Froebel Trust Podcast
Transcript : Episode 12
June 2024

00:00:02:18 - 00:00:32:04
Colin
You're listening to the Froebel Trust podcast. I'm Colin Kelly, and during the last 11 episodes of this series, I've been on a journey learning about Froebel, the inventor of kindergarten, and how the principles of his pioneering approach support babies and young children, and their educators working in schools and early years settings today. For this episode, which is all about supporting and developing young children's literacy, I'm passing my presenter baton to Dr Kate Smith.

00:00:32:06 - 00:00:54:06
Colin
Kate's a traveling tutor for the Froebel Trust and an education consultant who works with early years settings, schools and arts based organizations around the UK. Now coming up during this episode, you'll hear from Professor Dominic Wyse. "This idea that there's one way to teach children to learn to read is just not tenable." You'll also hear from Professor Usha Goswami.

00:00:54:08 - 00:01:03:24
Usha
If you're a child who's struggling to learn to read and synthetic phonics hasn't got you off to a good start, just being given more and more synthetic phonics year after year is not going to help that child.

00:01:03:24 - 00:01:08:23
Colin
And Froebelian expert and former nursery school head teacher Jane Whinnett.

00:01:09:00 - 00:01:23:17
Jane
We need educators who have a wide range of songs to sing and the confidence to do it. So we need colleges to be encouraging young educators and new teachers and practitioners to sing with children.

00:01:23:19 - 00:01:31:09
Colin
So a packed episode as ever. I hope you enjoy it. But let me hand over to your host, Dr Kate Smith.

00:01:31:11 - 00:01:55:24
Kate
Thanks, Colin. I'm Dr Kate Smith, and I'm delighted to be here to present this special podcast episode all about literacy, focusing on the ways educators can really support children's language and literacy

development through play. I'm keen to find out more about how new research can support and inform educators working with children now. I'm joined by a panel of guests.

00:01:56:01 - 00:02:31:18
Kate
Professor Usha Goswami is Professor of Cognitive Developmental Neuroscience at the University of Cambridge and a fellow of Saint John's College, Cambridge. She's also founding director of the Center of Neuroscience and Education. Jane Whinnett is an associate tutor on the Froebel in Childhood Practice course at the University of Edinburgh, and a traveling tutor for the Froebel Trust. And Professor Dominic Wyse is Professor of Early Childhood and Primary Education at the Institute of Education, University College London.

00:02:31:20 - 00:02:58:23
Kate
Don't forget you can find out all about my guests, read their full biographies and find details of the research, articles and resources they refer to during this episode on the Froebel Trust website or in the podcast description. So I thought it might be really helpful to begin our discussion by asking my guests what exactly do we mean when we talk about how we learn literacy?

00:02:59:00 - 00:03:02:18
Kate
Professor Usha Goswami, would you like to start us off?

00:03:02:20 - 00:03:27:07
Usha
Well, I think literacy is a fundamental aspect of our culture. And like all cultural acquisitions, children need a long apprenticeship in order to become experts. And the special thing about literacy is that we use a symbol system to write down spoken language. So at some point you need to learn about that. But what you need to learn first is to be a really great user of your spoken language.

00:03:27:09 - 00:03:47:21
Usha
And so there are different types of activities you might do to try and help children to have a great apprenticeship at different ages. But I think that one of the fundamental drivers of children is to be in the social group and to be doing what other people are doing. So, for example, if they see the adult carers reading, they might want to pick up books.

00:03:47:22 - 00:04:06:07
Usha
It doesn't mean that they need to start reading those books when they're three, but they might want to go through books when they're one, two and three with adults and have discussions about pictures and so on. There's many different types of activity you can do around literacy that will end up creating the best apprenticeship for a child.

00:04:06:09 - 00:04:19:18
Kate
And I think that links quite nicely with having knowledgeable and nurturing educators, doesn't it, Jane? And the important role that adults have in supporting children.

00:04:19:20 - 00:04:52:14
Jane

Yeah. I mean, I think, you know, that those relationships from birth and pre-birth, as we've shown in research too, are so, so essential and fascinating aspects of research that, you know, really help us to become those knowledgeable, educators and also emphasising that real, importance of supporting parents in their new role as parents, and helping them to know what is important, to their very young, baby.

00:04:52:16 - 00:05:23:13
Jane
So I think I wanted to go back to the literacy too and think about it as, you know, that link to culture and actually, how our cultural heritage is passed on through our literacy, through those oral traditions, and also through those, you know, written traditions. And I think in the UK, we're extremely lucky in that we've got a hugely diverse population who have all contributed to our literature over the years.

00:05:23:13 - 00:05:58:00
Jane
They've also contributed to our spelling and our speech. And those bring the complexities, but, they also bring an enormous richness, with them. So I think we need to think about the heritage of the children too, that we're working with, because some children will have very different experiences of language and literacy, within their families, because of the communities and families that they live in that are very connected to their identity.

00:05:58:02 - 00:06:20:17
Jane
So I think, you know, that experience out of, nursery or out of school is fundamental for children. You know, the more children we have too with additional support needs, you know, and really looking at, you know, what helps all children to be, successful and to be part of society, which is what literacy does for you.

00:06:20:19 - 00:06:24:09
Jane
It makes you a contributing part of society.

00:06:24:11 - 00:06:45:04
Kate
Thanks for that, Jane. I think as well, there's an element underpinning literacy, which is obviously about speech, but it's also about how we are able to hear and how we are able to listen and be able to discern different kinds of sounds. And that's quite a complex skill because we're born and we listen in different ways, don't we?

00:06:45:06 - 00:07:11:06
Kate
So we, you know, we start and learn to listen to instructions, but we also listen as a sort of in a reciprocal relationship where we might be empathetic to somebody that we're listening to. So having opportunities for children to really explore different ways of listening, I think is, is very important and be attuned to their surroundings, but also the other people around them.

00:07:11:08 - 00:07:43:22
Kate
And I think this is a really nice link to look at that interdependency between language and literacy and how language is connected with literacy through patterns of speech, which is obviously what Usha has been exploring. And we saw that recently in her wonderful article in Nursery World, which

looked at the UK Baby Rhythm Project's research. So I wonder Usha could you kind of, let us know what you've been doing there?

00:07:43:24 - 00:08:06:12
Usha
Well, I was originally interested in developmental dyslexia and why children have dyslexia, and I was doing studies that suggested that they couldn't really hear rhythm patterns in speech. And I found this in many different languages in the world. So not just languages that use an alphabetic system, but languages like Chinese as well. These children couldn't hear acoustic cues that give you speech rhythm.

00:08:06:14 - 00:08:25:20
Usha
So that led me to start thinking about the role of rhythm in language acquisition in general. And the conclusion I've reached with my studies is that rhythm is the hidden glue that underpins all the world's language systems, and it's partly to do with the way we speak, because you can't speak in a monotone. When you're speaking your voice is going up and down

00:08:25:20 - 00:08:59:24
Usha
you're producing stronger syllables, weaker syllables. In English, we tend to have strong first syllable, like in words like zebra, baby, daddy, mummy, and the way that we produce speech actually creates rhythmic structures in that sound signal that reaches the ear, that your brain then responds to. And it turns out that when parents speak to their babies, particularly if they're singing to their babies, they're emphasising different patterns that seem to be fundamental to acquiring a language.

00:09:00:01 - 00:09:22:21
Usha
Babies do not learn language in the way that phonics works in literacy. So, you know phonics, you're supposed to learn these letters on connections and you add them together and it makes a word. Babies don't hear these sounds, add them up in the brain and make words. Rather, they start with these acoustic rhythm structures which get emphasised in baby talk, which are also emphasised when you sing with a child.

00:09:22:21 - 00:09:46:04
Usha
Because when you're singing, you're providing these perfect temporal patterns. Everything's in time, and that's where the brain seems to begin. It learns these rhythm patterns, and from those rhythm patterns, it then learns things like where are the syllables? Where are the phonemes? Which words rhyme with each other? So the way that you talk to very young children and to babies is crucially important.

00:09:46:06 - 00:10:16:18
Usha
And Jane had mentioned about our oral language traditions, those same acoustic rhythm structures that get exaggerated in baby talk. They're also exaggerated in a play by Shakespeare, for example, where you're speaking rhythmically on stage, or they're exaggerated in very nice poems that have come down through the centuries because they're so pleasing to the ear. These metrical structures, the brain seems to rely on this kind of temporal patterning for language processing.

00:10:16:20 - 00:10:49:08
Kate

Absolutely fascinating Usha, it really is. And, for us, you know, as for Froebelians, we find that incredibly reassuring because of the work that Froebel did around creating his mother songs or family songs, which were his way of thinking about what a very young children need in their lives. And what do parents and carers do with babies? That really helps them to learn language, but not just to learn language

00:10:49:10 - 00:11:08:14
Kate
learn about language by connecting it to their everyday life, to the things that they know, and to appreciate the world around them. So I don't know if you want to say anything more about that, Jane, about the mother songs or family songs.

00:11:08:16 - 00:11:33:09
Jane
Yes. I think it's just so refreshing to hear that actually something that's been around for such a long time. You know, a theory. Actually, there's some kind of scientific rationale for it, or explanation and, you know, going back to visit some of those very early songs, there's a huge emphasis on rhythm. And actually Froebel, you know, talks about rhythm

00:11:33:11 - 00:12:05:11
Jane
in these writing about the songs, there's one song, it's called Tic TaC and it follows this the tick tock of the clock. And the child is actually encouraged to move to the sound with, their, limbs. And I think that those, sort of early ideas, although we wouldn't be going back maybe to some of the archaic language, those ideas of moving to the rhythm, and it being the human voice, it's not, a prerecorded voice.

00:12:05:13 - 00:12:57:11
Jane
It's not a voice that's got no body. it's very much an embodied voice that you're in connection with that you have a relationship with. So there's that kind of, trust and that communication that has to be the basis of further, literacy development. And that move from that very kind of literal, kind of and feeling the movement into representing and how you move with the child through play and, through other forms of representation into, you know, personal symbols, something that you've made yourself, some sound you've made yourself, some movement you've made yourself, or some representation through marks that you've made yourself before you get to that shared understanding

00:12:57:11 - 00:13:16:00
Jane
that we belong to a kind of a cultural society where there are codes that are linked to your language, and that you begin to realise you know, to take part, you need to learn these codes, these alphabetic codes in our case.

00:13:16:02 - 00:13:45:13
Usha
But rhythmic movement's really important. I'd like to underline that point. I think even when you're playing with babies... a lot of these bouncing games, the babies get rhythmic input and it's always in time with speech. The key thing is having it in time with the rhythms of speech. So any musical activity as well, if you're drumming along, you tend to be drumming along with the stronger syllables in a nursery rhyme, the same in things like, you know, peekaboo again is the strong, weak syllables they're doing time with the peekaboo movements.

00:13:45:13 - 00:13:49:23
Usha
These things are really fundamental because learning is so multimodal for the young child.

00:13:50:00 - 00:14:19:21
Jane
Can I just say, Kate, about, you know, the research from Goouch and Powell, you know, the baby room research where also it's not about using songs in a managerial way. It's not about, you know, singing the song because we are going to do this particular activity. So it's always about instructing through song. It's about that responsive relationship where both parties can initiate.

00:14:19:23 - 00:14:39:13
Jane
You know, it's not about directing children's activities all the time. So we can use song to help us communicate. And yes, there are times when it's really helpful to have a song signifier for something that's going to happen, but that shouldn't be the only way that we're using songs with young children.

00:14:39:15 - 00:14:45:21
Kate
I wondered if you had any thoughts Dominic about singing and especially related to practices?

00:14:45:23 - 00:15:11:05
Dominic
It makes me think about the other musical things, which babies also have a natural engagement with sound more generally, and not just rhythmic sounds. So they're going to be playing with with sound. If they get their hands on instruments, they'll be playing with those in non rhythmic ways. So I guess that maybe is a separate track of development that interacts at times with the rhythmic stuff that, that you've been talking about.

00:15:11:09 - 00:15:48:14
Dominic
Now, whether the less structured sounds, which we might call music that young children engage with also contributes, I guess they contribute to the hearing system and its ability to detect generally. Yeah, I'm interested in that. But then also, of course, I'm just interested in music as a vital part, more generally, a vital part of the arts of learning, of being a human being again, you know, I'm very keen on the idea that the arts should be a central place in informal education.

00:15:48:14 - 00:16:15:06
Dominic
And I think that's a live debate right now, isn't it? To what extent are the arts central to early years and primary education? To what extent are they under threat? Have they been under threat due to, you know, curriculum development and so on? So, and I think, you know, a lot of people in society hugely value the arts. I'm not saying that other areas of human knowledge aren't important as well.

00:16:15:06 - 00:16:34:21
Dominic
I think they are. But that's what the conversation made me think about. Also, if I may Usha I read an interesting paper that you done with the team. You discovered that, babies at a very young age can make that distinction between 'b' and 'p', for example. Or the brain can, they're not doing it explicitly.

00:16:34:21 - 00:16:49:13
Dominic
And it was, I think you said seven months, but not at four months, as I recall from the paper. But I was really fascinated by that and also how it links with the work you've just described around rhythm. You know, the importance of syllable and so on.

00:16:49:15 - 00:17:17:10
Usha
Well, in that study we were having one early years teacher sing nursery rhymes. So we need to have all the babies in the study. There are actually over 100 babies, hearing and listening to the exact same input. But then we recorded their brains' responses and we had a sort of novel technique that was developed by colleagues in Dublin, where you could basically reverse engineer from the brainwaves to see what linguistic units were being encoded by the baby's brains.

00:17:17:12 - 00:17:39:21
Usha
And that's what supported this focus on rhythm, because we began at two months of age, and at that age there wasn't much phonetic encoding. So encoding of the difference between 'b' and 'p', for example. But their rhythmic encoding was adult like from about four months. When we started looking at where were the phonemes, where was the phonetic information being encoded, that came up very, very slowly.

00:17:39:21 - 00:18:06:05
Usha
So the earliest at which there was any significant sign was seven months. But that wasn't for the whole phonemic repertoire at all. And even by a year when these babies already beginning to produce was again, the phonetic repertoire wasn't there. So that's reinforced this, result that's come from early years teaching, of reading that, you know, phonics, although it's an important aspect of learning, it doesn't actually represent the speech signal.

00:18:06:07 - 00:18:28:05
Usha
When you're a naive learner, you only learn really about these poems through someone teaching you an alphabet. It doesn't mean that you can't hear the difference between bag and rag and stag. You're doing it at some more global recognition level, and then to be able to reflect on your global learning, as it were, and pick out these phonemes, that's an additional new skill.

00:18:28:07 - 00:18:49:11
Usha
But you definitely need that foundation of rhythm, rhyme and Jane said extensive language interaction. You've got to interact with other people. You won't learn in the same way. Your brain won't learn from hearing nursery rhymes on a tablet or an iPad, as it will learn when you're singing nursery rhymes with a group of other people or with your mum.

00:18:49:11 - 00:18:52:12
Usha
There's got to be interaction.

00:18:52:14 - 00:19:26:12
Dominic

The risk is, of course, that you're not giving children what they most need at a given point in time, and it's too blunt an instrument. So I think really there needs to be a rebalancing in lots of education systems at regional levels and sometimes at national levels, if the balance isn't right. And we're certainly arguing, I've done this book with Charlotte Hacking from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, and we're strongly arguing that the balance is wrong at the moment.

00:19:26:12 - 00:19:53:01
Dominic
And it's got worse, if anything. And it's now, you know, quite shockingly, in some respects, we find the ministers from England have been traveling, say, to Australia and Australian policymakers, and saying 'all right, that that's great. We're going to do that'. You know, we've looked at hundreds of studies, and this idea that there's one way to teach children to learn to read, it's just not tenable.

00:19:53:03 - 00:20:26:08
Dominic
It really isn't. What's at the heart of this? It should be the child and their lives and all the influences that are both human and material, but they're driven by the curiosity that they need to understand spoken language, their need ultimately to understand written language and their need to compose ideas. And they have to be motivated. I mean, it's kind of common sense, but also backed by research that if you don't motivate children as part of their education, they switch off and then the consequences are really serious.

00:20:26:08 - 00:20:29:17
Dominic
I mean, then the, the, the gaps that open up.

00:20:29:19 - 00:20:35:11
Kate
I think this might be a good point to explain what exactly synthetic and systematic phonics are.

00:20:35:13 - 00:21:07:10
Dominic
So for me, systematic phonics teaching includes a range of approaches to helping children understand some of the links between the sounds of oral language in words, and how letters represent those sounds and words. But synthetic phonics is narrower than that. And this is where we have to talk about what happens in classrooms. So with synthetic phonics, there's an overriding emphasis on teaching phonemes in a particular sequence.

00:21:07:10 - 00:21:34:11
Dominic
And by the way, phonemes are the sounds of words, teaching them in a particular sequence. And it's an overridingly strong focus on that first and foremost. Now it's possible that listeners will be aware of synthetic phonics programs where what I've described is not quite as narrow as I'm suggesting, but my view is, and it's based also on research

00:21:34:11 - 00:22:02:19
Dominic
we've done that, it is in England, for example, it has been for a decade, narrow and getting narrower. And so in other words, synthetic phonics is a variant of a range of teaching approaches that we might call systematic phonics. And by the way, I think sometimes people slightly maliciously is the wrong word, but they often skirt around the difference between systematic and synthetic phonics

00:22:02:21 - 00:22:08:01
Dominic
and I argue that comes back to our paper Usha in 2008.

00:22:08:03 - 00:22:30:12
Usha
So I think something that's very important is that if you're a child who's struggling to learn to read synthetic phonics hasn't got you off to a good start just being given more and more synthetic phonics year after year is not going to help that child. Really, that child needs to go back a few levels, as it were, back to these rhythm structures in language working out syllabification, understanding rhyming patterns.

00:22:30:14 - 00:22:54:17
Usha
Because in English often the spelling system is more consistent when words rhyme with each other than when you're at this single letter sound level that is emphasized by synthetic phonics. So systematic teaching is always important. But if you haven't got the right phonological foundation, so the right, you know, development of your language sound structure system, before you get synthetic phonics, you may not be able to benefit from it.

00:22:54:19 - 00:23:19:12
Jane
You also have to understand, the whole process of how something becomes a symbol. I know that I've worked with children in the past who, these letters, almost take on characteristics as if they were things in themselves and, you know, had their own little lives or personalities. And are not seen. They don't understand

00:23:19:16 - 00:23:55:02
Jane
the relationship between, the sounds that are being spoken and the written, symbol. Yeah. So it's a fascinating thing to sort of watch a child and really try to get into their mind, as to how they are decoding what they're seeing, and what they bring to that. I think having those experiences of creating symbols themselves and also playing with people, understanding that, you can pretend and have something that stands for something else.

00:23:55:02 - 00:24:27:00
Jane
It might be a real thing, or it might move through that progression to being a written mark. But I think that's also something that's really important for children when they're beginning to learn to read, that construction of meaning. And, if you start to introduce single letters very early on and give them names, and not the sound they make, but actually, you know, character names that can be really confusing for children.

00:24:27:02 - 00:24:47:05
Dominic
I mean, that's really, really fascinating I think the whole way that letters are special objects or special things that represent in very special ways is it's amazing, isn't it? That's one of humanity's amazing developments and most original things, perhaps. I don't know, but,

00:24:47:07 - 00:25:06:12
Jane

And I think, too, that, you know, that that's when the importance of your own name, is in that literacy journey and the letters that are in your name and, you know, children talk about 'That's my letter' and it's, you know, the initial letter of their name. So it's got huge emotional significance for them.

00:25:06:15 - 00:25:31:14
Kate
And I just, I mean, it's absolutely fascinating this discussion around phonics, as an instructional way of teaching reading and some of the kind of limitations of that in terms of the evidence that sits underneath it. We know so much from what Usha was saying and Jane was saying about the mother songs about the importance of rhyme.

00:25:31:14 - 00:25:52:23
Kate
So taking it right back to practice, I know a lot of parents feel quite a lot of pressure knowing their children are going to go into school, and that's very prescient at the moment to kind of get their children school ready, as it were. That sense of is my child prepared for school? And that has pressure on practitioners as well.

00:25:53:00 - 00:26:06:14
Kate
So what's the advice there? How can educators and practitioners provide the best kind of literacy environments for children who are just at that age, where they're moving on to these more formal ways of working?

00:26:06:16 - 00:26:26:14
Usha
One thing I would say is that I think we're at in danger in our country of going younger and younger and younger with this kind of skill and drill, which I don't think benefits children because, as I've said, there's quite a long apprenticeship of language learning before you can become a literacy learner. And if you look at societies where synthetic phonics works very well

00:26:26:14 - 00:26:47:16
Usha
so for example, in Finland, they can learn phonics very quickly in Finland because I think there's 24 or 26 phonemes. You know, English has 44 phonemes and they have very consistent, spelling, sound correspondence. So there's no ambiguity. Whereas in England we have all this ambiguity So a seven year old in Finland can learn synthetic phonics type approaches in three months.

00:26:47:16 - 00:27:05:08
Usha
But a five year old in England can't. And so why are we trying to push it on to the four year olds in England? Or have them arrive in school ready? We're doing it back to front. It would be more beneficial to the children to have these rich language experiences and then to become apprentices in the classroom in the way, Jane said.

00:27:05:08 - 00:27:16:09
Usha
Because when you want to communicate through writing, that's when you really start trying to listen to these individual sounds in words. And that by itself brings you into phonics.

00:27:16:11 - 00:27:41:05

Jane
Also, I'd like to say that in Scotland we don't talk about school readiness anymore. We talk about schools being ready for the children who are coming. And I think that's been a big mind shift. We start where the children are and there's been a huge shift to more play pedagogy, throughout Scotland, supported by policy and inspection.

00:27:41:05 - 00:28:09:18
Jane
So we've seen a real shift away from that, sooner and sooner, skills and drills, as you were saying, which feels, well, it feels more Froebelian, I guess, because, you know, if you're starting with children and you're, involving families in, in that and really looking at effective ways of learning for them that suits their, age and their interests, then I think, you know, that has to be better.

00:28:09:20 - 00:28:24:01
Kate
And thinking about the setting of school environment, how should educators and early years leaders listening to this podcast think about the spaces and resources they offer the young children in their care so that they can really support their literacy?

00:28:24:03 - 00:28:52:14
Jane
Okay, well, I think, you know, the whole environment and the relationships within that environment are so crucially important. So starting with the language that a child brings, whether that is English or whether it's another language and they're just beginning to learn English and, really thinking about, can the children see themselves represented in school? You know, are there images and things that are around in the school or the nursery?

00:28:52:14 - 00:29:30:09
Jane
Does that reflect the families that are coming to that setting? Books and, access to books is essential, no matter how old you are, whether you're a baby, and you're having a you know, a story or an interaction on a 1 to 1, where you're possibly sharing the book, but actually you want to be able to see your parent's face because that tells you all about the book, because it's telling you if it's exciting or if it's, you know, soothing. You have to have those books, sometimes people think that just setting up the environment is enough.

00:29:30:13 - 00:30:01:20
Jane
And, and at times we've seen, you know, fashions for not having whole group story time because, you know, it's not at the level of the children or this child isn't interested or, you know, it doesn't fit. But actually, if we're really talking about social justice, every child is entitled to have access to literacy. So every child should be able to hear a story, in their setting, every day that suits them.

00:30:01:20 - 00:30:20:10
Jane
That interests them. It shouldn't be a case of, you know, that it's only if the child chooses. And I don't mean that I'm going to force books down their necks, but if you get it right, you know if you know your children really well, you can find a book that will, interest them.

00:30:20:12 - 00:30:43:09
Jane

And sometimes that's actually about making such a book about that child because that's what gets them. They see themselves in the book. And then it's the start of the, you know, the writing. I think it's a right. They should have a right to have a story, every day in their setting.

00:30:43:11 - 00:31:10:10
Kate
Yes. And just talking about that kind of representation in books. and the sort of diversity within books. I think it's not just for the child to be able to identify themselves, but it's also for children to understand that, there are all these other lives that exist, you know, it's about extending their knowledge about the communities that they live in directly in their vicinity, but also in the wider global world.

00:31:10:10 - 00:31:12:13
Kate
It's helping them to make connections isn't it?

00:31:12:13 - 00:31:34:17
Jane
I think also having outdoors as well, it's not just about, you know, literacy only happens indoors. You know, there's that huge scale outside, and the way that you can, have more open ended symbols outside in many respects. You know, with sticks and leaves and, I don't know, cones or whatever you can find.

00:31:34:18 - 00:31:58:20
Jane
And also that change in environment. You can paint with a brush on the ground with water and then it disappears. It's that kind of cause and effect thing as well, which is part of that, understanding. So I think, you know, being out and going out places and seeing things. Froebel was right. Go out into your community and see the things that are happening there in your community

00:31:58:22 - 00:32:01:16
Jane
and be part of that whole.

00:32:01:18 - 00:32:08:23
Kate
And what about any advice or support for parents and carers who are keen to support their child's language and literacy?

00:32:09:00 - 00:32:25:11
Usha
Yeah, I would say one of the most important things for parents is to talk to your children, have conversations with your children and if possible, have conversations around shared books. You don't have to be reading the book, but you could talk about the pictures. It doesn't even matter if you can't read English, if your native language is something else.

00:32:25:16 - 00:32:46:10
Usha
Having those verbal interactions with children around books is going to help prepare them for literacy. Conversation is really important, and that's what children are getting less and less of at home, everyone's on their screen. You need to be looking at the person that you're having your

conversation with. There needs to be this interaction which is so fundamental to us as a human species.

00:32:46:12 - 00:32:51:15
Usha
And in the early years, that's what you really need. Screens cannot take the place.

00:32:51:17 - 00:33:21:07
Kate
We know that there's a push on younger children attending nurseries. We have a sort of extension of two year olds entering our nursery system. And actually some of those nurseries are within school based settings as well in England. What should we be doing with those children, that particular age group? So these are these are toddlers. They've moved beyond the baby stage but actually they're really being introduced to literacy.

00:33:21:07 - 00:33:33:01
Kate
And they're in this early years setting, which is very different from home. What kind of environment, what kind of activities would really help them on their journey to literacy? Do you think?

00:33:33:03 - 00:34:00:02
Usha
I would really endorse, again, rich language interactions. You don't want to be teaching letters when they're two. You want to be doing lots of rhyme and rhythm. You want to be doing metrical poems and yeah, multimodal activities. So like marching in time to the Grand Old Duke of York or anything where you're moving your body rhythms with the language rhythms is going to support later literacy learning. And make it fun, because I think that's the other thing that, you know, being part of the conversation is fun.

00:34:00:02 - 00:34:26:14
Usha
Everybody likes talking to other people. That's what being human is, and just having the time for someone to listen to you and respond back. And as you're developing your language skills, you know, it's been shown in, nursery settings that what helps in rich language development isn't correcting a child's error, but it's just reformulating what they've said. So if they say something and it's not grammatically accurate, you say something like, oh yes, so 'duh duh duh'

00:34:26:16 - 00:34:49:17
Usha
But the 'duh duh duh' is grammatically accurate, but you're not overtly correcting them. It's all part of the natural conversation. And I think we don't do enough natural conversation with very young children anymore. And that's something that early years settings could really put in place. And you can have these interactions around anything, around the dressing up box, around books that you're sharing around, going out to the sandpit.

00:34:49:19 - 00:35:07:18
Usha
But keep talking. Have a lot of oral language. Because I think children are arriving in school, they don't necessarily know any nursery rhymes. All the things we used to take for granted 20 years ago aren't happening at home anymore. So if you're being already at nursery at two, do those kind of activities with these young children.

00:35:07:20 - 00:35:36:20
Jane
I think also actually having parents there with children. So it's not separating children and parents off, you know, although there's an extended offer, having families in and supporting families to, you know, really come together and talk and have fun together, enjoy being together through, you know, the kind of, sessions that you might have had or have in libraries where, you know, they, they come together to sing.

00:35:36:22 - 00:35:59:11
Jane
And actually, it can be as motivating for the parents who might be feeling quite isolated to come in and be in that setting and, you know, begin to get that confidence with singing. And having said that, of course, we need educators who have a wide range of songs to sing and the confidence to do it.

00:35:59:13 - 00:36:22:23
Jane
So we need colleges to be encouraging young educators and teachers and practitioners to sing with children, and not to be self-conscious or think that there's only one way to do it and it's the recorded way and the recording's so much better than me. But, you know, it's got to be that human voice with all those human imperfections in it completely.

00:36:22:23 - 00:36:40:05
Usha
And you don't even have to be singing in perfect pitch, as long as you've got the rhythmic structure in your voice. The studies we're doing shows, that's just as good. It doesn't matter if you sing out of key, young children don't mind, but the important input for the brain is still there. As long as your rhythmic.

00:36:40:07 - 00:37:09:23
Dominic
Yeah. I mean, and also I'm thinking if these are really literally just two, then this is the time for sitting on someone's lap having a book, you know, in front, the page is being turned, the story being just told. This is me drawing many years ago, my own experience of my own children, you know, but six months old, they would be sat on the lap, you know, in the snook of your arm, just reading them stories, you know, and so that's crucial.

00:37:09:23 - 00:37:34:11
Dominic
I absolutely agree fundamentally with what you both said about the importance of interaction and the kinds of interaction. I'm conscious, of course, that educators are dealing with bigger groups, and that's the classic challenge. It makes me think, you know, I've been fortunate in my career to see incredible educators working with very young children. And when you see something, it's spine tingling, isn't it?

00:37:34:11 - 00:38:03:04
Dominic
When you see that that expertise. But not everyone has it. And therein lies training, development, professional development, all of the difficult issues around, costs of early, high quality early years provision, but also... and not just reading. And so I would say, I'm sure we can find safe materials for two year olds to, you know, toddle, and then grab these things and be making the marks wherever

00:38:03:04 - 00:38:26:08

Dominic
And then the adults engaging with and being interested in. There's no harm in an adult saying, 'well, let me show you this. You know, I can write what you've just said.' If they're speaking fluently, you know, and so on. So it's about the right kinds of engagements, isn't it? And yes, it is about setting up the right resources and opportunities and so on.

00:38:26:08 - 00:38:48:03
Dominic
So, what I do worry about is what we've seen is a backwash, haven't we? We've seen the phonics screening check, for example, washing back. So the pedagogy in early years is being in some places is challenged. You have to be a very strong professional with a very strong head teacher to be able to say 'no don't be daft. We're not doing that.

00:38:48:03 - 00:38:53:03
Dominic
That just is not going to help children learn.

00:38:53:05 - 00:39:19:15
Kate
So perhaps with that call from Dominic, for strong professionals, it's a good place for us to end our discussion and remind you that the Froebel Trust offers lots of support for educators working with and caring for young children, from short courses to free resources, all available via the Froebel Trust website at froebel.org.uk. Thank you to all my guests: Usha Goswami, Dominic Wyse and Jane Whinnett.

00:39:19:17 - 00:39:30:07
Kate
You can find out more about my guests and all the details of the research, articles and resources we've mentioned in the podcast description. Colin, back to you.

00:39:30:09 - 00:39:41:05
Colin
Well, thank you, Dr Kate Smith, delighted to have you here as our guest presenter. And a reminder to all of you that a new episode of this podcast will be out later this month. So make sure you subscribe.

ENDS