

# Life Skills for Little Ones

Information & ideas to help your children develop the skills to thrive in primary school.



Created in 2022 in collaboration with parents of Skene Square Nursery & the Family Learning Team



## This booklet focuses on 5 topics:

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This guide gives an overview of why these topics are so important. Taking some simple steps at home can nurture these skills and give your child a strong start to their time at school.

Some of this you may already know – the guidebook can help you solidify those good skills and habits.

Some of this may surprise you – why not try out small changes and see if it helps?

Your little ones are learning so much, so quickly, and you'll be amazed to see how well they adapt to positive changes at home.

This guide is based on a training course offered by Family Learning.

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# Routine

## The importance of routine for child development

- ✓ Consistent routines help children feel safe, secure, and looked after. This is especially important during stressful times or during difficult stages of their development.
- ✓ Creating a predictable daily routine means children also learn what to expect at various times of the day and they feel a sense of control and satisfaction when they complete these tasks.
- ✓ Predictable food and sleep routines form a strong foundation that helps children learn, grow, socialise, manage their feelings & their behaviour.
- ✓ Getting used to routines at home helps children adjust to other structured settings, such as nursery or school.

## Routines can:

- Reduce children's (and our own!) poor behaviour and outbursts which can be caused by hunger, tiredness, or overstimulation.
- Help children learn, e.g., how to perform each task (getting dressed, brushing teeth etc) and how the world works and how they can interact successfully in it.

## A simple daily routine will provide our children with a basis learn other essential skills such as:

- ✓ Basic hygiene
- ✓ Time-management
- ✓ Self-control
- ✓ Self-care
- ✓ Responsibility
- ✓ Independence
- ✓ Self-confidence



## Developmental Ages and Stages for Routine

- All babies and children benefit from a routine from a very young age.
- Try to establish a routine as soon as you can.
- This may be only one or two things at first such as bath time and a story.
- As your baby gets older try to introduce a regular bedtime, even if they do get up through the night.
- Set mealtimes can also be introduced.
- As your child grows, you will develop an established routine.



## Families

- **Routines** can also help bring families closer together.
- **Routines** involve doing a lot of things together and while the tasks themselves might seem dull, this can really help to strengthen family relationships.
- **Routines & relationships** your child will love that they can expect something to happen - and it happens! Especially when that thing they expect is a cuddle at bedtime! This builds a child's trust and confidence in the world around them and reminds them that you are their safe person.

**When building your ideal family routine, thinking about how you can include spending time together, for example:**

### **Reading stories before bed**

- ✓ Join the library for free
- ✓ Buy books from charity shops or borrow from leading libraries
- ✓ Use school reading books
- ✓ Use Bookbug books available at newborn, nursery & school stages

### **Shared mealtimes**

- ✓ Try to have at least one meal together
- ✓ Include little one in preparing the meals
- ✓ No tech or TV at mealtimes

### **Fun Times**

- ✓ Plan a trip to the park - explore your local area, find your favourite playground, or green spaces
- ✓ Organise regular family game nights - board games, charades, Pictionary, hide and seek, build a fort, or play musical chairs
- ✓ Go for a walk along the river or beach collecting stones, sticks and shells
- ✓ Find your nearest green space, do a scavenger hunt, look for fairy doors, bird spotting or bug finding

### **Talking about your day together**

- ✓ Take the opportunity when walking home from school
- ✓ Bath time and bedtime
- ✓ When making dinner

**These moments will become special for you and your child and will be remembered when they grow older and make their own traditions.**

## Stick to the daily routines as much as possible

It is good to be flexible occasionally as children must learn to be adaptable. But do not be tempted to give in on a regular basis as establishing and continuing a good routine is worth the effort in the long term.

## Ideally a child's day should have a mixture of structured and unstructured time

**Structured time** = the things we can bank on, usually times we wake up, eat, our bedtime routine (e.g., bath, story) and sleep, the time to start and end school or nursery, and any set routines there.

**Unstructured time** = free time to get lost in play or have a choice about how to spend their time/pick an activity.

**A balance of structured and unstructured time is important** = too much structured time is stressful, not enough leave a child feeling bored, unsure, and inclined to emotional outbursts.

You can create a visual routine by creating pictures of daily events (such as breakfast, bath, bedtime), lining these up to show the order of the day, and allowing your child to take them down when the task is complete.



# Self -Care

## What are self-care skills?

These are the things that we all do each day to take care of ourselves.

- ✓ Brush our teeth
- ✓ Hand washing
- ✓ Eat and drink independently
- ✓ Get dressed
- ✓ Go to the toilet
- ✓ Sleep
- ✓ Wash our bodies
- ✓ Brush our hair



- ✓ When our babies are small, we do all these things for them, to ensure they are well cared for.
- ✓ Children have a need to be independent and do things on their own. This is a healthy part of normal child development.
- ✓ As children grow, they learn to do more and more tasks for themselves.
- ✓ Your job as a parent/carer is to teach them how to do these tasks independently. They will feel proud of their progress.
- ✓ So, be reassured, you are not being mean if you let your child struggle for a moment doing a self-care task! This is how they learn.

**TOP TIP:** For tasks your child hasn't yet mastered but wants to do for themselves - let them try but stay nearby and help with the final steps if needed. For example, the child may brush their own teeth for 10 seconds, but you will step in to ensure their teeth are cleaned properly, and over time you will give them more opportunities to do this themselves.

## Self-feeding

- ✓ The best way to build independent feeding skills is to offer solids when they reach 6 months (recommended weaning age).
- ✓ Encourage children to practice feeding themselves as soon as they can hold something in their hands.
- ✓ Make sure they are always seated when eating or drinking.
- ✓ Start by offering older infants finger foods such as banana or toast.
- ✓ Introduce a spoon and fork and give children plenty of time to practice. Do not worry about the mess! You can strip them to their nappy and use a mat under their highchair.
- ✓ Encourage children to cut their food with a knife and fork. This is a skill they will need to eat their school dinner at primary school.
- ✓ Consider bowls that attach to the table, child-sized utensils and small jugs with handles and spouts (such as measuring cups) for pouring.
- ✓ Encourage children to drink from an open cup as early as you can and limit the use of bottles to bedtime only.
- ✓ Urge children to try for themselves but provide help and encouragement when needed so they do not get frustrated



## Independent dressing

Encourage children to dress and prepare by themselves; just provide minimal assistance.

- ✓ Start with older infants and toddlers by encouraging them to help pull socks on and off, pull up their trousers after a nappy change and help put their arms through sleeves.

- ✓ As children get older, encourage them to dress themselves but help with challenging steps such as zipping and buttoning.

### **Why your child needs to learn how to get dressed:**

- ✓ Builds your child's confidence and independence
- ✓ Gives your child a sense of achievement
- ✓ Once your child can dress himself, helping him get dressed is one less thing for you to do!

### **Also, getting dressed helps your child develop many other skills, including:**

- ✓ **Fine motor skills** when they learn to fasten buttons and zips
- ✓ **Gross motor skills** as they stand on one leg to pull on a pair of trousers
- ✓ **Cognitive skills** when they remember which bits of clothing go on first, and builds the patience and attention to finish the task
- ✓ **Language** as they name types of clothes, colours, and sizes
- ✓ **Awareness of the world around them** as they learn to dress for certain occasions and weather conditions.

### **Hygiene and toileting**

- ✓ **Help** children to take care of everyday hygiene routines and to use the toilet independently. This encourages them to learn how to become more independent and self-sufficient and frees up your time to help children with other activities.
- ✓ **Look** for signs of readiness for toileting for example telling you they have a dirty nappy or wanting to go to the toilet.



- ✓ **Encourage** children learning to use the toilet to climb on and off the toilet seat, pull clothing up and down, and wash their hands independently.
- ✓ **Teach** children how to brush their teeth after mealtimes and before bedtime. Be ready to provide support and help if they need it.

***If you have any concerns about your child's toileting, please discuss with your health visitor or GP.***

## Helping with daily chores

- ✓ Give your child responsibility for setting the table
- ✓ Encourage children to begin taking their dirty plates to the sink when they are old enough to carry them
- ✓ Ask them to sort out dirty laundry into whites and colours
- ✓ Get them to help with the washing up or to load the dishwasher
- ✓ Encourage your child to tidy away their toys

When children are involved in regular chores starting before the age of 4, they tend to be more independent in early adulthood than children without the experience of helping.

Many chores are also a learning experience and will help your child with maths, literacy, language, and numeracy



# Play & Leisure

## The importance of play

- When we talk about play, people usually think about young children, however **all children and young people** should have the opportunity to play every day.
- Play is important for the early stages of **brain development** and playing with your child can help build relationships for later life. But it does not matter what age we are, play helps to develop important skills for learning, life, and work.
- Encouraging play is one of the best things you can do for your child, whatever their age, and it is free.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states (in Article 31) that every child should have:



**"The right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."**

## What is Play?

- Play is how young children make sense of the world.
- There is evidence to show that play in early childhood can influence the way your child's brain develops, helping to co-ordinate their mental and physical capabilities.



- Through play, children and young people of all ages develop problem-solving skills, imagination and creativity, language and observation skills, and memory and concentration.
- Children and young people use play to test their theories about the world and their place in it.

## Free Play

Free play is when children follow their own ideas and interests in their own way and have the freedom to play how they want to. You can play with them **if they want you to** but the whole play will be decided by the child.

- ✓ They can do this on their own or with others
- ✓ It can happen inside or outside
- ✓ Children and young people should be given the choice of how and when they play
- ✓ Play is just as important for your teenager as it is for your baby or young child
- ✓ During free play time, children can express themselves in the way that they choose depending on the day, time, and situation they are in

## The Benefits of Free Play

- ✓ Increases creativity- your child will use their imagination more
- ✓ Encourages independence
- ✓ Helps to learn problem solving skills
- ✓ Let's your child express themselves

## **Play at Home**

When you play with your baby or young child it is an important part of the bonding process. How you play with your child when they are young can have a positive impact on how they form relationships when they are older.

- ✓ Give your child time and a space to play
- ✓ Turn off/the TV, tablet, phone, or console
- ✓ Encourage them to play outside in all weathers - there is no such thing as unsuitable weather just unsuitable clothing!
- ✓ Encourage them to play alone or with friends
- ✓ Allow them to take risks in their play – this encourages them to problem solve, increases confidence, and learn to make appropriate choices

*Below is a short article from 'Play Scotland' about risky play:*

### **Dealing with risk**

Children and young people need opportunities to play in lots of different situations, experiencing adventure and challenge. Play should be free and safe. Your child will learn to manage risks and make appropriate choices about where, how, and when they play.

While risks are real, they need to be kept in proportion and controlled. They should not affect the opportunities children and young people must play outside. The goal for you as parents is not to eliminate risk in play, but to weigh up the risks and the benefits. Learning to manage risks and challenges will help your child or young person to grow and develop into a healthy, confident adult.

**Some useful phrases to respond to risk-taking activities:**

'Go as high as you are confident.'

'Stop where you feel safe.'

'Look at what that other boy/girl is doing.'

'What do you think?'

'Remember what happened the last time? What did you do that worked?'

'That's OK, have another go.'

'I'll stand here just in case you need some help.'

# Sleep

## Good sleep is essential for physical & mental wellbeing

- **Cell growth and repair** – during sleep, new cells grow, and existing cells are repaired, keeping us healthy, and our immune system strong.
- **Memory** – while we sleep our brains move short-term memories into long-term storage, especially important for young minds learning about the world or studying for exams.
- **Relaxation** – sleep helps us rest after daily information overload.
- **Healthy eating** – good sleep balances production of the hormone's leptin and ghrelin, which help us to follow a healthy diet rather than craving more carbs.
- **Concentration** – healthy sleep helps us to function better during the day, driving more safely, working, and studying more effectively, getting more out of the activities we enjoy.
- **Good mood** – after a good night's sleep we usually feel happier, and more able to deal with the issues life throws at us.
- **Social interaction** – feeling rested helps us to keep an eye on our actions, taking fewer risks, reacting appropriately to other people, enjoying others' company.
- **Energy** – a good sleep pattern means we have the energy to get the most out of the time when we are awake.



## Tips for Relaxation

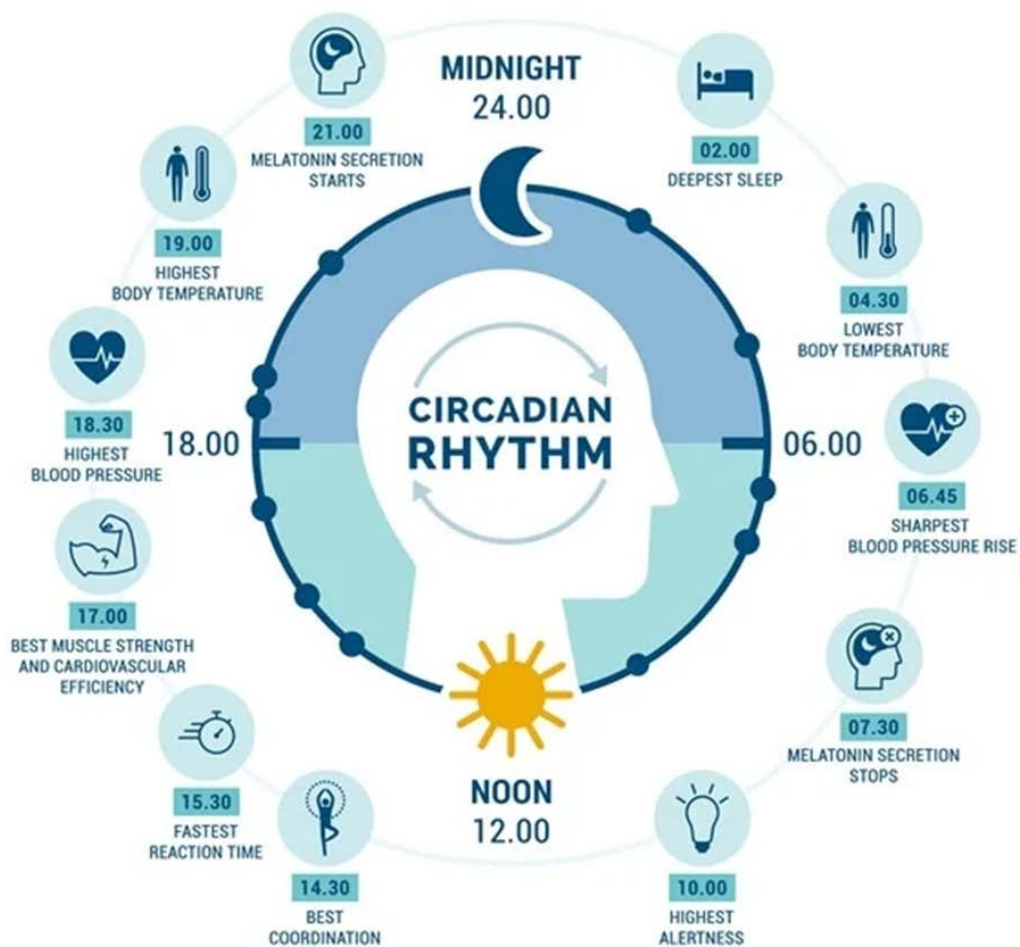
Feeling relaxed is important in the run up to bedtime for both parent and child. If your child is experiencing difficulties sleeping it can make you both feel anxious. Youngsters often pick up on stress levels so try to create a relaxing and calm environment as bedtime approaches.

Here is some advice that may help:

1. Turn off all screens an hour before bedtime, this includes television, laptops, tablets, and mobile phones. Screen activities can be mentally stimulating and also may inhibit the production of melatonin, the sleep hormone that helps us to feel drowsy.
2. Set aside time earlier during the day to allow your child to share any worries with you. It can be helpful to share how their day has been and what is planned for the next day. Make sure to give them your full attention.
3. Dim the lights in the hour before bed to create a relaxing environment and aid the production of melatonin.
4. Fine motor skill activities such as craft activities, model making, jigsaws or colouring pictures can aid relaxation.
5. Massage can help some children to unwind.
6. Classical music can be very soothing and makes good relaxing music to play in the background during the bedtime routine.
7. Mindfulness is being increasingly used and there is evidence to suggest that it can be helpful to promote relaxation and sleep. There are a number of apps and products on the market that may be useful.
8. Encourage your child to concentrate on their breathing. Imagine breathing in a beautiful white light and blowing out any worries or troubles each time they exhale. Breathing exercises are also useful for parents to carry out and are a great exercise to enjoy together.
9. Teach your child to progressively relax the muscles in their body. They can begin by tensing their feet to the count of 5 and then letting them relax. Next tense the calf muscles and relax, moving up to the thighs and so on until they have relaxed each part of their body. This is another good activity to try together.
10. End the day on a positive note by sharing 5 great things that have happened during the day

## The Circadian Rhythm

- The circadian rhythm or internal 'body clock' tells us when to sleep and when to wake up, regulating our sleep pattern.
- Moving in a 24-hour daily cycle the circadian rhythm responds mainly to daylight.
- We all go through sleep cycles. We move through light sleep, deep sleep, dream sleep, waking and then going back to sleep.
- Each of these cycles lasts for approximately 90 minutes. Brief waking after each cycle is part of a normal sleep pattern.





**Below are the approximate hours of sleep needed by children of different ages:**

<b>Age &amp; stage</b>	<b>Time spent sleeping</b>
Babies 4 to 12 mths old	12 to 16 hrs including naps
Toddlers 1 to 2 yrs old	11 to 14 hrs including naps
Children 3 to 5 yrs old	10 to 13 hrs including naps
Children 6 to 12 yrs old	9 to 12 hrs
Teenagers 13 to 18 yrs old	8 to 10 hrs

**For children, a regular good night's sleep means:**

- ✓ Healthy growth
- ✓ Positive mood and sociability
- ✓ Better mental health
- ✓ Doing better at school
- ✓ Enjoying life
- ✓ Improved immunity and better recovery from illness
- ✓ Healthy weight

*For parents and carers, it is also important to be aware of how lack of sleep can affect your own mental and physical wellbeing.*

## **How to help your child to develop good sleep habits**

- When babies are put into bed drowsy but not asleep, they are more likely to learn to 'self-soothe'. This means they will be able to fall asleep independently and go back to sleep when they wake during the night.
- For those who have been soothed until they fall asleep this becomes a habit and they may become dependent on this routine to fall asleep and when they wake during the night.
- By establishing a good bedtime routine which helps your child to settle to sleep and to stay asleep will support them to develop a healthy independent sleep pattern.

As they grow, your little one's sleep habits change a lot. Just when you think you've cracked it, they start waking up every two hours or refuse to sleep at all.

And the older they get, the more their bedtime routine changes and that's before you factor in things like school holidays, new siblings, or even a national lockdown.

**We know why sleep is so important for your child's physical and mental health and for you, but we all know they sometimes resist it.**

That's why having a clear bedtime routine that's easy for your little one to follow is so important, though this is sometimes easier said than done.

If you're looking for advice, the quick video on the next page will give you a great place to start.

## **Tips for settling children at bedtimes**

### **Create a clear, easy to follow bedtime routine**

- Do the same relaxing things in the same order, at the same time every night. These could include a warm bath, dimming the bedroom lights, and reading a story together quietly.
- Try to avoid screens for an hour before bedtime, and make sure there's no TV or tablet on in the room when they're going to sleep.

### **Be prepared for bedtime challenges**

- If you think about sticking points in advance you can pre-empt the things, they'll say 'no' to. How about encouraging them by making a reward chart for when bedtime tasks are fuss-free?
- If they know from the start that a drama-free toothbrushing means they can hear their favourite story, they are more likely to co-operate.

### **Help them to recognise when they may be sleepy**

- Talk to them in simple words to help them spot the signs themselves. You could say 'You look sleepy' or 'those yawns tell me it's bedtime.'
- Look out for these signals yourself, whether it's yawning, rubbing their eyes, or getting emotional. Talk with your child about these signs and how sleep will help them feel better.

## **Sleep and Food**

- What your child eats during the day may impact on their sleep during the night. A light snack in the hour before bedtime may be helpful for some children – but only introduce this if your child seems to need it.
- Avoid heavy meals as this can make it more difficult to sleep. However, if your child is waking up very early, it may be due to hunger.

- It's best to avoid sugar before bed as this can provide a rush of energy. Processed sugars such as cakes, cereals, and sweets should be avoided. Be aware fruit and juices also contain sugar, so only offer small portions.
- Avoid caffeine from late afternoon onwards. It is not only present in tea and coffee but can also be found in hot chocolate, fizzy drinks, chocolate bars and chocolate flavour puddings or cakes.

## **Things to Remember**

- Develop a good sleep routine as early as possible
- Stick to the routine as much as possible
- No devices for at least an hour before bedtime
- Keep TV/phones/tablets out of the bedroom
- Try relaxation techniques

**You have got this! It takes time to change a sleep routine and re-set that body clock but keep going – consistency will help so much in the long run. It's worth all the hard work to get there.**

# Communication

The four main types of communication are:

- Verbal (spoken words, tone)
- Non-verbal (body language, facial expressions, gestures)
- Written (words written down)
- Visual (signs, symbols, pictures)



When do we start to communicate?

Understanding communication begins before birth (during pregnancy) and continues through life, as a child hears, sees, and interprets information from other people.



## Talking to your baby

An infographic titled 'Talking to your baby' with a central illustration of a pregnant woman's belly. The infographic is divided into several colored sections with text and icons:

- Green section:** 'By talking to and touching your bump, parents can help their baby to develop.'
- Red speech bubble:** 'TIP: Siblings could get involved by reading to the bump.'
- Yellow section:** 'From 20 weeks of pregnancy your baby can hear your voices and might wriggle or kick.' (Icon: speaker)
- Orange section:** 'Keep your voice steady and slow. Stroke your tummy, sing softly, play music or read aloud.' (Icon: smiley face)
- Blue section:** 'Speaking softly and gently helps you and your baby relax and bond.' (Icon: brain) and 'Getting angry or shouting can make you and your baby stressed.'

## **The ability to communicate effectively is an important skill**

- ✓ Children start communicating from the moment they are born, with that first cry. As children develop it is important, we encourage their communication skills so they can express themselves, clearly and confidently.
- ✓ Children communicate first with their parents, then with siblings and friends, and then with other adults such as their schoolteachers.
- ✓ Children learn to communicate by watching and listening to their parents, and then mimicking their words and actions; the more you communicate with your child, the earlier and quicker they will develop these skills.
- ✓ Remember children will copy the bad as well as the good, so try your best to be a positive role model.
- ✓ Reading will help improve your child's communication skills; it helps to develop their language and introduces them to a range of different words. As they get older, reading together provides a chance for discussion, giving your child space to comfortably share their ideas
- ✓ By interacting with siblings and friends, a child will develop social skills and interpersonal skills alongside their communication skills.
- ✓ These skills will help them feel find it easier to strike up conversations with other children and make new friends. Through these relationships, they will also improve their listening skills as well as their ability to empathise and interpret non-verbal communication cues.

## **Communication development**

Communication development for young children includes gaining the skills to understand and to express thoughts, feelings, and information.

Language and communication skills are critical to a child's development. Good communication makes them better able to engage in social activities as well as learn from formal classroom instruction and the environment around them.

Communication involves both speech and language. Speech is the verbal means of communication, and language is using shared rules to put words together to express thoughts and feelings.

Since parents are a child's first teacher, a knowledge of language development in children will improve a parent's ability to interact with their child to encourage and guide them to understand and communicate with the world around them.

## **Talking to your child**

The parent-child relationship is very important. Effective communication skills for parents plays a huge role in this, as it improves the daily interactions between you and your child. This is all about learning how to talk to your children in a better way.

For our first step to good communication, we need to think more about how we say things, not necessarily what we say. Tone and delivery are very important when it comes to effective communication with children.

If we think about the number of times we talk with our children in a day, you will probably conclude its a large amount. If most of these are delivered as strict commands, do you think your child would be happy?

Would you be happy is someone gave you so many strict commands in a day?

You are far more likely to see a child acting adversely, if most of the communications they have with parents take this form.

Also, be careful not to bombard your child with questions. Some parents think they have to turn every single moment into a learning opportunity and find out what their child knows. Often, this will lead to a string of questions and a child that feels overwhelmed.

All conversations you have with your child should be natural, not forced in the name of teaching them something or finding out what they know.

# Ways to help your child develop their communication skills

## Early Years

- Verbally respond to your baby's vocalisations.
- Talk to your baby.
- Around six months of age, use shared attention and sign language (gestures).
- Point and name things that they see.
- Use an exaggerated voice when you describe things.
- Use feeling words.
- Sing to your child from babyhood until they ask you to stop.
- Have older children make up songs.
- Use songs to communicate things such as time to go to bed, time to clean up, etc.
- Make up songs that are silly or that communicate affirmations related to their positive qualities.

## Older Toddler and preschool aged child

- Initiate conversations with your child related to recent events and what they're doing.
- Make up stories along with your child where each contributes.
- This not only stimulates language, but thinking, creating, and a sense of humour.
- Gradually increase the complexity of grammar and vocabulary you use to communicate.
- Provide children with expanded information about events, as well as things they see and how they feel.
- Read interactively to engage their participation.
- Ask questions, use dramatic inflections, let them guess what will happen next, point to pictures, and describe them, and ask your child to do the same.
- [Learn More About Interactive Reading.](#)



## School Age and Beyond

- Keep the conversations going.
- Have family meetings.
- Have dinner together at the table and encourage conversation.
- When you go out to dinner, keep the electronics at home or turned off.
- After seeing a movie or TV show together, talk about what happened.
- Encourage reading. When they finish a book, ask about their thoughts and feelings.

**If you think your child has a problem with hearing, language skills, or speech talk to your child's teacher, doctor, or health visitor.**

## Communication issues can include:

- hearing problems
- trouble following directions
- trouble asking or answering questions
- difficulty holding a conversation
- poor vocabulary growth
- trouble learning things such as colours and counting
- stammering
- trouble putting sentences together
- unclear speech

Most children will outgrow these problems. Others might need speech and language therapy or further evaluation.



## Top Tips to Remember

- ✓ Talk to your child all the time
- ✓ Discuss your day, every day
- ✓ Listen to and reflect on what your child says
- ✓ Sing songs and rhymes and read stories

## What next...?

Children are learning all the time. We used to see school and nursery staff as the child's only teacher, but now we recognise that parents and carers are their child's first ever teacher and know that a lot of learning happens in the home.

We hope this booklet helped you recognise the many things you're already doing well. We also hope it gave you ideas for the future, to help your child learn these important skills to ensure they thrive at primary school.

**Family Learning** offers advice, support, resources, and training courses to parents and carers, alongside free events for families during the school holidays.



To contact Family Learning you can reach out via

Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/familylearningaberdeen/>

Or email [familylearning@aberdeencity.gov.uk](mailto:familylearning@aberdeencity.gov.uk)