochures, billboards, books, and electronic media — these 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, and 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.

What parents can do

- Draw attention to words in the environment and in the books you read together, for example: *'Look at those two words...they almost are identical except for the last letter'; 'That word is really long'; 'That word is French'; 'That word has three syllables in it; 'Those two words rhyme'.*
- Play games with spelling. Play games like Scrabble, crosswords and make words from number plates, letters in your names, words that can be spelled the same forward and backwards. Look for spelling apps that you can play together, for example, Boggle.
- 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.

Handwriting should not be confused 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. When it comes to publishing, children often publish on the computer, use voice to text recognition or publish in a variety of ways such a poster, alphabet books, dioramas, or chapter books. The form the publishing takes is the best match for the type of story being told.

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. Spelling should not be a deterrent for writing or effective expression of meaning. It is preferable for a child to use the word 'serendipity' because it is the word of choice even though he may not be able to spell it yet, rather than not use it at all or be forced to substitute a less significant and less interesting word. Using words is how new words are learned.

Children who lack confidence with spelling or are fearful of getting a word wrong, often restrict their expression to words they know and can as a consequence, become reluctant writers.

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. Initially, focus on what they have right rather than what is wrong. Show them where they have made an error and 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.

Literate children of the future

It will take a network of parents, carers and teachers working together to ensure that our children of the future have the literate success they deserve.

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.

The learning potential of all students to cope and thrive in a new world is dependent upon the co-operative effort and effective communication of all stakeholders. However, at the core must remain, our combined endeavour and unwavering commitment to ensure that all students succeed and discover the joy and love of reading and writing. Their future depends on it.



Choosing quality literature

Visit the PETAA website to find and download a list of recent Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) quality literature titles that parents might wish to use with their children.

This download, plus access to this article, are complimentary courtesy of PETAA.

You will find the downloads at the 'For Parents' page in Teaching Resources on the PETAA website (http://www.petaa.edu.au/imis_prod/parents)

About the author

Dr. Kaye Lowe is Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of Canberra and Director of 'Read4Success'. She has had a life-long passion for literacy learning and supporting struggling readers.

Kaye has worked in many learning contexts including P-12, parent education, adult education, jails and juvenile justice. She aspires to make the journey of the reader fun and easy. Her research interests include supporting struggling readers, supporting Indigenous learners, parent education, the impact of technology on literacy learning, boys' education, adult literacy education, and inspiring reluctant writers. She has written four books and numerous chapters and articles on the teaching of reading and writing.

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.

Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA)

PO Box 3106, Marrickville Metro, NSW 2204, Australia

Tel: (02) 8020 3900 **Email:** info@petaa.edu.au **Website:** www.petaa.edu.au