Pre-reading and spelling skills
Hayley Cockcroft

“Reading is more than seeing words clearly, more than pronouncing printed words correctly, more than recognising the meaning of isolated words. Reading requires you to think, feel and imagine.”
Ruth Strang

INTRODUCTION
Becoming school ready is a complex concept that means that a child is “learning ready” when he is able to comply with the minimum requirements and has developed the minimum skills necessary to experience success and make progress in the school environment.

In order for a child to be successful in learning to read and spell accurately, he needs to be competent in the following:

- Gross and fine motor skills
- Age appropriate emotional development
- Be able to cope socially in the school environment
- Have good visual and auditory perception
- Have a good concept of numbers
- Be able to reason on a concrete, semi-concrete and abstract level
- Be able to distinguish between left and right
- Be able to cross his midline
- Have a good sense of spatial orientation
- Have good use of vocabulary
- Be able to recall rhymes, songs, home address, etc.

Learning readiness needs to be seen as a process and not a single event. Pre-reading and spelling skill development begins at birth and goes hand-in-hand with the sequential stages of development in children. When a child is provided with sufficient opportunities to develop healthily, he is usually school ready by the compulsory school age.

FACTORS AFFECTING LEARNING READINESS
Factors affecting learning readiness can either enhance or inhibit the process of achieving a state of learning readiness. When a child cannot see or hear well, is over-active, sickly or
whose natural perceptual development seems to be inhibited for whatever reason, then he may well not be ready for learning at the expected time (regardless of ample opportunity being provided). Such a child would require professional or other assistance in order to aid him in the normal process of school preparation.

### THE ROLE OF THE TRIUNE BRAIN

A child’s level of development in the following three areas will indicate whether he is ready for learning to read and spell.

1. Physical development (PQ)
2. Emotional development (EQ)
3. Intellectual development (IQ)

A child who has not yet reached an age appropriate level of maturation often displays the need to play. This can be an indication that he is not yet emotionally ready to meet the demands that are being made on him, he is unable to orientate himself in order to complete tasks and may tire easily in the formal teaching situation.

When a child is physically prepared for school, he has the ability to meet demands which are made on him. He is able to hold his pencil with ease and can also sit still long enough for him to concentrate and learn. Such a child is not only able to learn, but is also capable of listening to and carrying out instructions.
When a child is physically independent, he develops a positive self-concept, confidence and assertiveness. The result of these skills is that the child will have a good sense of safety, healthy risk-taking and learning readiness. Learning skills do not only refer to academic skills, but also includes the making of friends (shows that the child has the emotional maturity to get along with others). Motivation and memory are the emotional and social skills which act as glue to join the head (thinking) with the heart (feeling).

Other than physical and emotional readiness, a child also needs to be intellectually and perceptually ready for school. A child should be able to distinguish between left and right, understand spatial concepts like “behind, besides, in front of ...” and show comprehension of numerical concepts such as bigger/smaller, more/less as well as numbers. These skills enable a child to make sense of his experiences, think about them, make plans and respond appropriately.

Besides being physically, emotionally and intellectually ready, a young child might still face various barriers to learning.

THE IMPORTANCE OF VISUAL PERCEPTION SKILLS
“The eyes look, but the brain ‘sees’” (de Jager. 2006). A child has mastered his visual perception skills when he is able to sort, match and classify objects according to shape, colour, size, texture and position, as well as be able to recognise differences and similarities in pictures, letters and words.

Visual perception includes skills such as:
- Visual discrimination – the ability to see differences between pictures, letters, words and numbers that are similar in appearance, e.g. 6 / 9.
- Foreground-background discrimination – the ability to isolate a figure that may be in the foreground or background of a picture by focusing on one object at a time.
Activities such as cutting, colouring-in, reading and spelling require figure-ground discrimination.

- Visual memory – the ability to recall visual images. This is an important skill as children need to be able to recognise sight words.
- Visual sequencing – the ability to see letters in order, e.g. b-a-t = bat.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF AUDITORY PERCEPTION**

A child has well developed auditory perception when he is able to recognise and distinguish between similar and different sounds, pitch, volume and speed. He also needs to be able to recognise similarities and differences between similar sounds. Auditory perception includes skills such as:

- Auditory discrimination – the ability to distinguish minor differences between words, e.g. 15 / 50.
- Auditory sequencing – the ability to recall and understand sounds in the order in which they were heard, e.g. r-a-t not t-a-r. This is also applicable to numbers, e.g. the educator said 184 and not 148. This is a very important part of the reading and writing process.
- Auditory memory – the ability for a child to remember what he has heard, enabling them to learn rhythm and poems. The three aspects to auditory memory are: short-term memory (instant recall), working memory (remembering until the task is complete) and long-term memory (recalling information heard a long time ago).
- Auditory foreground-background discrimination – the ability to hear and recognise the educator’s voice above the noise of the classroom.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF CORE MUSCLE DEVELOPMENT**

Gross motor skills refer to the movement and control of the body’s large muscles which are involved in daily activities such as walking, running, kicking and catching. Gross motor development is a reptilian response and is made up of a number of skills at a level of unconscious competence in order to maintain posture and a sense of independence. Underdeveloped core muscles result in low muscle tone, poor posture, poor concentration and fatigue. Rather than focusing on learning, the brain concentrates on staying upright through constant movement.
ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TO DEVELOP PRE-READING AND SPELLING SKILLS

Speech and language develop naturally when a child participates in various experiences. Speech refers to a child’s ability to know and use language with understanding. A child has the need to belong both emotionally and socially, and needs to develop language as a way to communicate and bond with his peers. Adequate language development in the early years is important for the development of cognitive skills, e.g. comparison, classification and organisation. Children can be encouraged to develop pre-reading and spelling skills in the following ways:

- Speak to them often.
- Listen to what they have to say.
- Avoid “baby” language.
- Allow them to tell you what they want – do not anticipate their needs.
- Play games together.
- Read books together – discuss the pictures / story line.
- Take them on outings.
- Afford them plenty of time to socialise with other children.

It is essential to note that when entering school, a child may have attained varying degrees of learning readiness in the different areas. The variation in areas of development will impact on his success at school.

In order to assess whether a child is learning ready or not, it is important to form a picture of the whole child, taking all aspects into consideration.

**Questionnaire: Is your child ready for reading?**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is he able to sit up and sit still for 11 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is he able to look UP with his eyes without tilting his head</td>
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<td>Is his drawing of himself complete with ears, fingers, clothes, neck</td>
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<td>Is he able to concentrate throughout a short story?</td>
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<td>Is he able to match pictures that are similar?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is he able to match shapes that are similar?</td>
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<td>Can he express himself using appropriate language?</td>
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<td>Does he have a good vocabulary?</td>
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<td>Can he tell a story in the correct sequence?</td>
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<td>Can he recall songs and rhymes?</td>
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<td>Does he recognise his own name in print?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is he able to identify one or more letters of the alphabet?</td>
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<td>Does he recognise the way words are set out on paper? (Left to right; top to bottom)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does he show interest in books?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Does he show interest in reading</td>
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If you are able to answer ‘yes’ to all of these questions, then your child may well be ready for reading.
FUN GAMES TO PLAY TO ENCOURAGE READING AND SPELLING SKILLS
As a result of children being unique individuals, they all learn to read and spell in different ways. By employing various teaching methods, learning becomes a more enjoyable activity. Below is just a few of the many games which can be played in order to encourage young children to develop reading and spelling skills:
1. I spy …
2. Memory Card Games
3. Look and Say games with flash cards
4. What’s that sound?
5. What comes next? Sequencing cards
6. Name puzzles e.g. birth + day = birthday
7. Broken Telephone
8. Listen and imitate

ENHANCING PRE-READING AND SPELLING SKILLS WITH MIND MOVES®
Mind Moves® (De Jager, 2006) is a movement programme that can be utilised on a daily basis - 3 times per day in a controlled manner - to improve pre-reading and -spelling skills. Spatial orientation is essential for reading and spelling. Well stimulated eyes, ears and vestibular system provide the foundation upon which knowledge can be added, which can all be improved with the following Mind Moves:

Antenna adjuster
Massage both ear lobes simultaneously from top to bottom using circular movements.

This move develops the near senses, auditory processing, auditory perception as well as receptive language ability.

Mouse pad
The eyes are to the brain what the mouse is to the computer. The eyes access different parts of the brain when turning up, down, horizontal, left and right. Focus on the thumb held at elbow distance from the eyes. Move the thumb upwards, first around the left eye and then around the right eye outlining the shape of an infinity sign. Repeat five times. Swop hands and repeat the same process, always first drawing a circle around the left eye and then around the right eye.

This move stimulates the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic receptive ability, while crossing the midline to integrate the left and right parts of the brain and body. It develops eye-hand coordination and visual integration.
Temporal toner
Starting in front of the ears, using both hands simultaneously, gently tap upwards around the ears.

This movement promotes temporal lobe stimulation to improve listening skills, auditory perception, vestibular stimulation, proprioception and balance. It also promotes integration between listening and communicating both in verbal and written form.

Bilateral walk
Touch the left knee with the right hand, twisting the trunk to bring the opposite shoulder and hip towards each other, extending the other arm and leg. Now touch the right knee with the left hand, extending the other arm and leg. This movement stimulates left-right integration by crossing the lateral midline and is best done first lying down and then standing up. Repeat at least 10 times. The exercise can also be done while singing or doing some form of rote learning.

This move integrates the left and right parts of the brain and body, while crossing the midline. When eyes are moved into visual, auditory and kinaesthetic positions, this move also crosses all three midlines.

Communication is at the heart of a child’s development, be it cognitive, social, emotional or behavioural.

L.S. Vygotsky