



Literacy and Numeracy – Learning Through Play

Welcome back to our new 'Spotlight On' section of our Newsletter. In this section, we aim to look at areas of our practice and help parents understand how and why the nursery operates in the way it does. We hope to share our experiences and expertise with you and we invite your feedback and comments on the 'Spotlight On' subjects.

In this newsletter, Martin explains our approach to introducing literacy and numeracy in the early years setting and why we use the tried and tested approach of learning through high quality play.

All parents want their child to have the best start in life and we're often asked at the Nursery if we focus any time on teaching the children how to count and master a basic level of literacy. The old fashioned method of sitting children down and teaching them how to write and how to count to some arbitrary number, such as twenty, is now understood to be incorrect and not suited to the learning style of pre-school age children.

The Early Years Foundation framework, that all pre-school settings now use, conforms to an understanding that children learn through 'doing' – sometimes called a kinesthetic learning style. Play is vital for children and in a high quality, stimulating environment, managed by qualified practitioners, interactive play gives children the best start in life and helps them understand the world around them socially, emotionally as well as intellectually.

For example, to the casual observer, a simple game of hopscotch looks like children just having fun. However, it helps them in speech and language development as they say the numbers aloud when playing and chat to peers whilst taking turns. It helps in their cognitive development as they need to understand the rules of the game and how to recognise the numbers. It teaches social and emotional development as they understand how to manage emotions if they win or lose, plus how to wait until it's their turn etc. It also helps in physical development as children need to throw an object at a number, balance on one leg, hop, jump and coordinate a range of movements which are essential at a young age. These are all skills a growing child needs to assimilate and are all part of our goal of developing confident, happy and socially integrated children.

As the children in the nursery approach 4 years old and are getting near to moving into their chosen school, we try to ramp-up their exposure to literacy and numeracy. This is why we have our graduation from Caterpillars (children of 2 – 3 years) into the Butterfly groups (children of rising 3's and 4 years.)

You might be asking why we don't we teach the Caterpillar groups to count and write some simple words? After all, some say the earlier the better.

At this age, children are not physically developed enough to manipulate a pen or master writing skills. Until a child can support their own weight from monkey bars, they do not possess the strength in the hands to write legibly. The muscles that control the fingers in the hand are actually one of the last to develop and asking a child to do something their body is not ready for may result in frustration and low self esteem.

We therefore use 'pre-writing' skills games, plenty of interactive stories and an abundance of verbal interaction to promote an awareness of literacy and an interest in language. Much of this is carried out in our group (or circle) time. I would be happy to go into more detail if you wish.

As for numeracy, it would be easy to teach children to count parrot fashion, but counting shouldn't be recalling a sequence of nondescript words, it should show an understanding of mathematical and numerical relationships between objects. We feel that exposure to counting is performed with greater success through stimulated play with a qualified keyworker. Playing with number puzzles or using a game of 'how many blocks can you stack?' are simple and fun places to start. Moving onto measuring and weighing objects, playing with counting grids etc. develop numerical skills further in a fun and relevant way – providing real skills that prepare the child for school life.

I hope this has given a brief introduction into a complex and in-depth subject. If you have any questions on our approach to literacy and numeracy or if you'd simply like to see example of what we do, please let me know.

Louise adds... another big part of EYFS is that parents have a valuable role to play in their child's learning, so how can you help? More than you think! Simple songs and rhymes are a really great way to develop numeracy and literacy with your child. Songs that count forwards "1,2,3,4,5 once I caught a fish alive" or backwards "5 little ducks went swimming one day" (counting backwards is a difficult thing to learn for young children) can all help reinforce numeracy and literacy in a fun way. Counting objects with your child, (knives and forks, fir cones in the park, ducks on the pond etc), playing with toys such as building blocks and most importantly praising your child for what they achieve. Building a tower, making a pattern with pegs or bricks, sharing out a snack with family and friends; all are helping your child develop skills and confidence / self esteem so they are enthusiastic learners when they get to school.

Enjoy where your child is at now; if they are crazy about dinosaurs or trains, or love to paint make the most of it! Numbers, colours, communication and social skills can all be taught through what ever your child is in to so harness their enthusiasm for their latest passion and tune in to where they are at. Before you know it that stage will be gone (I still can't bear to throw our Thomas Trains away and they used to drive me crazy!) so enjoy it while it lasts.

Finally don't put pressure on them to count or write their names before they are ready – research has shown that this is no indication of how well they will do later in life or at school and if you put them under pressure you may put them off reading and writing which is of course the last thing you want to do! Avoid comparing them to their friends; every child is unique and develops skills at their own pace. Boys in particular do not develop the fine motor skills in their fingers to enable them to hold a pencil really well until they are 6. Interestingly in some of the highest achieving countries such as Switzerland and Sweden, children do not start school at all until they are 6 years old and they still do just as well at the other end.

In the next newsletter We'll be looking at how we are preparing our current Butterfly children for their transition into school.