

PRE-BRAILLE SKILLS

About Braille

Braille is a code that is made up of a six-dot cell.

1* *4

2* *5

3* *6

The simplest Braille involves a letter for a combination of dots.

The word Braille can be written simply as 'b r a i l l e', the word in each individual letter, or written in 'short form' to 'brl'.

Young braillists learn the simple alphabetical code first before moving onto the more complex Braille code, which involves 189 contractions and short form words.

Getting Ready to Braille

There are lots of activities that you can do to help develop the skills that are needed to become a successful braillist.

Play simple sorting games with familiar objects.

- Put objects in a box or bag and ask your child to find one. Make it easy, start with two objects that feel very different or have distinct shapes. Build up the number of objects and similarity in texture or shape as the child's skills improve. Work at your child's pace. Always use real items when possible rather than imitation toys if possible. This will be more meaningful and give you more to talk about.
- Play and sing lots of finger rhymes.
- Play a wide variety of matching games with toys, bricks, bobbins, cars and also everyday items; pairs of gloves, identical cups, socks, biscuits.
- Find groups of objects that are the same, eg: a collection of different types of spoons, different sizes of socks, different types of brushes, to help your child develop an understanding that sometimes the same is **NOT** identical.
This is a very difficult idea for a severely visually impaired child, who may experience their own spoon but not accept that other items are also known as spoon (wooden, plastic, metal, large, small). This can be done through everyday activities. This is early work on grouping or categorising, which is important in Braille (understanding similarity).

Your child will need the same experiences many times to help them understand these concepts.

Encourage your child to play with a very wide variety of textures. Encourage the use of texture vocabulary: soft, hard, smooth, bumpy, rough etc and relate this to what they already know eg: "When you feel your cup it's very smooth". "The path in the garden feels rough and hard". "Your cushion is soft and squashy". "You have a bumpy pattern on the bottom of your shoe".

As your child develops the ability to sort small similar shapes introduce two kinds, eg: pasta, or buttons, or collage materials, or pegs (wooden/plastic).

Encourage your child to develop strength and good two-handed co-ordination by including the following activities:

- Tearing paper, card (perhaps to make paper-mache), punching holes with a hole punch.
- Kneading dough, or using a rolling pin, pastry cutters whilst baking or playing with playdough. Clay and plasticine can also be used but initially these are harder to manipulate.
- Helping to take pegs off the line or peg out clothes, or peg up collage or paintings to dry.
- Unscrewing jars/lids with their toys inside, or as part of tidying up or sorting play.
- Using push button toys.
- Any play that encourages the use of two hands together, such as building, threading, posting, stacking. **When threading this should always be done from left to right, (this is the way your child will track Braille).** Thread onto pipe cleaners, wikki-stix or thin dowelling as initially using cord is very difficult.

Moving On

Mark making with fabric pens or 3D pens, or glitter glue and then following the lines (left to right) once dried.

Follow the lines of holes made with a hole punch or shape punch (left to right) along the page.

Counting lines of objects (make it fun, relate it to number rhymes) 5 Little Ducks, 5 Cheeky Monkeys, 6 Green Bottles etc. Continue to play and sing lots of finger rhymes.

Use textured paper / card strips to feel along (left to right). Can they find a matching one?

Wikki-stix lines – stick them onto card in a straight line then more complex wavy lines. Follow with fingertips from left to right.

It is fun to have a reward on a string at the end of the line, for your child to reach, such as a jingly bell, small fluffy toy, anything tactile, fragrant or that makes a noise. These can be detachable (use blu-tac) and re-used so that the child doesn't know which reward to expect.

Continue texture-matching games, increase the variety of textures and the similarity of textures.

Place objects in a line, feel each one then remove one. Can they identify the one that is removed? You could reverse this and let the child take the object away for you to guess. Start with three or four objects to begin with.

Use a half-dozen egg box (once the child can count to six) and place buttons on the upturned box. This corresponds with the 1-6 braille cell.

Pre-Braille Reading

It is important for children to know that books contain print or Braille and that the Braille carries a meaning or message. It is important that children learn to distinguish between Braille and the textured or raised diagram. Explain that you are reading a letter or a book, the paper or a magazine so that your child realises that print/Braille can be for many different purposes. As your child's books may be handled and examined more than a sighted child's books, teach your child to handle books with care. All of these ideas take time to develop. Help your child by being a good role model.

Share books as often as possible, building up from just a minute if your child shows interest, to longer, as your child becomes more interested. Make sure that book time is as cosy and relaxed as possible.

If your child has useful residual vision then choose the books that have simple large pictures, with bold colours and little clutter or detail on each page.

Encourage your child to explore books as soon as possible by using texture books. Choose books with more realistic textures.

Choose books that will interest your child, for example about cars or animals.

Begin with board books, to develop the skills of holding a book and turning the pages.

Have an expressive voice and make animal and car /train noises as appropriate to bring the story to life.

Describe the texture. Relate it to something they already know about "It is soft like a teddy" "It is rough like the pavement" "It is bumpy like your lego bricks".

Playing, and experiencing a wide variety of textures is very important. If children are to develop tactile (touching) discrimination skills and vocabulary, and ideas about all kinds of materials the world is made up of and that they are not able to see these experiences are essential. This should be encouraged from your babies earliest days. Textures should be introduced gradually usually starting with dry or soft textures.

Use everyday opportunities to talk about texture and encourage touch and exploration, (dressing, washing up, bathing, sorting washed / dried clothes, putting food away, preparing food, walks to the shops etc). Please consider safety, especially if you have a child who tends to mouth lots of objects.

Introduce books that make a noise if you press the correct button. There are some nursery rhyme books available with about 4 or 5 musical accompaniments for each rhyme featured in the book. These can be adapted to help your child by adding a textured line from the page to the button.

Encourage your child to feel the textured line and move left to right across the textured line.

Make your own nursery rhyme book with simple objects on each page to represent a favourite nursery rhyme such as a star for Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, or wool for Baa Baa Black Sheep etc.

When your child is a little older, say the terms “front cover” and “back page”, “top of the page” and “bottom of the page”. Some books have markers to help your child find the top of the page and realise which way up the book goes.

Objects or toys can bring any story to life. If your child has a favourite story, try to use real objects to sustain their interest and discussion. For example, The Gingerbread Man – you could use a dough cutter, a Gingerbread Man (bought or homemade), an apron etc.

Tracking a line or Braille - allow children to place their hands on top of your hands, encourage them to find your fingers and align them to your own. This can be a challenge for little fingers. Model reading Braille by moving slowly over the Braille from left to right. **Please ask for more guidance if necessary.** If you are privileged to know an adult brailist they may be able to act as a good role model for your child.

Your local library will have texture books to loan. Please speak to the librarian. Specialist books can be ordered / loaned through a company called ‘Clear Vision’. It is very worthwhile giving them a call to request a catalogue or about books they feel would be suitable for your child. Please ask for further information or contact details.

Happy (pre) Braille reading!