INTRODUCTION

The Forward Together (FT) Parent Programme has been used in many schools in various socio-economic areas, and case studies in the Middle Infant Screening Test (MIST) Teachers’ Guide are of children whose parents helped them. Further projects have taken place in Britain and the Republic of Ireland. In the latest, Cleary concludes: ‘This research has shown that the parental partnership created by the use of FTP can have a transforming and empowering effect on both the children and parents involved.’*

It is important to understand why, if possible, it is advisable to involve parents: they are particularly keen to help their children at this age, as long as they are given guidance from school. If the programme is easy to follow, and produces noticeable improvement, this boosts their confidence and it establishes a positive parent–child–school relationship early in the child’s school career. Parents with English as a second language can find the experience particularly helpful.*

The school benefits not only from creating positive, long-lasting links with parents, but in saving on teaching time: an hour a week for the parents’ meeting over nine weeks is less than the time needed to follow the targeted intervention at school because children receive more frequent, individual attention at home. Children’s performance, confidence and self-improving strategies improve sufficiently to enable them to reach their expected level in literacy. A small proportion of children will continue to need special help for some time but they gain confidence and improve sufficiently to make their involvement worthwhile. Subsequently, Special Education Teachers can refer to their MIST and FT results in order to build on them. The SELB Study concluded that ‘The results of this survey indicate that those children who had had early intervention (in the form of the MIST screening and FT programme) did sustain the effects of that work through to their current situation in P5 and P6’ (three years later).*

Facilitating Teacher

If available, this can be the Special Education Teacher or School/Home/Community/Liaison Teacher who will liaise with the classteacher. Their presence in the classroom at home-time to remind FT children to take their reading books home has also been found very helpful. If the classteacher facilitates, one hour’s teaching cover for nine weeks will be required.

THE PROGRAMME

Parents are taken through the programme step by step – many activities being in the form of games. Children are helped in those areas of need that have been highlighted by the MIST: reading, handwriting, knowledge of letter sounds, word analysis and free writing. It is designed in such a way that children are encouraged to develop what Clay (1985)* calls ‘a self-improving system’. When doing handwriting, children assess their own work, when writing words they check their accuracy in spelling, in attempting their own spelling they demonstrate their independence in word analysis, and when reading they are given time to use searching strategies and to self-correct. Schools have found that, when followed carefully, it achieves its aims and that most children are brought up to the general standard of the class in reading and writing.

Parents use the programme with their children over a period of nine weeks, meeting as a group for an hour’s guidance and discussion with the facilitating teacher. At the ninth meeting they discuss the children’s progress in the retest. Although it is unlikely that their children will have completed the programme, all the basic learning strategies have been covered. Sometimes parents would like to continue the meetings for a while, but most are usually keen to continue on their own, at a more leisurely pace.

The following are typical of the hundreds of positive responses that schools have received from parents, and they show some of the ways in which the experience influences them and their children:

‘Her attitude to work and other people has changed. I think she felt frustrated before.’

‘Michelle really loves to prove she can do things on her own.’

‘He became more confident as the weeks went by. It became more of a “special time” together than working.’

‘I’ve never praised my child so much!’

‘I feel more confident and much happier now I know the correct way to explain things, and I feel much more involved with school.

And, from the 2011–12–13 Republic of Ireland study:
‘Adjusting into doing work with him was difficult but was really worth doing.’


A Polish mother said: ‘I don’t push her too much as I did last year before we start this. … I pushed her so hard to do things and I think it was the opposite effect, she didn’t enjoy … I know how to make things more simple, how to change homework for playing for fun.’

The comment from parents that arises most often at the end of the programme is that they had wanted to help their children before but were uncertain about how to do so. Many schools now successfully enlist parental help with reading, but few feel that this help can be extended to writing. This programme has shown that it is possible, in this area as well, to use this most valuable human resource – parents. The difficulty most often cited by parents is that of finding an uninterrupted half an hour. Children themselves respond eagerly to the extra attention, once they begin to enjoy the activities, the praise and their increasing self-confidence. Parents learn to pace the learning wisely: for instance, parents have said that when their child is very tired, they just read to them instead of doing the activities. If parents continue to find time an inhibiting factor, the facilitating teacher will decide whether to suggest the programme is followed instead at school.

**Approaching Parents**

When considering which parents are likely to cooperate in doing the programme, it is useful to take into account the following factors:

- overestimate rather than underestimate parents’ suitability for the programme: often parents whom you feel will not cooperate, in fact do, once their trust is won;
- allow for a certain dropout rate – some groups remain intact throughout the programme but sometimes parents do drop out, so initially invite as many as you can possibly accommodate since it might diminish! Six is an optimum number, but any number from three to eight can work well;
- don’t feel guilty if some parents drop out and, above all, ensure that parents don’t feel guilty: assure them that you understand and that their child will continue with the programme at school.

(Examples of the criteria used by a teacher in choosing both children and their parents for the FT programme are on page 46 of the Teacher’s Guide: Parental Help.)

There are various ways of approaching parents that are effective and not alarming. One option is that you send a letter (Appendix I) or invite each parent personally to the first meeting.

At this initial meeting the following points are made:

- their children lack confidence in reading and writing;
- they are not failing, but they would benefit from more individual attention;
- parental help at this age has a very positive effect on children’s progress;
• parents will be guided through an enjoyable programme, and be able to discuss this each week with the teacher leading the group and with other parents;
• the programme develops learning strategies that reduce children’s dependence on adult help;
• parents will be shown their child’s test results before and after the nine-week project;
• agree a suitable time for the weekly hourly meeting;
• possible difficulties parents might experience with attendance can be discussed later (see below).

The Forward Together leaflet can then be distributed (see Appendix II). If parents want time to decide whether to accept, ask them to please let you know during the following week.

In fact parents very seldom refuse the invitation to take part in the programme. Even if a few of them drop out after a while, they usually like to ‘give it a go’. They discover how helpful it is to share their experiences with other parents in the group: initial anxieties are often dispelled in this way. And they are reassured by knowing that their children’s progress is being carefully monitored, and that they will be able to compare their work, and test results, at the beginning and end of the project. The activities too are enjoyable, often in the form of games.

Sometimes there are problems which need to be resolved individually such as:
• parent working full-time – can they get an hour off each week or every other week and continue using the Activity Sheets at home?
• parent cannot attend for the whole hour – would it be possible for the teacher to respond to their questions first at each meeting to enable them to leave early?
• parent works shifts and cannot attend all the meetings – could someone else in the family attend instead? (Sometimes partners, grandparents or even older teenage siblings attend the meetings if it is difficult for the usual parent to attend.)

Preparation

Resource Folder:
1. Photocopy the first four sections: Reading, Handwriting, Letters and Emergent Writing to give to parents at the first meeting. Include the ‘Introduction for Parents’ and ‘Learning Strategies’ sheets (Resource Folder). Decide on suggestions for storing, and using the sheets.
2. If you intend to tape the children reading, refer to ‘Recording Children Reading’ (Appendix III) to demonstrate the pause–prompt–praise (PPP) method at the first meeting.
3. Children enjoy the Book Box, as a supplement to the Reading Scheme. If you decide to use one, see Book Box (Appendix II in the Teacher’s Guide). Decide when to introduce it: this could be the third meeting when parents have become used to using the PPP method of hearing reading. You can describe the criteria you use in choosing these particular books, which makes their readability easier.
4. Organise a reward system to encourage children to take books home frequently.
5. Three of the games need to be cut out and assembled (Meetings 2, 4, 5). Decide beforehand whether to help parents do this at the meeting or let them do it at home. In either case you provide the materials needed.

6. Read through the Learning Principles in the Resource Folder. The sequence of activities can be set into the following timescale:

**First two weeks.** Children concentrate on reading and handwriting. Reading continues throughout the nine weeks; handwriting for as long as the parents feel it is necessary. The Alphabet Game is also introduced.

**Third week.** Children continue reading, handwriting and letter games. ‘Emergent Writing’ is introduced. From now on parents encourage their children to do their own ‘emergent writing’ at least once a week throughout the programme. First Letter Bingo is introduced.

**Fourth week to end of programme.** If they are ready, children start the ‘blending three sounds’ activities. Gradually more vowels and consonant digraphs are added, and children learn to write first single words, then short sentences from memory. The Apple Game, Balloon Game, Second Letter Bingo and Rhyming Pairs Game are introduced and used during this time.

**NB.** Children work at their own pace: there is no competition.

It is important that parents should understand their role when helping their children. They will need to demonstrate each new activity for their children, and observe and encourage them while they are working. The only activity that children should be encouraged to do unsupervised is emergent writing.

**Learning Principles (Resource Folder).**

The teacher should discuss these with the parents before every new activity.

**PARENTS’ MEETINGS**

In the following pages a format is suggested for nine parents’ meetings. The pace might be either too fast or too slow for your group: you are the one to judge. Parents and children will benefit a great deal from setting a daily routine even if they do not cover as much as is suggested.

The Learning Principles at the start of the *FT* programme should help you to describe the programme to parents, and to answer their questions. Stress particularly that their children are not failing, but that they would benefit from more individual attention.

The four most important points to make to parents in the first few meetings are that:

- their children lack confidence in reading or writing;
• the parents’ daily help and encouragement will almost certainly boost confidence and accelerate progress;
• the parents will be carefully guided through a structured home-help programme;
• their attention will be drawn to their own children’s specific difficulties.

Setting a target will help reassure parents that their children’s progress is being carefully monitored: they will be able to compare their children’s work at the beginning and the end of the project.

In the first meeting, parents will want to ask questions, but the teacher will be doing most of the talking. However, in all subsequent meetings, you will want their feedback and this in turn can generate a discussion that all parents might find helpful. A useful format is to start each meeting by going around the group and asking each parent in turn for their experiences during the previous week, in working with their child. In this way, no parents dominate the proceedings. It is natural for parents to feel somewhat anxious to begin with, but airing their own concerns, and listening to others’ positive or negative experiences, soon tends to dispel anxieties. Parents appreciate having their concerns and contributions remembered from week to week. You can provide this kind of continuity by taking brief notes either during or after each session, and referring to them before the next meeting.

Many problems that parents experience are temporary and manageable
Initially, for instance, the question of how to negotiate a daily routine with their children, and the system of rewards is discussed. The most effective motivators, however, will be success and praise, and once children experience these, they cooperate well. It is up to parents to organise their sessions with their children in such a way that the children achieve success and merit praise. Parents come to realise the importance of being patient, and relaxed.

Meetings are very much enriched when parents share experiences, observations and ideas. Aim to create the sort of atmosphere where this can happen.

If parents drop out, there is little you can do. If a parent cannot attend a meeting arrange for them, where possible, to keep up with what happened in their absence. If you give parents a list of dates of meetings at the start of the programme this will act as a reminder and enable them to plan ahead.

FIRST MEETING

Aims

1. To describe the project to the parents, answer their questions and find out whether they are willing to take part.
2. To show parents how to hear their children read using the pause–prompt–praise method.
What you need

- List of dates of future meetings.
- *Forward Together* Resource Folder for each parent.
- Tapes of children reading and the books they read.

Describing the programme

Discuss the project with parents as suggested. Emphasise that if they wish to take part they should try and attend as many meetings as possible. If they cannot, it might be possible to send someone in their place, such as a partner or grandparent. It helps to let them know that past programmes have been very successful in accelerating children’s progress, and that after one or two weeks, parents’ nervousness disappears and they begin to enjoy working with their children. If, however, they do drop out, their children will continue to be helped at school, and they must not feel guilty.

Mystery sentence

To enable parents to understand the processes involved in reading, ask them to try and read the mystery sentence. The answer is ‘Letters are not the only clues used for reading words’. They can guess the words in any order and say them aloud. This can take anything from one to five minutes. Note carefully which clues they use, for the subsequent discussion on how children read unknown text.

Context

‘Letters’ and ‘reading’ are often guessed first because the parents know the subject is reading. Children, too, are more likely to be able to read a story if parents discuss both the pictures and story first, then read some of it to them.

Sense

Parents should keep scanning the sentence to make sense of the sequence of words. Children, too, should be given time to scan and reread sentences.

Letters

Letters at the beginning, middle or ends of words can spark off recognition of that word. Children at this stage will be helped most by using the first sound of the word.

Draw their attention to the fact that:

- they did not read the words in order, but instead searched the sentence for clues. Similarly their children should be given time to reread sentences or to read on and return to unfamiliar words;
- the longer words were read before the shorter ones. Children also find short, function words harder to read than longer, more interesting words;
- they probably self-corrected. Self-correction is to be encouraged: children should feel free to make mistakes.
Children should be encouraged to read in the same way that the parents read the mystery sentence. Show some books to the parents that have a picture on every page to help children make sense of the text, and that, although there is not much text there will be words that children might not know and will therefore have to guess, using context, sense and letter cues.

**Reading procedure**

**Pause–prompt–praise**

Read through ‘Reading procedure with your child’ and discuss each step. The most difficult part will probably be for the parents to be patient when their children stop at unfamiliar words. Demonstrate ‘counting five elephants’ while someone times how long this takes. Get the parents to count with you so that they get the feel of how long five seconds last. Then discuss the type of prompts to use. Remind parents that their function is to observe and support their child.

Ask the parents to reread this section when they get home to make quite sure they follow the right method. If anyone else in the family hears the child read, they, too, must follow this method.

Before you close this meeting, have you remembered to:
- mark the register?
- make a few notes to refer to before the next meeting?

**SECOND MEETING**

**Aims**

1. To encourage parents to talk about the reading they did with their children and to review the reading procedure.
2. To show them the MIST results, and look particularly at handwriting and the Letter Sounds subtest.
3. To introduce the handwriting activities and the Alphabet Game.

**What you need**

- MIST Booklets.
- Large sheet of paper and felt-tip pen for demonstrating handwriting.
- One Alphabet Game, already constructed following the instructions on sheet 15 of the Resource Folder.
- Self-adhesive paper/stiff card for parents to reinforce the picture page of the Alphabet Game.

**Reading**

It is impossible to cover all eventualities, but the following are some difficulties experienced by parents and children during the programme.
Problems and possible solutions

Children ‘forget’ to take books home:
- Create a daily routine for book borrowing, and a reward system.
- Parents remind children when they are fetched from school.
- Children might be feeling uncertain about reading so parents should be gentle but persistent, until children begin to enjoy the relaxed sharing of stories.

Children want to read the story straight away: they don’t want parents to talk about it, or read it first:
This could be impatience, or anxiety to show parents that they can read. Say that you want to look through it first to get an idea of what it is all about. Reading some of the story first, or using some of the text in talking about the story is often essential to the child’s success, particularly in these early stages.

Children are not focusing on words but are still reluctant to point:
This could be because the children know they are not getting word–sound correspondence and are afraid of trying in case of failure, or it might be because they think to point is babyish. In any case parents can explain that pointing helps to prevent missing words and can model this by running a finger beneath the words while reading. Make sure that children are pointing with the index finger of the hand they write with – the ‘pointing finger’.

Children do not respond to parents’ prompts – they just wait to be told the word:
This could be laziness, but is more likely to be lack of confidence, eventually they will do so, particularly if praised for trying. This is only the first week and it may take a few weeks for children to begin to respond as parents want them to. Urge parents to be patient.

Siblings interrupt:
It is important that this happens as little as possible. Can parents arrange to keep the sibling(s) busy during this time, or promise them attention afterwards?

Children are tired or distracted:
Sometimes children might be too tired to read or do the activities, but this shouldn’t happen often, if a suitable time is chosen. Parents can read to the children if they are too tired to read themselves.

Children want to play, go online or watch TV:
A routine needs to be established: once children begin to enjoy the sessions it won’t be so difficult to keep to the routine.

Parents have difficulty finding time:
This is a very common difficulty, particularly as the programme continues, and more activities are suggested. If parents are convinced it is worthwhile they will make every effort to find time. Make it
clear that you are aware of the difficulty in following the programme every day, and do keep praising them for their persistence.

**MIST Results**

Aim to spend only 15 minutes on these. Briefly describe the test and discuss with parents their children’s work. Draw attention to their strengths, as well as their weaknesses. Explain that the test will be given again at the end of the programme and parents will see the results, which will very likely have considerably improved. Say you are going to concentrate on handwriting and knowledge of letters today, and ask parents to notice those letters that their child did not know in the Letter Sounds subtest.

Explain that if the child’s handwriting is not very good it is not because they haven’t tried or because they haven’t been taught: they need more time and practice to improve and the individual help at home will be invaluable. Some children have poorer motor control than others, and this will improve with age. Be very sensitive to parents’ feelings: emphasise children’s strengths too.

**Handwriting**

Two handwriting styles are shown on sheet 5 of the Resource Folder, one with ligatures (flicks) and one without. Many schools are now introducing ligatures in Reception and if your school does this you will need to change the letters on sheets 11 to 14 which the children will use as models.

Elsewhere on the sheets where children are required to insert letters or write words, it will be sufficient to point out to them that the print style is for reading but that when they write they are to use flicks. Research has shown that this distinction causes young children no problems.

The notes in the Resource Folder are comprehensive: read those for the letter c (sheet 6). Your aim in this meeting is to make clear to parents that although children are shown how to form letters, they don’t necessarily remember what they are told. To learn to write a correct letter automatically, they need multi-sensory experiences such as:

- writing the letters with a finger in various textures for example in flour, sand or on velvet;
- articulating what they are doing (‘up and down’);
- using various media (felt-tip pens, chalk);
- seeing pictures (the cat’s face);
- ‘writing’ a letter on your child’s back, and asking her ‘what letter is that?’ Then she writes on your back.

Demonstrate the points in the handwriting section. Until they get used to this activity, parents might like to do handwriting one day and reading the next. Eventually they should be able to fit in 10 or 15 minutes of both each day. Children must work at their own pace: there is absolutely no competition in the group, and no fixed timescale. Children might take weeks to complete page 11 because it is
the hardest part of the handwriting section. Once mastered, the rest is fairly easy by comparison. Conversely, if children are able to do the letters satisfactorily they should not be held back. However, children do have a tendency, particularly in the beginning, to want to fill more pages. To prevent this ask them to do only the c group of letters this week.

NB. Many schools have found that the Letterland alphabet, which was originally designed for children with perceptual difficulties, is very effective in helping them to associate letters and sounds, and to remember how to write the letters correctly (see www.letterland.com). It is suggested, therefore, that the Letterland pictures and stories could be used where appropriate as an additional aid. The stories associated with the digraphs ck, ch and sh ensure that children learn and remember the digraphs quickly, and do not confuse visually similar ones, such as ck and ch.

Activities

Alphabet Game
Parents can look at their children’s work in the Letter Sounds subtest again and make a note of those letters they did not know in order to concentrate on these when playing the Alphabet Game.

- Demonstrate the Alphabet Game.
- Give parents the self-adhesive paper/stiff card.
- Suggest they read the instructions at home, and put the pictures in a container after reinforcing them and cutting them out.

Parents judge whether certain parts of the activities need to be emphasised or skipped over. This will work as long as they are clear about their aims.

NB. Parents will not have time to do reading, handwriting and the Alphabet Game every day, so suggest they try to do reading.

THIRD MEETING

Aims
1. To talk about reading, handwriting and the Alphabet Game that the children have done this week. (NB. Children might need more practice handwriting sheets).
2. To describe the First Letter Bingo and the Word Turtle.
3. To introduce the idea of children’s own spelling (emergent writing).
4. To introduce the Book Box, if you are using it.

What you need
- Large piece of paper for demonstrating handwriting, should this be necessary.
**Reading**

*Get feedback from parents about using the PPP method*

Sometimes parents continue for some weeks to feel concern that their child does not recognise words he or she has known before. Reassure them that the children are doing structured reading activities at school, including building a sight vocabulary and learning phonic skills. Their reading sessions at home are not to build sight vocabulary or learn phonic skills, but to gain confidence in using other strategies, such as picture cues, meaning of sentence and initial sound of words. Phonic skills will improve also as they work through the activities. The parents’ notebook can be used for their comments, and also any feedback from the children themselves.

If the Book Box is being used, as well as reading scheme books, emphasise that children are allowed to choose books by themselves. (NB. The easiest books are being used at this stage to ensure success; more difficult ones will be added later during the programme.) Ask parents to notice the match between the text and their child’s reading ability.

**Rereading when using Book Box**

Until children become more fluent and confident it is a good idea for them to reread stories. They can do this in one sitting or keep the book to read the next day. During the programme they will no doubt develop favourites and should feel free to reread these, as long as they are not avoiding choosing new ones.

**Handwriting**

Examine children’s activity sheets and, if some parents haven’t brought them, urge them to do so next time. You should check whether children are:

- doing the multi-sensory activities before using the handwriting pages;
- doing only four letters in a square;
- ticking their ‘best’ one;
- writing letters on a line, once the formation is correct;
- trying hard to improve one letter before going on.

Remind parents to go slowly on these handwriting pages and give them additional copies if necessary. Most children will probably still benefit from continuing to practise the c group of letters. For children who have difficulty remembering how to write b and d, the following mnemonic has been found to be useful:

> Write the word bed and turn it into the shape of a bed.

Then show them how their children can make their hands into the shape of a bed, to remind themselves of the orientation of b and d.
Activities

**Alphabet Game**
Review the children’s progress. Those who have a lot of letters to learn will benefit from playing this game for several weeks. Emphasise again that they are to work at their own pace.

**First Letter Bingo**
This can be played every day even by children who do not yet know most of the letter sounds: they will benefit from trying to match the spoken and printed words by focusing on the first letter, and can play the games many times. Parents can tick a page when children have made no mistakes.

**Word Turtle fun page**
When children know most of the letter sounds and have played all the First Letter Bingo games, they can do this fun page. Fitting words into the spaces on the turtle’s shell will require some thought, and children should be encouraged to form correctly those letters which they have been practising on their handwriting sheets.

**Emergent writing**
In order to help parents understand what emergent writing is, ask them first how their children learned to talk. During the course of the discussion, the following point will probably arise:

Children imitate speech. At first they babble, but gradually these approximations become more like speech, until adults no longer have to guess what they are trying to say because some words have become clearly recognisable, though by no means perfect!

Similarly children will imitate writing if they are encouraged to do so. Unfortunately adults often discourage them from doing their own writing by telling them that it is not ‘real writing’ and that they will learn to write properly when they get to school. In fact, just as babble is a child’s way of learning to speak, so scribble is a child’s way of learning to write. Children are more likely to learn conventional writing quickly when they get to school if they have already been experimenting with their own forms of writing. At school they see the correct models (alphabet, words, messages) but should at the same time also be free to experiment because, in so doing, they will learn a great deal about writing and will write freely and confidently from the start instead of waiting to be shown what to do.

Now parents should look at the examples of early writing on sheets 25 and 26 of the Resource Folder.

**Example 1**: This shows drawing and early writing: at this stage children regard writing as a form of drawing.
Example 2: What might Alex's purpose have been in writing a row of letters?

Example 3: Ask parents what Scott has written (‘Jack and Jill went up the hill’). Explain that:
- he is associating sounds with letters;
- he uses the name of e for the sound of i (‘hill’ is written ‘he’);
- he confuses letters visually (y/j, j/l);
- the teacher has to write ‘up the’ to encourage him to finish.

Example 4: Kiran hears k of jack and v in the, and is not sure how to use spaces between words.

Example 5: Emily (who is older than the previous children) is hearing more vowels and is clear about spaces between words. She leaves off endings she is not clear about (went, fetched, pail, water) and writes what she hears (e for i, hiul, ov).

Example 6: Abigail knows how to spell some words correctly (hill, of, came and so on) and uses her own spelling for the others.

Be prepared for parents still to feel a little uneasy about allowing children to do their own spelling, and explain that:
- many of the activities in this book are designed to improve spelling;
- a structured spelling programme is being used in class and children are expected to write some, but not all, words correctly;
- when children do not feel constrained to spell every word correctly, they write much more and they enjoy writing: they become independent writers, not just copiers.

Practising at home
In order to encourage their children to have a go at writing independently, parents can show them the examples in the Activity sheet and tell them that this is how some children wrote ‘Jack and Jill went up the hill’ all by themselves using letters they know, and suggest that they could do just as well if not better. At this stage parents can give children either separate sheets or a special exercise book for their ‘own writing’. Later, when they have had a lot of emergent writing practice, they might like to fill the Nursery Rhyme and Picture Writing pages, using their best handwriting. The important thing is that they should do the writing by themselves. If they ask their parent how to spell a word, the parent should tell them to say the word and write the sounds they hear. Offer suggestions for things to write about: lists are a good start e.g. things I like; my favourite foods; my best toys and games; what makes me laugh; and so on. What are their suggestions?

It is very helpful for children to have an alphabet in front of them to refer to while they are writing. They should be able to see the entire alphabet at one glance. It can, for instance, be written on a piece of A4 card with each line of letters a different colour. The Letterland alphabet is particularly
effective in helping children with visual, auditory or motor difficulties to associate letters with their sounds, and it also helps them to remember how to write them correctly.

Parents need not sit with their children when they do their own writing but when they have finished, parents should always praise them and ask them what they have written. If children say ‘I don’t know what it says’ or ‘You read it to me’, parents should pass responsibility back to them and say something like ‘What did you want your writing to say?’ or ‘It’s your writing so you tell me what it says’. Sometimes children just practise letters and put no meaning to them: this is also acceptable. However, parents should make a note of what their children say the writing means, in order to discuss this at the next meeting. The simplest way to do this is to tell children that you like their writing and want to remember what it says so you are doing your own writing underneath theirs. This is not to be used as a model for them to copy. Remind parents that their main aim is to encourage their children in three ways:

- to enjoy writing on their own;
- if they don’t know how to write a word, to say it and write the sounds they hear (at first they might write only one or two letters);
- to read to their parents what they have written.

Children who know very few letters or are unwilling to try writing should be given a little more time. Parents can give them some felt-tip pens and a fairly small piece of paper and suggest that they fill the paper with their own writing. They might do patterns interspersed with some letters. A lot of this sort of experience on different sizes of paper often dispels their fear of writing freely.

FOURTH MEETING

Aims

1. To review the week’s activities. Handwriting: to demonstrate the next group of letters (r n m h b p)
2. To give parents the next four sections of the Resource folder, and demonstrate the Apple Game. Even if some children are not ready for this, all parents will want to have it for future use.

What you need

- A large sheet of paper and felt-tip pen for demonstrating handwriting.
- The Apple Game, already constructed, and counters for Game 1.
- An exercise book with a ladder ruled in coloured pens for Game 2.
- Self-adhesive paper/stiff card for parents to reinforce sheet 32.

Reading

If the Book Box is being used, this can be discussed. Parents often make comments about books being too easy or difficult for their children. In discussing their reasons for saying this, you will find
that they have become knowledgeable about features of the stories such as repetition, familiarity of language and predictability of the text. You can at this stage (if you have not already done so) put some new books into the Book Box to cater for children who require more difficult texts, and for others to try if they want to.

**Handwriting**

Make sure that parents are still using baking trays, doing rainbow letters and playing 'What is it?' if children are having difficulty with correct letter formation. It is essential that you look at their books at every meeting. Probably most of them need only two or three practices a week at this stage, but parents must watch their children doing it.

Introduce the next set of letters (r n m h b p) and demonstrate, if necessary.

**Emergent writing**

Discuss what they have done.

Parents are interested when you analyse their children’s approximations, and other members of the group learn a lot from this as well. For instance one child was singing a song as she wrote:

```plaintext
t e m n e g t e (the more we are together)
t e m n e g t e the more we are together
t e m n e g t e the more we are together
t e p l b the happier we’ll be).
```

You could hazard a guess that the t e is an attempt at the and that there might be some letter–sound correspondence (for instance m for more?), but the most striking and significant feature of the writing is its maintenance of a fixed pattern to accord with the fixed patterning of the song. Sometimes children use patterns because they just enjoy doing so – for instance Gemma, who wrote crerek for cake. Her mother was pleased she got the first and last sounds correct, and noted that she likes repeating groups of letters. At a more advanced level, Peter wrote telfun for telephone, a nice example of phonetic spelling, and also the tendency at this stage to omit unstressed syllables. Parents could help children listen more carefully to words they are trying to spell by clapping the segments (syllables) as they say the word, for example hip po pot a mus.

**Activities**

**Apple Game**

This is an important stage in the programme: some children will progress fast from this point.
Game 1  Read through the instructions and demonstrate using the prepared materials. Let some parents practise doing this.

Game 2  This should be done only when children find Game 1 easy. Demonstrate, covering each word while writing in on the ladder.

Draw attention to the third instruction for Game 2 on sheet 30 of the Resource Folder, which emphasises that, at this stage, parents should not criticise their child's handwriting. Once they remember the words with ease parents can remind them to form their letters correctly.

FIFTH MEETING

Aims
1. To review the week’s activities.
2. To demonstrate all reinforcement activities for the Apple Game up to and including the Gobbling Goose fun page.
3. To make further suggestions for children’s own writing.

What you need
- Apple Game and counters.
- An exercise book with a ladder ruled in coloured pens.
- One Rhyming Pairs Game, already constructed (Resource Folder, sheet 38).

Reading
Parents’ feedback.

Handwriting
Are there any problems? Parents often express concern that the improvement in their children’s handwriting is erratic. Remind them again that, when tasks are new to children, they should not be expected to do perfect handwriting but that once the children are doing a task with ease, they can be reminded about correct letter formation.

Some children frequently reverse individual letters and incorrectly sequence letters within words. This can be a persistent, rather long-term problem to be dealt with patiently by all concerned. The structured, multi-sensory learning of handwriting followed in this programme will benefit all children, so encourage parents to continue helping their children in this way.

Emergent writing
Discuss the children’s work, reminding parents of their aim to encourage their children to enjoy writing on their own and to read out what they have written. Children might like to continue writing lists:
sometimes a narrow piece of paper motivates them to do this. Or they might have started trying nursery rhymes or their own stories.

**Apple Game**

Game 1  Some parents can demonstrate how they use the Apple Game.

Game 2  Where children have written their words on ladders, note whether:
- parents have drawn attractive coloured ladders to motivate their children;
- incorrect words have been crossed out and rewritten (not erased or altered, which tends to leave a confused impression of the correct word in the child’s mind);
- children were asked to read the words they wrote.

Urge parents to follow this routine and also suggest some form of reward for a good ladder, such as a star or sticker.

**Balloon Game**

Read the instructions. The important point to make is that children should mentally rehearse making a word before drawing a line, otherwise they might find the initial sound makes a nonsense word.

Children can use some of these words to write on the ladder using the procedure for writing words described on page 37 of the Activity Book.

**Second Letter Bingo**

Demonstrate, using counters. Emphasise the vowel in each word.

**Rhyming Pairs Game**

Children who are making and reading the three-letter words in the Apple Game without difficulty can continue with these reinforcement activities. Demonstrate the Rhyming Pairs Game, first as a visual then as an auditory matching game. Parents can make up all four sets now, if they wish, but should put aside Sets III and IV to be used after u and e have been learnt.

**Gobbling Goose fun page**

When children write words on the Gobbling Goose they should use one of the methods suggested on that page: writing as many words as possible from memory, or writing one word at a time using the look–say–cover–write–check method.

**SIXTH MEETING**

**Aims**

1. Review the week’s activities.
2. Demonstrate Stepping Stones Game.
3. Chair parents’ discussion about children’s books (if Book Box is being used)
What you need

- One sentence from sheet 41 printed and cut into words to demonstrate the Stepping Stones Game.
- A selection of books from the Book Box ranging from ‘easy’ to ‘more difficult’, and representative of a variety of writing and illustrative styles.

Reading and handwriting

Ask parents if there are any problems. Demonstrate the next group of letters if necessary.

Emergent writing

Some children might be writing willingly at this stage. Can their parents suggest some more writing purposes for them? For example they might like to write to Father Christmas, to their teacher or to a relative! Or they might enjoy playing a game of ‘not being able to speak’ with their family and writing notes to them instead! This is very popular with children as they are keen to know what the notes say, particularly if the messages are funny.

Urge parents to keep encouraging them and praising them for their efforts knowing that this will nourish their progress towards literacy. Showing their work to their classteacher for praise might also prompt them to write more. Where children still feel a need to be correct, this need can be partially satisfied by suggesting to them that when they have finished writing, they can choose two words they would like to spell correctly. These can either be copied or, if appropriate, learned using the look–say-cover–write–check method.

To further motivate children, they can be told that if they do quite a lot of their own writing this week, next week they will be able to use the Picture Writing sheet in their Resource Folder (sheet 28).

Activities

Get feedback on the Rhyming Pairs Game. Remind parents to sit with their children while they are doing the Balloon Games, and to ask them to read some of the words or use them for dictation.

Stepping Stones

When children have finished Gobbling Goose they can start Stepping Stones. Demonstrate how to use a cut-up sentence on the Stepping Stones. It is important not to rush the Stepping Stones stage. Only when they can remember a whole sentence should they go on to sentence dictation.

Book Box Discussion

Invite parents to browse through the Book Box. This can be a purely informal discussion or it can be given some direction by suggesting that they choose one book that their child has enjoyed and
another new one that they feel their child would enjoy. In justifying their choice, a lively discussion usually ensues. When chairing the discussion, remember to draw their attention to illustrators as well as authors.

This is also a good time to discuss public library facilities and books and magazines that give information about children’s books. If you don’t have these in school, maybe your local library would allow you to borrow some to show parents. The advantages and disadvantages of children’s book clubs could also be discussed.

SEVENTH MEETING

Aims
1. To review the week’s activities, particularly Stepping Stones.
2. To discuss the Picture Writing page in the Activity sheets.
3. To prepare parents for next week’s discussion of their children’s emergent writing.
4. To demonstrate Word Snake (sheets 54 to 58).
5. To discuss how parents can continue to guide their children through the Resource Folder.

What you need
- A cut-up sentence taken from sheet 41 for Stepping Stones.
- A large sheet of paper and felt-tip pen to make a list of points arising from the emergent writing discussion.

Reading and handwriting
Ask if there are any problems.

Emergent writing
Next week parents will work in pairs, reviewing their children’s progress with emergent writing, so they should encourage their children this week to write as much as possible. To help motivate them to do this they can use the Picture Writing sheet in the Resource Folder. Apart from providing a prompt to children as to what to write about, these pictures create spaces to write in which, hopefully, children feel are not daunting: large areas such as A4 sheets are discouraging to children whose writing output at this stage is probably still very limited. Parents (and teachers) can take a cue from this and think of ways of creating small spaces for children to fill up, for example tiny six-centimetre square ‘books’ in which a few pages are stapled together.

In discussing how best to use this sheet, parents might come up with various suggestions that other members of the group will also find helpful, including the following:
- children choose the picture they want to write in;
• parents and children discuss what to write in the picture. The writing can be done in one sitting, or spread over two or three days;
• children will be asked to write by themselves, once the discussion is over. If they do ask questions, these should concern the content of their writing, not the spelling;
• if children want to write on lines, parents will draw these in the pictures, taking into consideration the size of their children’s handwriting;
• children might like to draw certain details first, for example the windows in the house, before starting to write.

In the notes for the previous meeting, the suggestion was made that children could choose two words, after their writing is finished, which they would like to spell correctly. Ask the parents whether any of them did this. Which words did their child choose and how did the parents respond?

How do parents feel about showing their children how to spell common words (such as my, I, and)? Which common words would they not try to teach them (for instance mother or friend)? Children’s willingness to write freely using approximate spelling must not be dampened: if there is any doubt about this, then leave their children’s writing uncorrected until children are writing freely and confidently. Where the opportunity arises, it’s good teaching practice to say, ‘Here’s a word that rhymes with and – hand’, and to write it. Then say ‘Can you think of more words that rhyme with and?’ This generalising principle greatly empowers children.

Activities
The digraphs ck, sh and ch are introduced on page 47, 48 and 51 of the Resource Folder. Letterland pictures and stories for these digraphs are very helpful, and children will enjoy using them.

Demonstrate the Word Snake games (pages 54 to 58). Talk parents through the rest of the Activity Book so that they can continue the work according to their children’s needs.

Stepping Stones
Ask parents who have done this activity with their children to show the group how they went about the task. If their children are still writing one word at a time and checking it, how do they intend getting them to remember more words? It would be pertinent here to discuss why children are being expected to write these words correctly, and not to approximate them as in their free writing. Children have learnt these words throughout the programme, and this is a task that teaches them how to remember what they have learnt: it is a specific spelling task, not a free writing task.

Read ‘Using the sentences for dictation’ on sheet 40. It is important to follow this routine exactly. Parents whose children are not ready yet for this task will also benefit from the discussion.
EIGHTH MEETING

Aims
1. To review the week's activities.
2. To get parents to discuss their children's writing first with a partner and then with the group.

What you need
- A large sheet of paper and felt-tip pen to write down any points arising from the parents’ discussion of their children’s free writing.

Reading and handwriting
Ask the parents if there are any problems.

Emergent writing
While parents work in pairs discussing their children's writing, you can circulate, joining in the discussions and offering guidance where appropriate. Remember, parents' aims are to encourage their children to:
- want to write;
- say words and write some of the sounds they hear;
- read what they have written.

After everyone has had time to talk to a partner, there can be a general discussion. Sharing ideas and experiences will assist parents to continue helping their children after the programme has finished, particularly with reading and free writing.

Sentence dictation
Ask parents if they followed the suggested procedure.

Retesting
Remind parents that their children will be retested this week and that they will see the results at the next, final meeting.

NB. If you think the parents want to continue the programme for another few weeks, and the children would benefit from this, discuss the possibility of having another four meetings.

During the coming week you should make copies of the retest results and also the results of the children's first test, so that parents can take them home to show the family. Also ensure that the children’s classteacher fills in the classteacher’s Observation Sheet for parents to see at next week's meeting.

NINTH MEETING
Aims
1. To review the week’s work.
2. To make sure that parents know how to continue working through the Resource Folder.
3. To examine the retest results and compare with the first test.
4. To discuss the classteacher’s observations of the children’s work.
5. To discuss the programme and give out questionnaires. Most parents might want to take them home to fill in, but make sure they return them within the next week.

What you need
- New MIST results and first MIST results.
- Parents’ Questionnaires.
- Classteacher’s Observations Sheets.

Review and further guidance
This will have to be brief to allow time for the evaluation of test results, classteachers’ observations, and general discussion. Parents by now are usually confident and keen enough to want to continue the programme on their own, although probably at a slower pace. You can reassure them that they can come to you (or the classteacher) with queries. An important point to make is that once children realise they can do some of the dictation sentences on sheet 41 they usually become more confident about writing independently. Parents should continue to encourage them to write for different purposes (shopping lists, letters, rhymes, songs, stories and so on) using their phonic skills but also encouraging their own spelling of new words. The aim is that children should write as much as possible, not that every word should be correctly spelled.

Test results
Improvement is to be measured not only in terms of better scores but, just as importantly, in increased confidence and independence. The following are some improvements in children’s work and learning style that have been achieved during past Forward Together programmes.

Reading
Children have come to enjoy using clues and attempting to read independently. If they have been using the Book Box, the books they read might still be simple, with one or two lines of text on a page, but they have become more enthusiastic about reading a lot of books. If shared reading techniques have been discussed during the programme, this will have widened children’s choices.

Writing
Children now know most letter sounds and are blending sounds more confidently. Many are enjoying writing and they write independently using approximate spelling, particularly if this is encouraged by their classteacher.
**Handwriting**

Letter formation, size and orientation have improved. Children with quite severe visual perception problems are making fewer letter formation errors, but they still reverse some letters. Their errors tend to be erratic – they might do letters and words correctly one day, and not the next. Parents need to understand that this problem is persistent and will continue for some time.

It is important that the teachers that the children have in the next two years should examine their ‘before and after’ MIST results in order to continue with the good practice that has enabled them to improve.

**Discussion of the programme**

This links with the discussion of the improvements that the parents and the class teacher have noted in their children’s work and attitude. The discussion could also be widened to include points in the questionnaire such as the development in the parents’ understanding of their children’s difficulties and greater confidence about helping them. Parents might also have some suggestions on how to improve the programme, which you will find useful. Usually they say that they will continue helping their children at a more leisurely pace now that the tight schedule of the eight- or twelve-week programme is no longer necessary. Often they are keen to ensure that their children’s progress should continue to be monitored and that they would like to meet again some time in the future to discuss this. Alternatively, they might prefer to see the class teacher individually.

If parents are taking questionnaires home to fill in, make sure that they are sent back to you.

Remember to congratulate parents for completing the *Forward Together* programme: this has been a considerable achievement!
APPENDIX I

Sample Letter to Parents

Dear ................................................

You are invited to attend a meeting at ............................................................... on

........................................................................ at which your child’s classteacher will describe to you a nine-week, home-help project for accelerating your child’s progress in reading and writing. This has been done in several schools with great success.

Please sign the attached slip to let us know you are able to attend.

Yours sincerely,

........................................................................

........................................................................

I will be attending the meeting at .................................................................

on ....................................................................................................................

Signed ........................................................................................................... Parent/Guardian

Name (please print) ............................................................................................
APPENDIX II

Forward Together Programme

The aim of this programme is to support children who would benefit from more help with reading, handwriting and free writing.

Your commitment will be:

- to attend as many of nine weekly one-hour sessions as possible, for guidance and discussion,
- every ………….. (day) from …………. (time) to …………..
- to work with your child for 15 to 30 minutes daily where possible

Our commitment will be:

- to guide you carefully through a structured home-help programme
- to provide our time, expertise and support,
- to monitor your child’s progress within school
- to show you your child’s pre- and post- test results

APPENDIX III

Recording Children Reading

At the first meeting, parents listen to a recording of their child reading to a teacher. This demonstrates to parents how to use the pause–prompt–praise method of hearing their children read.

1. Set up the recorder.
2. Make a note of the child’s name and book.
3. Tell the child you will read them some of the story first and then they can try to read it.
4. Let her know she is being recorded and she can listen to it when she is finished reading.
5. Tell the children their parents are coming to school and will listen to the tape.
6. You will keep the book for the parents to take home.
APPENDIX IV

Forward Together Parent Workshops in North Bristol Evaluation Report 2007

The FT parent/carer workshops were carried out in three primary schools for ten weeks from January to March 2007.

- 47 parents attended weekly workshops with an average attendance of 86%
- 58% of the children were boys
- The programme particularly impacted on writing:
  - 125% gain in dictated sentence
  - 92% gain in writing vocabulary.

SOUTHERN EDUCATION LIBRARY BOARD
Long-Term Evaluation Report 1996

This survey examined the long-term effectiveness and value of an early screening and intervention programme to support literacy development. The results of this survey indicate that those children who had had early intervention (in the form of the MIST screening and FT programme) did sustain the effects of their work through to their current situation in P5 and P6 (3 years later).
Parents’ Questionnaire

How do you feel about working with your child at home?
Does it differ in any way from how you felt at the beginning of the programme?

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Do you think that working in this way with you has benefited your child, and if so, how?

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Have you learnt anything new about your child or about how he or she learns?

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Have you had any difficulties doing this programme?

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Have you any suggestions to make?
Class teacher’s Observations Sheet

During this week please observe the children in your class who have done the Forward Together programme and fill in this sheet for each child.

Child’s name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Reading
Has there been an improvement in:

• the use of contextual and graphophonic clues? ____________________________
• self-correcting? ____________________________
• attitude to reading? ____________________________

Handwriting
Has there been an improvement in:

• letter formation? ____________________________
• size? ____________________________
• control and fluency? ____________________________

Writing
Has there been an improvement in:

• independence – using own spelling? ____________________________
  – knowledge of common words ____________________________
  (for example in, to, the)? ____________________________
  – structuring own sentences? ____________________________
• knowledge of letters sounds and blending? ____________________________
• spacing words clearly? ____________________________
• attitude to writing? ____________________________

General
Has there been any improvement in confidence?

____________________________________