

Smartphones, Reading and Language Development



Why Language Matters

Language is one of the most important foundations for learning. Long before children learn to read and write, they are developing language through everyday interactions—listening, talking, asking questions, telling stories and making sense of the world around them.

These early experiences help children build:

- Vocabulary
- Communication skills
- Listening skills
- Understanding
- Confidence
- Social skills

Language development does not happen in isolation. It develops through interaction with other people.

Did You Know?

 Children learn language best through responsive, back-and-forth interactions with adults and other children.

 Reading for pleasure is one of the strongest predictors of future academic success.

 The first years of life are particularly important for language development, with children's brains forming millions of neural connections every second.

 Children need to hear words, conversations and stories repeatedly in order to build vocabulary and understanding.

 While technology can support learning, children learn language most effectively through real-world interaction rather than passive screen use.



Why Conversation Matters

Everyday conversations are powerful learning opportunities. Whether chatting in the car, talking during dinner or discussing a favourite television programme, children are constantly developing language.

Through conversation children learn to:

- Express their thoughts
- Ask questions
- Understand different viewpoints
- Develop reasoning skills
- Build confidence in communication

These skills form the foundation for learning throughout life.

What Happens When Screens Replace Conversation?

Technology is not inherently harmful, and many digital tools can support learning. The challenge arises when screen use begins to replace activities that are particularly important for language development.

For example:

- Family conversations
- Storytelling
- Shared reading
- Creative play
- Time spent with friends and family

When these experiences happen less often, children may have fewer opportunities to practise and develop communication skills.

This is particularly important during the early years when language is developing rapidly.

Why Reading Still Matters

Reading remains one of the most powerful ways children develop language and learning skills.



Reading helps children build:

- Vocabulary
- Comprehension
- Imagination
- Concentration
- Empathy
- General knowledge

Unlike much digital content, reading requires children to slow down, focus and actively engage with ideas.

Why Some Children Find Reading More Difficult

Many forms of smartphone content are:

- Fast paced
- Highly visual
- Constantly changing
- Designed to capture attention quickly

Books are different.

Reading requires sustained attention and the ability to follow ideas over time. For some children, particularly those spending large amounts of time consuming short-form content, reading can feel more effortful by comparison. This does not mean children cannot enjoy reading. It simply means they may need more support and encouragement to develop the habit.

Reading Doesn't Have to Mean Traditional Books

When many adults think about reading, they picture a child sitting quietly with a chapter book.

The reality is that children engage with language and stories in many different ways, and all reading experiences can help build confidence, vocabulary, imagination and a love of learning.

Some children will happily read novels for hours. Others may prefer different formats—and that's okay.



Supporting Dyslexic and Reluctant Readers

Some children find reading more challenging than others.

This does not mean they cannot become confident readers or develop a love of stories.

Many children benefit from:

- ✓ Shorter books
- ✓ Larger font sizes
- ✓ Increased spacing between lines
- ✓ Coloured overlays or tinted pages
- ✓ Graphic novels
- ✓ Audiobooks
- ✓ High-interest, low-reading-age books
- ✓ Reading alongside an adult

Publishers such as Barrington Stoke specialise in creating books designed to be accessible and enjoyable for dyslexic and reluctant readers.

The goal is not perfection. The goal is helping children experience success, enjoyment and confidence when engaging with books and stories.

Follow Their Interests

One of the best ways to encourage reading is to start with what children already love. A child who refuses a novel may happily spend hours reading about:

- Football
- Animals
- Gaming
- Space
- Nature
- Art
- Cooking
- Cars
- Dinosaurs
- Science experiments

Reading for pleasure does not have to look a particular way.

Children are far more likely to read when they are interested in the subject matter.

Supporting Language & Reading at Home



Small daily interactions can make a significant difference.

Try to:

- ✓ Read together regularly
- ✓ Encourage reading for pleasure
- ✓ Visit libraries
- ✓ Talk about books and stories
- ✓ Have conversations during everyday activities
- ✓ Ask open-ended questions
- ✓ Encourage imaginative play
- ✓ Model reading yourself
- ✓ Create device-free opportunities for family conversation

Remember, children do not need perfect parents. They simply need regular opportunities to connect, communicate and learn.

Looking for Book Recommendations?

Finding the right book can make all the difference.

The following organisations provide trusted book recommendations, reading lists and resources for children of all ages and abilities:

BookTrust

Age-based book recommendations, reading tips and family resources.

Website: www.booktrust.org.uk

National Literacy Trust

Reading, literacy and language resources for families and schools.

Website: www.literacytrust.org.uk

LoveReading4Kids

Book reviews and recommendations for different ages and interests.

Website: www.lovereadings4kids.co.uk

The School Reading List

Curated reading lists organised by age, ability and interest.

Website: www.schoolreadinglist.co.uk

Barrington Stoke

Specialist publisher of dyslexia-friendly and accessible books for children and young people.

Website: www.barringtonstoke.co.uk



Need Support?

If you are concerned about your child's communication, language development, reading or learning, support is available.

Speak to Your Child's School

Schools can often provide advice, identify concerns and signpost appropriate support .

Speak to Your GP or Health Visitor

If you have concerns about your child's speech, language or communication development, your GP or Health Visitor can help identify appropriate support pathways.

Key Takeaway

Language develops through connection.

Children learn to communicate through conversations, stories, questions, play and relationships. Technology can be a useful tool, but it should never replace the real-world interactions that help children build language, confidence and a lifelong love of learning.

The goal is not to raise children who simply spend less time on screens. It is to raise children who are curious, confident communicators with a love of stories, learning and exploring the world around them.