

WHAT MATERIALS?

All language is learned. Babies and young children learn language in the company of the important people around them. Language-rich environments stimulate and support children learning how to listen and speak; adding and using print in daily life offers children opportunities to start to learn about reading and writing in one or more languages.

In this workshop, we consider what it means to be an emergent writer and why and how a holistic approach to learning to write works so well for children from birth to four. Reading and writing can be learned as if they were two sides of the same coin; so we will explore what is needed to inspire excitement about and interest in reading and writing. Because we are, as human beings, storytellers and because play is 'story in action' (Vivian Gussin Paley), stories, both told and read, are central materials for learning; children tend to learn the component parts of print (letters, sounds, words etc.) when they are part of something purposeful and personally important. We will look at some examples of home-made and commercially published books, ways to create and encourage meaningful exploration of print and examples of children's emergent writing.

HOW TO USE THE MATERIALS?

Adults who regularly share their interests in and reasons for writing in daily activities become the interactive role models young children need to develop a sense of themselves becoming readers and writers. Many positive encounters with the rhythms and repetition of language are essential. Finger plays, rhymes, lullabies, riddles, and stories (with and without pictures and images), mediated by caring and interested adults build self confidence, self esteem and a desire to hear and do more.

At the same time as children's knowledge and understanding grows about the power and purpose of writing, adults draw their attention to details such as letters and their sounds, words and their meanings. First words in print need to be ones full of emotional significance (Sylvia Ashton Warner), so significant people's names, their interests and stories are a perfect starting point for initiating knowledge about and using the alphabet.

Combining our need to explore and make meaning, and the way our brains are continuously recognising patterns and predicting (Jeff Hawkins), the adult's role includes encouraging children to make connections between new information and what they already know and have experienced. Adults who invite children to guess, think, imagine, pretend, and to wonder if, how, what, and why, stimulate curiosity and motivate children to want to explore and discover more. Based on what they have experienced and stored in their 'heads and hearts' already, children from birth use what they know to predict what will happen, and then confirm or adjust their understandings against further evidence (the basic process of learning). When adults encourage and value children's immature attempts at writing, in a similar way to how they value immature speech, little children realise it's ok to make 'mistakes'. They invent spellings and compose through writing something they want to 'say'. Letter formation and spelling accuracy gradually become more conventional with practice.

WHAT ARE CHILDREN LEARNING WHEN USING THE MATERIALS?

The beginnings of any learning arise in the emotional connections between baby and caregiver and the baby's drive to feel safe, make meaning, and play. Children come to invest images with emotional meaning, and this leads to these becoming meaningful ideas or symbols (Stanley Greenspan and Stuart Shanker). Nurturing relationships with babies and young children as they

explore how to use oral and written language are profoundly motivating, and activate learning, leading to self-regulation and the needed neural connections for ever-improving performance (Peter Gray).

The following table shows how aspects of language are learned in similar ways, when the conditions of learning are appropriate.

Language is listening, speaking as well as reading (including braille), writing and signing

Baby learns to speak	Baby learns to read-write
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hears, sees/ experiences people who speak (role models) • Expresses and communicates as she learns • Learns why she listens and talks at same time as she learns how • Has shared interactions • Is included, heard, encouraged, praised - connects emotionally • makes 'mistakes' - speaks immaturely(babbles) and plays with sounds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hears, sees/ experiences people who read – write (role models) • Expresses and communicates as he learns • Learns why he reads - writes at same time as he learns how • Has shared interactions • Is included, heard, encouraged, praised - connects emotionally • makes 'mistakes' - reads/writes immaturely (pretends to read, does emergent writing).

Regular shared experiences with the richness of picture book visuals and language leads to predictable patterns of interaction as little children imagine, pretend, and learn about how symbols work at the same time as they come to identify and empathise with others through stories. Together with this growing sense of self as a writer, children learn essential concepts of print (Marie Clay). For instance, drawings and words are different, letters represent sounds, words are written from top to bottom and left to right in our languages, and 'what I say can be written down and read' become understood. This is the key point they learn: writing has significant meaning.

They bond with adults, storing shared memories of stories and important interactions with them as they experience rewarding times. Gradually, by observing and joining in the print-related culturally valued activities (Barbara Rogoff), children are apprenticed into their community's 'ways with words' (Shirley Brice Heath). As they come to trust adults who value what they say and do, they open up and become more likely to want to communicate and express themselves through written as well as spoken language.

Readings:

Carole Bloch, 1997. *Chloe's Story, First Steps to Literacy*. Juta. (<http://www.praesa.org.za/training/>)

Patricia.M.Cooper, 2009. *The Classrooms all young children need*. University of Chicago Press.

Vivian Gussin Paley, 1990. *The boy who would be a helicopter*. Harvard University Press.

