

1

Take them to the library - setting the scene

Introduction

Literacy and communication skills are vital in society today and an early introduction to literacy through a breadth of experiences of rhymes, stories, pictures and books supports these skills. Encouraging young children and their families to access a library with all its resources can provide a great foundation for developing early literacy. There are many routes into reading and practitioners - early years librarians, carers and educators - should capitalize on all of them. Parents are in the best position to introduce their children to the world of words and families can be attracted into the library services by the range of practitioners who work with young children. Early years librarians need to provide positive conditions for all children and their families, so they can access the vast range of books and literacy resources available within libraries. Did you know that a major study of reading (Kirsch, 2002) concludes that reading for pleasure is more important to a child's educational achievement than its family's wealth or social class?

Children's services are receiving a high profile today, as policy-makers are concerned about effective education and the level of reading skills for the Information Age. This first chapter aims to set the scene for early years practitioners in terms of the UK government agenda. The political policies that influence and shape what is offered to our communities and how it will be delivered will be explored. It is important for practitioners to be effective in developing and delivering a range of services to meet local needs, using the techniques of community profiling. This chapter examines a range

2 DELIVERING THE BEST START

of issues related to meeting community needs. Proactive library authorities will use community profiling to develop and customize services to meet the needs of their local communities. Community profiling will be further explored in Chapter 2. Funding, sustainability and accountability are at the centre of most initiatives, but many practitioners may not be aware of the political landscape in which services are delivered. How strong is your professional voice in your parent organization or multi-agency setting? This chapter will explain how important your provision is within the increasingly complex landscape of early years provision in the UK. As an early years practitioner you are an advocate for literacy, and your practices are the tools of such advocacy. Providing resources, developing and delivering services, connecting with young children and their families all create communities of practice. This chapter provides examples of effective schemes between public libraries and other partners.

An overview of early childhood services

Over the past decade, many countries have developed their policies for early childhood education and care (ECEC). Early childhood is now high on the political agenda globally, shaping children's and their families' daily and future lives through policy development. This has evolved through the growing awareness of the significance of the first five years of life for intellectual, social and emotional development and the growing interest and research in these early years from the disciplines of psychology, education, social policy, social care and neuropsychology. This interest in policy has been stimulated by recent studies highlighting that the nurturing, care and education received from parents and carers are vital for optimal brain development, emotional intelligence, learning and educational achievement. There is growing evidence 'from neuroscience, from longitudinal development studies and from population studies that the period of early childhood is crucial in establishing a child's self identity, learning and achievement' (Gammage, 2006, 236). The past 20 years have seen exceptional developments in knowledge about how the brain develops, how genes and the environment interact to affect maturation (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Policy development for early years services is therefore a complex process both conceptually and practically.

A key factor underlying policy development in ECEC is the view that a ‘good start’ in early education might be a way of compensating for any negative effects of children’s developmental context (Sylva et al., 2004). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) (DfES, 1999-2002) longitudinal research on ECEC, funded by the DfES, is a notable study in the field. The project aims were to identify the impact and effectiveness of pre-school on children’s intellectual and social/behavioural development. It demonstrated the importance of parents in children’s early educational achievements. Wilkie (2002) uses positive evidence from the EPPE project in her introduction to a Youth Libraries Group publication. ‘When Professor Kathy Sylva, the principal investigator for the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) research team was asked by the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education and Employment “What is it that parents should do in those early years?”, she replied “Take them to the library”.’

Literacy is a human right

Basic education, within which literacy is the key learning tool, was recognized as a human right in 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1989 the United Nations endorsed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which afforded children the same range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights as adults. It is the most complete statement of children’s rights ever produced and it came into force in the UK in 1992. It requires that services for children develop policies that are responsive to the wide range of children’s needs, encompassing all spheres of their lives (Lewis and Lindsay, 2000).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the first legal instrument to focus solely on the child, regardless of where the child was born and to whom, and regardless of sex, religion and social origin. It sets out in detail what every child needs to have for a safe, happy and fulfilled childhood. The rights focus on three key aspects - the three ‘Ps’ of protection, provision and participation. All of the rights in the convention apply to all children and young people without discrimination. These include the rights to:

4 DELIVERING THE BEST START

- receive special protection measures and assistance
- have access to services such as education and health care
- develop their personalities, abilities and talents to the fullest potential
- grow up in an environment of happiness, love and understanding
- be informed about and participate in achieving their rights in an accessible and active manner.

Key rights include the right to education, the right to literacy and the right to play. Literacy is acknowledged as a major global issue and the UN has established the Literacy Decade from 2003 to 2012.

Literacy takes many forms: on paper, on the computer screen, on TV, on posters and signs. Those who use literacy take it for granted – but those who cannot use it are excluded from much communication in today's world.

UNESCO

Libraries and librarians are a vital aid to literacy development, providing resources to help parents make sure their child has the best start in life. The generic message is that reading with young children is important, irrespective of first language, heritage or cultural background. The pleasure of stories and storytelling is universal and this will be explored further in Chapter 5.

A working group from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) provided an overview of library services to children and young people in the *Start with the Child* report published in 2002. This is at the centre of advocacy activity and argues that libraries can change children's lives. Books can inspire imagination, help emotional growth and develop understanding of the world and our place in the local and global community, past and present.

Libraries are a hugely important part of children's and young people's lives because they bring books and children together; they provide reading opportunities free of charge, and so they encourage experimentation and learning.

(CILIP, 2002, 9)

In many areas, the public library service works in partnership with early years services to provide multi-agency services that are flexible and meet the needs of young children and their families.

The family support workers would tell everyone about the library and they'd bring them down to the library for a visit. They see it as their own, it's not just a library for Sure Start but for all the partners working with it.

Senior Librarian

The role of the public library in supporting young children

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) has produced guidelines for children's library services to help public libraries implement high-quality children's services. Published by the Libraries for Children and Young Adults Section in 2003, the guidelines state that:

Library services have never been as important for children and their families all over the world as they are today. Access to the knowledge and the multi-cultural riches of the world, as well as lifelong learning and literacy skills have become the priority of our society. A quality children's library equips children with lifelong learning and literacy skills, enabling them to participate and contribute to the community.

IFLA also says that by providing a wide range of materials and activities, public libraries provide an opportunity for children to experience the enjoyment of reading and the excitement of discovering knowledge and works of the imagination. Children and their parents should be taught how to make the best use of a library and how to develop skills in the use of printed and electronic media (IFLA, 2003).

Since the late 19th century public libraries in the UK have been at the heart of their local communities, providing services for children and young people, reflecting the diversity of the population they serve. In the past public library services mainly focused on children who already knew how to read. Public libraries are now actively encouraging parents and carers of babies and very young children to join in language and literacy activities.

6 DELIVERING THE BEST START

The UK's Labour government views the way out of poverty to be through education and a high level of literacy and has committed funding to targeting 'effective' early childhood education and care (this will be explored in a later section in this chapter). Sustainability is dependent on links with other mainstream activities and funding opportunities and libraries also are involved in this particular focus on those at risk of social exclusion. Some individuals, groups or communities may feel deliberately excluded from access to mainstream services and may face barriers to using those services. This may be because of their own literacy skills, because they have never used libraries in their schooling years or because they have not found schools or other institutions to provide positive experiences. It is therefore important that early years services - children's centres, nurseries and libraries - welcome families and aim to meet all their clients' needs.

Public libraries have always been community spaces designed to support learning, reading and wider community objectives. Long-term benefits of early years services for the public libraries themselves can include improved understanding of target groups, a higher profile in the community and improved staff skills (Stevens, 2003). The public library service in the UK has many unique selling points and benefits. There is a strongly held view that libraries offer a welcoming, neutral space providing opportunities for personal, cultural and community development. Goulding (2006) writes about how public libraries are playing a role in multi-agency working and in enabling community involvement, cohesion and capacity building (2006, 237). Public libraries also give children and their families access to a vast amount of reading at all levels and for all interests. Ross et al. sum this up when they highlight the public library offer:

The opportunity to try out a book with no risks and the importance of no-cost use, the assistance of knowledgeable staff, wide choice, and the ability to browse freely, choosing reading material independently, support readers of all ages. (Ross, 2006, 99)

Miranda McKearney of The Reading Agency believes that using the public library is an important first step in local citizenship. Children, and their families, can gain a sense of belonging to the community through using a

shared resource and they are made welcome in a community space that celebrates diversity. This following case study will show the challenges librarians may face in providing support for family literacy in the communities they serve.

Case study

A librarian's reflection on the community her library serves

It's hard to get families into the library. We have plenty of school-age children, but we'd really like to get the younger children to come in too. I'm making that a priority. I've now started to visit and read stories in the Children's Centre next door. I found that most of the children are being brought to the Children's Centre by carers, but few parents seem to go there. It's very hard to make the connections. One grandma did not know her children's surnames and was not sure which father they had. It can be very difficult to get some parents to join libraries. We've found some would not enrol. They didn't want to fill in forms and we couldn't get them to bring their ID in. They had difficulties in filling in forms, as some had real problems with levels of literacy and couldn't fill in their address and postcode. Parents did not want the responsibility of having books in their homes. They wouldn't let the children borrow the books, as they thought they would have to pay fines. We try to be as welcoming as we can to draw these children and their families in through the doors.

Claire, community librarian

Evidence has shown that libraries are good at reaching hard-to-reach groups and can successfully build partnerships based on reading. For young children and their families there is the chance to develop and achieve in a community setting through accessing the local library. The Summer Reading Challenge is the largest UK reading promotion for young people aged 4-11 and it is organized by The Reading Agency. It is run in public libraries during the summer months and each year it takes a different theme. It challenges children to read at least six books during the

summer holidays, which they keep track of in a special folder. There are incentives through stickers and rewards and children really enjoy the challenge, but it does help if their parents/families are involved in the scheme.

To support professional practice, practitioners should be aware of the political environment influencing the public library service and its partner organizations. *Framework for the Future* (2003) is the first-ever national public library strategy, setting out a long-term strategic vision that public libraries in England could aspire to by 2013. This suggests that public libraries should concentrate on three main themes: supporting early learning; supporting pupils and students; and supporting older students. Public library activities that promote reading are playing a key role in supporting learning. The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) developed an action plan, funded by the Department of Culture, Museums and Sport (DCMS), outlining a range of projects and developments based upon the three main themes. *Books, Reading and Learning* is one of the four work strands of *Framework for the Future*. This outlines a series of projects and improvements to further the cause of reading in libraries and to support people of all ages in their reading development.

The role of early years librarians

According to IFLA, effective and professionally run children's libraries require trained and committed staff. Desired skills include:

- enthusiasm
- strong communication, interpersonal, team-working and problem-solving skills
- the ability to network and co-operate
- the ability to initiate, be flexible and be open to change
- the ability to analyse user needs, plan, manage and evaluate services and programmes
- eagerness to learn new skills and develop professionally.

The public library should be attractive to the early years community, as it provides access to library staff who know about children's books and care about children's reading. However, they not only need to be welcoming places, they also should be able to stimulate and inspire. Creative spaces should enable creative experiences and public libraries should provide a mix of cultural and creative resources and experiences. Many public libraries have strong links with writers, illustrators and storytellers and library practitioners get involved in holding events which draw in the local community. So, whether working in a large central library with extensive 'creative space' for running such events, or in a more modest local setting, practitioners can use the power of a storytelling, story-sharing experience to encourage and foster early literacy. The role of the early years librarian is therefore very important in drawing families into the world of literacy and all that it can offer.

Story time for pre-school children involves social learning, being part of the group, learning how to listen and following the activities modelled by the early years librarian. Creaser and Maynard (2006) note that throughout the UK 88% of public library services to children offer weekday sessions for 0-3 year olds and 85% for 3-5 year olds. These story and rhyme sessions for children are designed to help language development and reading skills. These activities now form part of the forward planning for library managers, and we look at more aspects of planning in Chapter 6.

Early years librarians not only have knowledge about stories, books and collection development (as illustrated in Figure 1.1 on the next page), but also about key initiatives and how to work in partnership with other organizations. For example, the National Literacy Trust (NLT) is an independent charity that changes lives through literacy and promotes reading to young families (NLT, 2002). The NLT links home, school and the wider community to inspire learners and create opportunities for everyone. The Talk to Your Baby initiative encourages parents and carers to talk to and enjoy communicating with their baby. There is a wealth of information about the initiatives of the National Literacy Trust and many varied, valuable resources available on its website. See the end of this chapter for details of this and other useful organizations.



Figure 1.1 An early years librarian preparing for a storytelling session

Bookstart

Early years librarians need to know about Bookstart, run by national charity Book Trust. It is the first national baby book-giving programme in the world. Bookstart began in the UK in 1992 with 300 babies; by 2001 there were over one million Bookstart babies. The scheme was initiated in 1992 by Book Trust, working in co-operation with Birmingham Library Services, South Birmingham Health Authority and Birmingham University School of Education (Wade and Moore, 1998). Bookstart operates through locally based organizations by giving a free pack of books to babies, with guidance material for parents and carers. The aim is that every child in the UK should enjoy and benefit from books from as early an age as possible. Bookstart for babies aged 0–12 months aims to provide a canvas bag to every new baby born in the UK, containing baby books, a booklet for parents setting out information and advice on sharing stories with young children, a Sure Start children's centres leaflet and a booklist and invitation to join the local library. The books are selected by a team which includes a health visitor and an independent expert on children's books. Choosing them is not as easy as it might sound: the varied cultural and social backgrounds

of the children must be taken into account. In the majority of cases the Bookstart bag is given to parents by their health visitor at the eight-months health check. McElwee (2004) writes that Bookstart has been the catalyst for the development of new public library services aimed at this user group - such as rhyme times, interactive sessions using songs and action rhymes which encourage interaction between parent and baby - and to develop communication, bonding and enjoyment.

Children's rights

Library practitioners are at the forefront of promoting children's rights and helping to give young users the best start in life. They can play a key role in disseminating information about the importance of early literacy to parents, childcare providers, early childhood educators, children's advocates and political decision makers. Reflect on the following scenario.

Scenario: Having a voice as an advocate for early years policy

'Hello, what do you do?'

'I work as an early year's librarian in a children's centre'

'Gosh it must be great fun to spend all day just reading stories and running playtimes, though I'm not sure I could cope with all those little children crawling about . . .'

Reply option 1

'Yes, I do spend part of my day reading to young children and their parents and carers and helping them to choose books. It is great fun.'

Reply option 2

'Yes, I do spend part of my day helping young children and their parents and carers with story times and reading activities. I and my colleagues also address some of the key issues in 21st-century society - we tackle social exclusion, support lifelong learning. We encourage community cohesion and build social capital and foster cultural activity.'

Making parents and others in communities aware that librarians are a resource for early literacy information and guidance will help position libraries as community partners in the common public goal of helping children to become successful readers and learners. Libraries can change children's lives.

There is anecdotal evidence of the contribution libraries make to community agendas. To provide hard data, the DCMS and Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) working with the Audit Commission and the libraries sector developed a set of public library impact measures which were launched in March 2005. The impact measures are a qualitative measure of performance, encouraging library services to assess their community profile and tailor services accordingly. They are also an advocacy tool aimed at decision makers outside library services. They demonstrate libraries' contribution to formal education, regeneration and community building. This inevitably impacts on the role of the early years librarian. The government's agenda is built upon targets and performance indicators. Public libraries, just like schools and other institutions, now have to demonstrate their value in supporting early learning and family learning through partnerships, for example, with Sure Start children's centres. The management aspects of service evaluation are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

There has been a significant increase in activity around early years provision in recent years and there are now many cross-sector initiatives, recognizing the key role of language in children's development. Multi-agency working and integrated service delivery are key aspects of government strategy to improve standards in the early years. Agency partnerships are helping parents to support their children's early language and literacy, as well as communicating important messages about emotional and social development and health issues. The challenge for librarians is to implement policies in libraries and work effectively with partners to achieve the effective delivery of services.

Policy and partnerships: Sure Start children's centres

The first five years of the New Labour government saw unparalleled attention, resources and initiatives devoted to early-childhood care and

education as it 'rocketed onto the political, educational and research agenda' due to the commitment to reduce poverty and social exclusion (Taggert, 2004, 619). It targeted educational achievement to avoid the consequences of educational failure, juvenile crime, unemployment and teenage pregnancy, as highlighted in the USA Headstart longitudinal research findings (Sylva, 1994). Government investment in high-quality early-childhood education and care was to support educational achievement and potential and life chances, ameliorating the effects of social disadvantage.

The Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) programme was a seven-year government-funded initiative (DfES, 2000) aimed at areas of high unemployment, low income, and high numbers of bilingual/multi-lingual families. New initiatives were introduced in these disadvantaged neighbourhoods, such as the Sure Start (DfEE, 1999) community-based local programmes aimed at supporting children, families and communities. Sure Start aimed to achieve better outcomes for children, parents and communities by increasing the availability of childcare for all children, improving health and emotional development for young children and supporting parents. Sure Start works in partnership with local authorities, Primary Care Trusts, Jobcentre Plus, local communities, public agencies and voluntary and private-sector organizations. These local programmes formed a central part of the government's anti-poverty agenda, seeking to integrate and expand health, childcare, early education and family-support services to families with young children living in economically deprived areas. The Sure Start mandate was to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-school children so that they would succeed when they got to school. This included a focus on early language and reading.

The Children Act (2004) raised the degree of accountability, especially at local authority level. *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* sets out the national framework for local change programmes to build a fully integrated and holistic approach to services around the needs of children and young people, and takes forward the government's plans for radical reform for children, young people and families. This is a major new approach to the well-being of children from birth to age 19 and the aim is for every child, whatever its background or circumstances, to have the support it needs to:

14 DELIVERING THE BEST START

- be healthy
- stay safe
- enjoy and achieve
- make a positive contribution
- achieve economic well-being.

The Sure Start (DfEE, 1999) community-based local programmes were integrated into the Sure Start children's centres and intended to be key in achieving the objectives set out in the *Every Child Matters* programme. In the 2006 ten-year strategy, the government promised to deliver a Sure Start children's centre for every community by 2010. Children's centres offer children under five years old and their families access to help from multi-disciplinary teams of professionals. The core offer of the centres includes integrated early learning, care, family support, health services, outreach services to children and families not attending the centre, and access to training and employment advice. Local authorities have a strategic responsibility for the delivery of children's centres. The programmes vary from area to area, as they are tailored to the needs of their particular community. The policies and programmes of Sure Start apply in England only; responsibility for early education and childcare in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland rests with the separate devolved administrations.

In a scoping study on family learning and public libraries in the UK, Spacey (2005) found that

Libraries working with Sure Start would seem to be particularly successful in identifying and targeting new groups of families to involve in library activity. Indeed this would seem to be a reciprocal relationship, which benefits both libraries and Sure Start programmes. The employment of Sure Start librarians has been a significant development in the growing relationship between the early years and the library sector since Sure Start Local Programmes were first set up in 1999. (Spacey, 2005, 32)

The results of the project in the study area indicate the importance of key professionals being willing to develop an interdisciplinary approach to achieve objectives. Early years librarians have been involved with the

delivery of Sure Start programmes. During June 2006, and as part of their Families Love Libraries campaign, all 3500 public libraries promoted National Sure Start Month by organizing activities, creating displays and signposting local families to Sure Start events.

The government has contracted with a partnership of private-sector and public-sector organizations, called Together for Children, to provide delivery support on the ground for local authorities. The Together for Children website provides local authority resources, examples of good practice, case studies and discussion forums. This is a really complex area of provision involving many partnerships. Sure Start offers public libraries the opportunity to use partnership projects to target some of the hardest-to-reach families in a community. Libraries are key partners alongside children's centres in encouraging family reading. In some areas libraries and children's centres have formed very effective partnerships and are increasingly providing collaborative activities such as:

- coffee morning sessions
- storytelling events
- toy libraries
- reading sessions
- family literacy activities
- craft activities
- puppet shows
- information about childhood services
- information and resources about parenting.

The early years library: creating the right environment

Libraries should be safe and secure, as well as a welcoming environment for children. Long gone are the days of our expecting children to creep into a library, choose a book and creep out again. It is important to make information available to parents that will encourage them to bring their child to the library. The library should be a community hub - welcoming all. It is important to think about how the traditional barriers to access and use can be broken down and removed. In Chapter 3 we will look at some of

the ways in which space and design can be used effectively to create a welcoming environment.

Young children will make the most of all their experiences in the library. They will enjoy the range of interesting materials to play with and the opportunity to socialize in a relaxed atmosphere. They will like the colourful environment and revel in the variety of sights, sounds and activities. If their parents and carers are relaxed and made to feel welcome this will enhance the experience for all and should lead to repeat visits. Word of mouth is an important means of promoting early years services. Important factors include very practical things such as ease of access to the building:

- If you are in a shared facility make sure the library is well signed to help potential users know where you are.
- Is there somewhere to park buggies and prams and leave car seats?
- Is it easy to get to the toilet and baby changing facilities?

(More of this in Chapter 3, when we will look at issues of space, design and planning.)

Positive outcomes from the Sunshine Library

Jane is a mum who, despite having literacy problems, is determined that her children will have better chances than she has had. She was encouraged to come to the library after receiving her Bookstart Plus Bag and listening to the Bookstart Plus worker on how to share books together.

A mum who has a daughter with Down's syndrome recorded the comment: 'I love to come to the Sunshine because nobody minds if you stay all afternoon.'

A mum who has mental health problems comes to the library for time out – she knows that our staff will make her feel welcome, make her a drink and read with her children – giving her some precious time for herself.

What practitioners need to know about young children

Some of you reading this book may already have a background in theories of early child development and pre-school literacy. However, many managers or co-workers may not have this knowledge base. In common with parents and carers, they will also have questions you may need to answer. The following sections highlight some of the underpinning knowledge and useful things to know about early literacy. This will help you to develop your role as an effective advocate for early years library services.

There are now many studies on the development of the brain that suggest that a young child's early years are important, as the learning that takes place during this time contributes to brain development and functioning. We learn as we interact with the world and the resulting stimulation of neurons in body and brain passes messages through the nervous system. This networking of the neurons effectively produces thought - the source of language. From thought comes meaning, and it is meaning that helps us to understand and interpret the world - the ultimate goal of any learning experience. Each new experience adds to the previous, to create a rich tapestry of learning and communication. The early interactions that occur between children and their parents and carers are crucially important for young children's personal, social, cultural, emotional and linguistic development. They not only promote close relationships and early language development, but also contribute to children's intellectual development. It is important for young children to have natural experiences and types of active learning, including 'brain gym', that will encourage thinking, learning and communication. Practitioners should be providing young children with the following opportunities to:

- have interaction with adults as listeners
- practise movements, sounds and rhythms
- practise language patterns repeatedly
- have opportunities for imaginative play
- discover and investigate creative means of expressing themselves
- be able to move around on their tummies to explore their personal space and the physical environment around them.

Children's centres, nurseries and libraries often provide rhyme, song, music and movement activities for young children. They will have interesting names such as 'Jo Jingles', 'Moving Minnies' and 'Sing-a-long with Sheree'. Baby yoga and baby massage are also on offer in many settings. These experiences are an important part of early literacy development, as well as being social activities with other children and their parents.

Librarians have always been interested in a 'reading child', but now, due to new understandings about child development and emergent literacy, we also need to be aware of the needs of babies and toddlers and provide opportunities to support their learning.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

Everyone who works with children from birth to five will need to know about the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which is statutory from September 2008. The EYFS is a comprehensive framework for high-quality development, learning and care for all children from birth to the end of the academic year in which a child has her/his fifth birthday. The framework builds on and replaces the non-statutory Birth to Three Matters guidance, the Foundation Stage Curriculum Guidance for 3-4 year olds and the National Standards for Daycare (DfCSF, 2007). Each child and family is seen as unique, with differing needs and concerns. These are identified in the four key themes: A Unique Child; Empowering Relationships; Enabling Environments; Holistic Learning and Developments. The themes are linked to key principles, each of which has four commitments. Children's development is presented through six phases. These overlap and acknowledge that there can be big differences between the development of children of similar ages (DCSF, 2007). The EYFS stresses the importance of providing opportunities for children to communicate thoughts, ideas and feelings, and build up relationships with practitioners and each other. It also affirms the importance of promoting positive relationships with parents and families. Language and communication are key to learning and understanding.

Early years language and literacy development

Children need a multitude of experiences of oral language, of talking, listening, storying, rhyming, reading and singing. These are the building blocks of literacy and make the difference as to how quickly and easily they acquire reading and writing. Language is the key to learning, and promoting young children's language development can be an exciting journey (Brock and Rankin, 2008). Young children acquire language through interaction with others in their immediate environment, through responding to sounds, sentences and experiences expressed by their parents, family and other carers. They begin by absorbing, listening and then imitating and practising. Gradually they learn to reproduce sounds and words and establish an understanding of how language works, the structure and grammatical sense of putting these sounds and words together. When communicating and talking to their babies and young children, parents will accommodate their language use to promote attentive listening, understanding and then reproduction of sounds, words, then sentences.

Reading to babies and young children and getting them involved in that process is one of the most effective ways of enhancing language development in a child. Librarians have a number of great selling points - there is access to free books at the local library and children's centres and it is never too early for parents and carers to bring their babies and toddlers to the library. Encouraging the development of early language skills in children also means providing support and guidance for parents and carers. Babies can learn to handle books from a very young age. They will acquire vocabulary as parents and carers provide the words that match the pictures, imitating sounds with enthusiasm. The following case study illustrates the importance of involving babies in choosing books to read.

Case study

Amy, aged 8 months, and her books

Reading a book together now forms part of our daily routine. There is a large box full of books and before bed every night we choose a book to read together with the baby. Sticking a hand in the box and rummaging

around makes an interesting noise and Amy responds excitedly. We do not specifically choose books for babies or young children, rather we read lots of stories together and she appreciates the rhythm and sounds made. Amy also likes turning the pages and will sometimes want to turn back to the first page. She is also excited by pages with particular colours on them.

Amy's mum tells us something about how they share the reading experience. Practitioners can advise parents that it is important to get into a routine with their baby. Each night before bed, it is good to choose a book together; it can be a very simple book with just a few words on a page. In holding a conversation with the baby, the adult provides an opportunity to model turn taking by waiting for the baby's response before continuing. The baby is also learning book-handling skills, even at this young age. This illustrates the importance of reading to babies and involving them in the process of choosing books to read. Although the baby may not yet be able to understand the words or articulate formulated responses, clearly she is enjoying the experience. She is looking at the pictures and learning how to turn the pages. Many books are quite tactile with different materials to touch and feel, flaps to lift up or buttons to press. It is good to point out that reading before bed can settle the baby and ensure that there are fewer interruptions during the night.

(Brock and Rankin, 2008, 27)

Emerging literacy

As you can see, young children don't wait to begin their early experiences of reading and writing until they start school! Children will acquire language and literacy skills from their earliest years. From birth and throughout pre-school years babies and young children develop knowledge of language and the sounds that form words. This places the onset of literacy acquisition at birth rather than at the start of formal reading instruction at school. Emergent literacy (Clay, 1991) is a term used for young children's early explorations into reading and writing. As they are singing rhymes, listening to stories, looking at pictures, handling books, scribbling and drawing with varied writing implements, they are acquiring early literacy skills.

Young children soon begin to incorporate patterns and incidents from stories into their everyday conversation. Stories can have a tremendous impact on many aspects of children's lives, permeating their language experiences and enabling them to use advanced linguistic structures (Fox, 1993). The following examples demonstrate how young children incorporate stories in their everyday activities.

Scenario: Early story experiences

Two-year-old Jeremy wore a pyjama collar round his neck for weeks because 'if you don't wear a collar, you get taken to the pound'. This originated from his first video of Walt Disney's *Lady and the Tramp* and it engendered lots of family storytelling. This two-year-old was able to use and understood 'pound' in this connotation of 'dog prison'. (Brock and Rankin, 2008, 31)

These three-year-old girls were often in roles from their favourite picture books: Carmen was a wicked stepmother chanting 'Mirror mirror on the wall', allocating her parents a role in her *Sleeping Beauty*; Katie when wearing a shawl would say 'I'm the poor, poor peasant woman' or 'I'm Red Riding Hood' and the 'Tiger came to tea' often at Melissa's house. (Brock and Rankin, 2008, 68)

Most children cannot escape literacy, as it permeates their environment and real-life settings - in their home, in nursery, on the television, in supermarkets and in the high street. They are surrounded by signs and notices in our highly literate environment and all young children will have everyday experiences with literacy. They will have received birthday cards, visited a favourite restaurant, observed electronic signs and digital screens, looked through catalogues, scribbled on pictures, and handled (and possibly chewed) packaging in the supermarket.

The early years librarian can help parents and carers to understand they are the best teachers to help their children to enjoy books and to get ready for learning to read. Learning occurs through interaction with what is available in the immediate environment and the caregiver's task is to

provide the child with an enriched environment. Reading together and sharing books encourages talking, which helps develop speaking and listening skills. Fluent readers do well in school and reading and literacy skills will stand them in good stead for life in the 21st century.

Reading – making sense of those funny little squiggles

When we *can* read, we probably take being able to read for granted. One definition of reading is ‘the cognitive process of understanding a written linguistic message’. Reading is a complicated process and learning to make sense of those funny squiggles on the page (as illustrated in Figure 1.2) involves a wide range of skills.



Figure 1.2 Sharing a story in the garden

Imagine that no-one had encouraged you to understand the funny little squiggles on the page called words that can make you gasp or can make you cry. You'd be a smaller person living in a smaller world. We believe that everyone deserves the right to those amazing moments that reading can bring us. And that we should all have more of them.

The Reading Agency website

The early years librarian is able to encourage an interest in reading by providing an environment of language and literacy through access to books, tapes, videos, computers, story and rhyme times, as well as a caring adult to introduce the child to literary pleasure.

Case study

A family visit to the library

Nathan (aged 6) and Callum (aged 5) visit the library with their mum.

Nathan always asks the library staff for help or information even though his mum is sitting there next to him. 'No mummy you don't know what to do. Let the lady do it.'

Tricia (Nathan and Callum's mum) observes: 'The librarians have a fantastic attitude to the children – very approachable, really friendly and always willing to help them. They promote a chatty, friendly and relaxed atmosphere. It's a great place. There are comfortable places to sit and read, bright displays and it's light and airy.'

'I bring them here, but I'm not sure what they are getting out of it – that is to what level. I think that bringing them into this environment is very important. If they get used to it and when they go to secondary school, working in a library and handling books, accessing information from textbooks and doing homework won't be a problem for them. They will be comfortable in a library setting. My mum never ever took me to a library.'

'You can go into Smiths and look at some books and buy the boys books, but look at the range of books that are here; you couldn't possibly buy them all. The whole concept is fantastic. Callum is fascinated by the non-fiction. I couldn't provide him with all this. These are the building

blocks to set them up now for later life – using reference books and reading stories. This environment is great for Callum – he doesn't run around or shout – he has really calmed down here.'

Nathan, who is 'working' at the computer, but listening in on the discussion shouts: 'Callum hasn't calmed down!'

The above case study emphasizes Greene's (1991, 8) view that:

The goals of the profession give librarians a vested interest in the child's development of language and reading skills. The librarian is interested in the preliterate development of the child, so in time there will be a reading child, and in still more time, a literate adult.

Early years librarians can foster emergent literacy by modelling reading and showing an interest and enjoyment in books. They can:

- provide opportunities for listening and following directions
- introduce sentences, words, letters and numbers
- introduce new vocabulary
- help children with story lines
- create social learning through group activities
- support discussion in story time (more about this in Chapters 5 and 6).

Early years librarians can suggest how parents can model reading and support their children by letting the children see them:

- enjoying reading and writing
- reading to themselves
- reading different things - poems, books, stories, messages, newspapers, instructions, advertisements
- writing for a range of purposes - notes, letters, lists, invitations, diary entries, filling in forms.

Modelling reading and writing is important, as is promoting a love of story and books. Encourage parents to read with and talk to their children about the books they are sharing, and to view the sharing and reading of books as an enjoyable experience. Here are a few pointers on how to support parents reading with children:

- encourage them to get their children to choose books for themselves
- be aware of what books and stories their children are likely to be interested in
- ask the early years practitioner for advice
- read with expression and intonation
- read familiar stories again and again
- give children time to look at pictures
- get children to participate in the storytelling
- encourage anticipation and prediction
- make connections to familiar experiences.

Get parents to demonstrate the reading process through showing their children:

- page or book layout
- left-to-right orientation
- turning the page in different directions
- scanning backwards and forwards for cues
- how texts and stories work
- the title, characters and content
- punctuation and what it's for.

There are, of course, issues here in relation to family literacy and the literacy levels of the parents themselves. Parents can be encouraged to improve their literacy levels by their own involvement in supporting their young children. This will be further explored in Chapter 2 when we look at partnerships with parents.

Reading as a social activity

Many people will view reading as a solitary activity, where the reader becomes privately absorbed in the place and time created for them by the author, or immersed in the detail of an information book. But reading can also be a very social activity, encouraging community involvement. Think of the current interest in reading groups and book clubs, and the initiatives promoted by The Reading Agency, which is an independent charity that aims to inspire more people to read more. Young children can certainly be socialized as they participate in reading as a social activity. This is very popular, judging by the number of rhyme time and story sessions offered in public libraries and other early years settings across the British Isles.

Reading has social benefits and the power to build relationships, according to a report from the National Literacy Trust (NLT, 2006). From the earliest act of parents sharing books with babies, to paired reading at school or grown-up reading groups, reading together can help form and nurture relationships. Research by the OECD (Kirsch, 2002) has shown that growing up in a home where reading is valued can have a greater effect on a child's achievement than parental wealth or education. The benefits of sharing books last longer than a lifetime, since a child who is brought up to value reading is likely to pass its love of reading - and good literacy skills - on to the next generation. Reading should be a pleasure; a love of the written word can take you into stories both real and fantasy, so that your own world is expanded and enriched.

Children need active and varied experiences to help master the complex skills involved in reading. They need to achieve through experience and success, as failure can lead to frustration and cause barriers to learning. Children try to make sense of their world and the learning process by using all strategies available, and this is the same for reading as for everything else they learn. They need to be interested, to be motivated, and they learn to achieve through building on early success. Practitioners encourage parents and carers to read aloud to their children from infancy and hold on to the idea that reading aloud is a shared social-bonding experience. Think about the different approaches that can be taken. It is far more positive for parents and carers to encourage the idea that reading is fun, as opposed to fulfilling the role of 'pushy parents', who are continually signalling the

idea that reading is something that has to be worked hard at in order to achieve it.

Case study

A 'pushy parent'

Chloe's older sister learned to read easily and quickly worked her way through the reading scheme at nursery. When Chloe's turn came to attend nursery she showed very little interest in the reading scheme books. Mum was worried about her seeming lack of progress and tried using flash cards to hurry along the process. Chloe virtually ignored the flash cards, although she showed occasional flashes of involvement when Aunty provided bribes. Chloe eventually found her own route into reading – not that of her pushy parent.

Carolynn ('pushy parent') Rankin

Reading with children is a shared process, as the closeness of reading with an adult is special. Get parents to guide children to understanding and success without continually correcting them. Inform them that they are apprenticing children into reading. Get them to view it as a sharing time, rather than an instruction time. Encourage them to get their children to:

- make sense of the whole text
- talk about and understand what they are reading
- ask questions about the reading process
- see patterns in words and letters
- gain visual images of words
- use illustrations to help meaning
- match pictures to words
- use a variety of clues - if one doesn't work try another
- encourage their children to think 'Does that look right?' 'Does that sound right?' 'Does that make sense?'

Reading and storytelling activities in the early years library

Reading aloud to children is a well developed aspect of library provision. By providing quality children's books and holding activities and events, early years librarians can show by modelling how to read aloud to young children. The Reading Agency has produced *Hints for Reading to Under 5s*. Librarians may read straight through a book, whereas nursery teachers often interact with children by asking questions and encouraging questions. Using the technique of dialogic reading helps children to stay actively involved with a story and develop reading comprehension. Instead of reading the story straight through, ask open-ended questions about the story: 'Why do you think Goldilocks ate Baby Bear's porridge?' 'What do you think will happen next?'

- Are you confident enough to tell stories as well as read them? This takes more confidence and may require some practice; however the benefits can be enormous. You will probably feel empowered if you tell a story to an audience of enthralled young listeners. Start with something familiar such as *The Gingerbread Man* or *The Enormous Turnip*.
- Are you aware of the behavioural characteristics of your clientele and the implications of these for library services? For example, babies and toddlers may dribble and chew books, so materials and quality of resources are important. Babies and toddlers require space to move and crawl around and many settings now have cushions, bolsters, small comfy chairs and carpeted areas for them to explore in between handling the books.
- Do you provide activities for children to dress up and engage in role play? Many library settings now provide for play and developing of emergent literacy through role play. In addition to the books do you offer interesting materials, such as dressing up clothes, and musical instruments?
- Are you aware of the importance of active activities and enabling children to scribble and begin to write? Are there opportunities for children to draw, paint and be actively engaged in craft sessions

around story themes? Do you have crayons, paint, paper, card, envelopes, glue, clay, playdough, etc.? How do you cope with these resources in surroundings that cater for 'expensive' books?

Chapter 3 will explore designs for early years library settings, while Chapter 4 looks at the development of collections of resources, as well as books.

When planning for these experiences, don't just think about the resources, but also consider the communication, language and literacy demands. Through planning in this way other adults can become more focused on how to support children's experiences. You can encourage families to develop their own literacy and role-play experiences through the toys their children play with at home.

Young children's early years education should be a quality experience for all. Children learn most effectively through being involved in rich experiences and practical activities promoted through play; they learn through all their senses. Adults need to join in this play, both talking with and listening to the children, taking into account their interests and previous experiences.

Conclusion: helping to create positive experiences and memories in your library

How well prepared are you to ensure you can provide positive and enjoyable learning experiences for young children and their parents and carers? Katherine Ross suggests that one good way to think about the role of the reader is to think about your own experiences and reflect on your own reading history (Ross et al., 2006, 56). Were you read to as a child? Does your memory include a physical experience such as being bounced up and down to nursery rhymes? What can you remember about the first stages of reading on your own? Your professional practice, your partnership with parents and the activities and service offered in your library setting will shape the recollections and experiences of the next generation. We rather like that thought, and it sits comfortably with all the stuff about government policies, missions and targets.

Issues and questions

- How can you encourage families to use your library setting effectively?
- How can you model emergent reading and writing for children in meaningful ways?
- What do parents need to know about their children's literacy development?

Key points to remember

- Your role as an early years librarian is key.
- The UK political agenda has an impact on service provision.
- Working across disciplinary boundaries is important for professional practice.
- Reading to babies and young children is one of the most effective ways of encouraging early language.

Useful organizations

Booktrust, www.booktrust.org.uk/home

Bookstart, www.bookstart.co.uk

Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP),
www.cilip.org.uk

IFLA, www.ifla.org

National Literacy Trust, www.literacytrust.org.uk

Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), www.mla.gov.uk

Sure Start, www.surestart.gov.uk

The Reading Agency, www.readingagency.org.uk

Together for Children, www.togetherforchildren.co.uk

UNESCO, www.unesco.org