

Books and reading

Bridgette Drake gives the Montessori childminder's perspective

Why Montessori?

I was a mum with a teenager by the time I began my Montessori journey. I left my career in finance/administration when the small spark of an idea to work with children was soon ignited into studying for a BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies. During my studies Montessori had been mentioned, almost as a foot note, but when I started working at Drakes Montessori Childcare, the calm Montessori environment felt right, not just for me but also for the children. My new-found enthusiasm for Montessori led me to gain my International Diploma alongside an MSc in Language and Communication Impairment in Children, and later my Early Years Status. The more I learnt about Montessori and saw the benefits in practice with the children at Drakes, the more I wanted to learn.

At Drakes we offer the children the opportunity to blossom as they gain more independence and become social beings. We work with children aged between 11 months and 4 years, and several primary age after-school children as well.

Why books?

I consider my role as a Montessori practitioner is to use books with two distinct aims: to create the building blocks of spoken language alongside nurturing a love of books that will create future readers who will enjoy reading books of all types. My MSc has given me a deeper understanding that children who struggle with language impairment may also struggle with reading or reading comprehension. I have seen how books help children to explore emotions, experience and gain understanding of their world, through aiding their socialisation and fostering imagination and creativity and broadening their vocabulary. Illustrations and rhyming words can get children talking about what they perceive and think, and also help them absorb the patterns of language.

The books available in our setting vary in format, and



Children using a picture as context as they retell the story

include both fiction and non-fiction, made from fabric, board, paper, photos, and printed or home-made. We feel books should also be accessible to all children to explore independently so our Book Corner is welcoming, floor-based, spacious and well-lit with natural light. Books include familiar and novel titles, to accommodate and reflect a child's interests and offer new challenges. We also choose titles to help children work through specific issues or transitions, such as toilet training, gaining a sibling, going to hospital or moving to a new school. We recently helped a child who was wary of having their hair cut: we introduced a rhyming book, "Need a Trim, Jim" by Kaye Umansky and Margaret Chamberlain. All the children loved it and it fostered a whole new role play activity around hairdressers (instigated and led by the children) and happily the child in question successfully had an actual hair cut soon after.

It is never too early to share books with children to encourage a love of books through mutual enjoyment. Looking at books with children is not only about reading the words. The learning for the child includes: how to hold a book in the right way and how to move through the book by gently turning the pages, that words represent sounds and concepts, that we read from left to right in English, and that stories continue when you flip the page. The benefits for the child's development include promotion of longer attention span, building listening skills, helping them to practice thinking and logic skills such as prediction, story event sequence, what happens next or what could happen next.

Why reading?

Reading is not simply another word for literacy. The broad definition of literacy as "the mastery of spoken language and reading and writing" (Garton and Pratt, 1998:1) takes into account it is expected that literate people are able to speak

Continued on next page ►

fluently too. Factors, such as social context, which support and shape language development (Hoff, 2006) also influence emergent literacy skills. Pre-school children benefit more from listening to written words than reading them, in the form of songs, stories or poems, because the development of phonological awareness begins when children notice the similarities in words, especially via rhyming and alliteration (Bryant et al, 1990; Buckley, 2003). So at Drakes we incorporate rhyming and alliteration into our daily routine with the children. At snack for example, we talk about trying the "groovy grape". We recently had an apple theme and read a short poem about an apple to the children as we tried different types of apple over several weeks. Soon the children were completing the rhymes and then one day a 4 year old spontaneously repeated the whole poem.

How children are introduced to the print environment influences the knowledge that they develop "about the uses and nature of written language long before they are able to decode or manipulate letters – this knowledge is referred to as emergent literacy" (Buckley, 2003:145). Children also use the context within which the writing is set to help them decode, which for early readers might mean using pictures to aid understanding. Reading words does not always start with books. To encourage shape recognition of letters as part of the morning routine, we offer sandpaper letters for children to feel their initial letter in their name before looking for their name label in the fridge in order to put their lunchbox next to it. Reading is part of everyday life and we bring it alive by pointing things out to children such as "what does it say on your t-shirt?" or noticing labels or posters in the environment that feature the same letters as a child's name.

How should I read to a child?

I talk to families during our annual Montessori parents evenings about reading to their child. I explain that when reading at sleep time in our setting I aim to calm and not over-stimulate the child, so I do not ask many questions and my voice is slow and quiet to encourage listening. Whereas story time at other times can be stimulating and I encourage children to ask questions and answer them. A study published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* concluded that reading to a child in an interactive style raises their IQ by over 6 points (Protzko et al, 2013). So I embellish my story-telling: I add more information during the reading to help the child understand difficult concepts. I talk about the characters, the drawings and the events so that the story starts to come alive. I deliberately change characters or objects and the children enjoy correcting me. I read with different voices and other acting skills such as

exaggerated expressions, putting emphasis on repeated words and phrases, and I engage the child as an active participant in the reading by getting them to complete familiar refrains. I do not discourage a child who chooses the same book over and over, as repetition is part of the pleasure a child may get from reading. However I will also extend their repertoire by including a different book too.

When reading with older after-school children we use all of these tactics but in addition we also identify letters, words and punctuation; examining the differences between lower- and upper-case letters; pointing out different punctuation marks to explain what they mean. For very young children you may need to keep it brief and may not be able to finish a book. As a practitioner it is important to be responsive to the child's ability to listen. We encourage children to enjoy books independently and even very young children at Drakes will sit comfortably on the cushions looking at picture books by themselves in the reading corner.

But whatever age range you read to, books need to be presented with enthusiasm and excitement, and not merely used as a vehicle for analysis and deconstruction. Books are important in many ways, paving the way for later independent reading. Suggate (2010)

succinctly writes that "Reading is not like language, in that there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that a dramatic 'sensitive period' exists. There is no window in which reading needs to be learned or else be forever shut" but research suggests that "early and later language is the backbone of reading comprehension"; just as Montessori concluded last century, reading occurs later and only when the child has made the connection with the written word through language.

Becoming a Montessori childminder has been the right path for me and if you are interested in becoming a Montessori childminder we would love to hear from you: please contact the Montessori Childminders Network at jenny@drakesmontessori.co.uk.

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Adult reading to children, interjecting questions about the book