

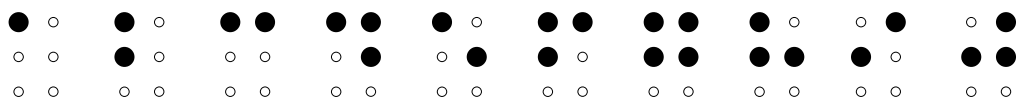
Help your child enjoy
learning braille

A Braille Reader in the Family

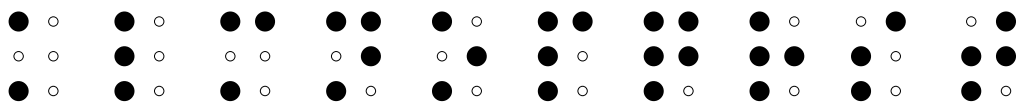
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Top Tips

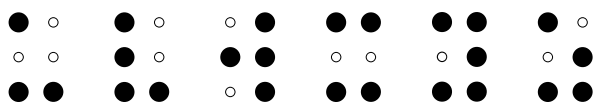
Braille Alphabet



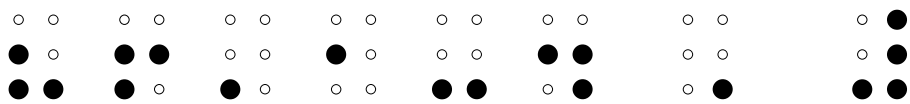
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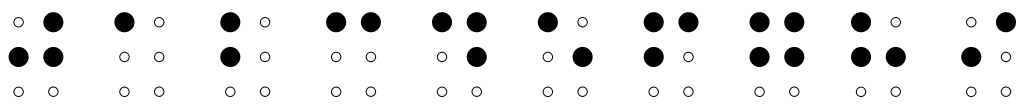
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A BRAILLE READER IN THE FAMILY

helping your child enjoy learning braille

WHAT IS BRAILLE?

Braille is a system of raised symbols which people who are blind or partially-sighted have been using worldwide for over 150 years. The words in braille go from left to right across the page, just like printed words.

The symbols which represent each letter are made up of between one and six dots, based on the pattern of the six dots you would see on a dice or a domino.

Developments in technology are opening up new opportunities for braille producers and for readers. People with the latest equipment can now read braille on small electronic braille displays which change under the readers' fingers – providing another way to access texts, the Internet and social networking sites. A whole braille book can now be stored on a memory stick and read on a small and easily portable device.

“With braille I can visualise what's going on in the book. I like bringing my own ideas into books. I don't like someone saying it for me.”

(Grace, aged 11, UK)

Some people read long books in braille. Some use electronic braille keyboards and displays to access the Internet and send emails. Some use braille music to sing in choirs or play musical instruments. Some use it to study maths, science and IT. Some use it to read their own bank statements and utility bills. And some just use braille for labelling, or for writing notes. For many children with little or no sight, braille is the best route to literacy and independence.

“I read braille recipes for making fish bites, potato wedges, choc crispies and apple bake. When we go to McDonald's for a Happy Meal there is a braille menu for me to choose from.”

(Key Stage 2 pupil, Cornwall)

What are contracted and uncontracted braille?

There are two kinds of braille. Uncontracted braille (also called 'grade 1 braille') is a straightforward code with one symbol for each letter of the alphabet, plus a few extra symbols for punctuation and numbers.

Contracted (or 'grade 2') braille uses the same symbols for the letters of the alphabet but it has lots of extra signs for common words and combinations of letters. Contracted braille is quicker to read but there is more to learn.

“Braille plays a main role in taking people from illiteracy to literacy. In my case, I depended a lot on this writing system through my study years.”

(Mohammed Abbas, Computer Teacher, Syria)

GETTING READY

in the early years

Being positive about braille

- Try not to suggest braille is strange, unusual or impossibly hard to learn.
- Talk positively about how useful and enjoyable it will be to read braille.
- Draw your child's attention to the fact that you (or other people) are reading – a letter, a magazine, a book or a sign – so that he or she will pick up on the importance of reading. If you don't mention it, your child will not realise how much silent reading goes on. Braille is just another way of doing the very same thing.
- Try to learn the braille alphabet and ask close friends and family to learn at least a few letters. This will make braille seem less strange to your child – and make him or her feel part of a 'braille community.' You may find that grandparents are keen to get involved. Ask ClearVision for a free copy of the puzzle booklet 'Crack the Code' for sighted people - and make as many photocopies as you like to give to everyone you know!
- But there are lots of ways you can help your child, even if you haven't learned any braille yet ...



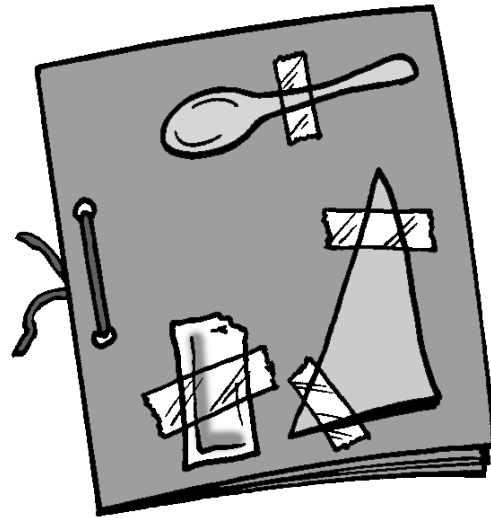
Enjoying books together

- Read to your child as much as you can and encourage other people to do so. Talk about the story as you go along. Explain anything which might puzzle your child because she or he has no experience of it. Put on silly voices. Add sound effects. Give the child an appropriate toy or other object to hold. Do anything to make the story session enjoyable for you both.
- Re-read favourite books over and over again. Remember that even young children might prefer real life stories, or books about animals, trains or whatever, rather than fantasy. Pause so that your child can join in with words she or he knows or can guess. Encourage your child to talk about the story and to re-tell it after you have finished reading.
- Talk with your child about the actual book, the front and back covers, the tops and bottoms of pages. Encourage the child to turn the pages.
- Stick something tactile on your child's own favourite books – a puffy sticker, a bit of felt, or a toy wheel for example – anything which will help him or her to choose by touch which book you are going to read.



Be crafty!

- Ask friends, family or local craft groups to make some simple tactile books. The easiest are made of card with textures or objects stuck on. How about a book based on a trip to a café, with a sachet of ketchup, a paper napkin and some penny coins stuck in? Or a simple 1 to 5 counting book? There are more suggestions at www.tactilebooks.org.



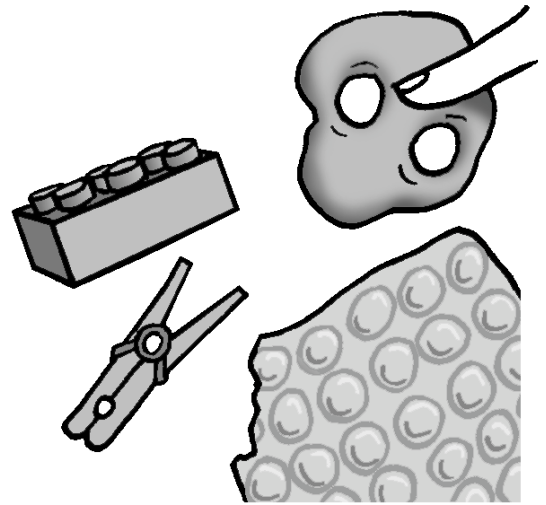
- Encourage your child to make pictures, for example by sticking things onto a piece of paper or card, by using Wikki Stix (available from RNIB and lots of toy and craft shops), by making patterns of holes (or braille dots) or by moulding clay.

Borrow a brailier

- Try to get hold of a Perkins braille machine (or something similar) so that your child and other children can get used to pressing on the keys and making masses of dots – a kind of ‘braille scribble.’ To make clear dots, you need to press quite hard on the keys and children may find this easier if they are standing up.

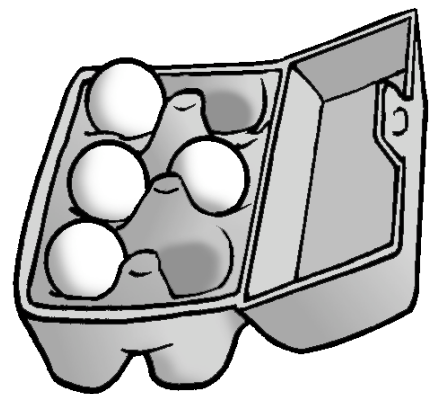
Hands on

- To operate the keys of a braille machine, your child will need strong and mobile fingers. Activities such as poking holes in play dough, building with Duplo, playing a keyboard, popping bubblewrap, squeezing a squeaker, unscrewing lids, or putting pegs on a line (or on a lampshade, or on Dad's tie ...) can all help with this.

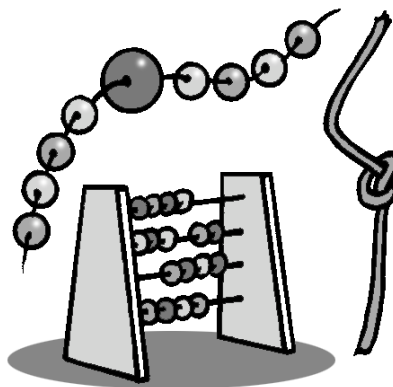


- To help develop touch skills, encourage your child to play sorting games. Shape sorters and stacking rings are a good place to start. You could also collect bits and pieces such as buttons, pegs, beads and bottle tops then ask your child to sort them into pots, or pairs. Of course, young children will need supervision if they are likely to put things in their mouths.

- An empty egg box with six ping pong balls (or golf balls, or whatever) is a good way to introduce a child to the all-important six dot positions in braille. Play at making different patterns. See if you can make braille letters with chocolate eggs!



- Learning braille starts with ‘tracking skills’ to help children learn to follow a line with their fingers, and to find changes on the way. This could be a knot in a piece of string, or a large bead on a string of small beads. A toy abacus or a pegboard toy will help develop useful skills. If you have a braille machine at home you and your child can make rows of dots all the same – but with a gap somewhere along the row. Then take the paper out of the machine and play at finding the gap.



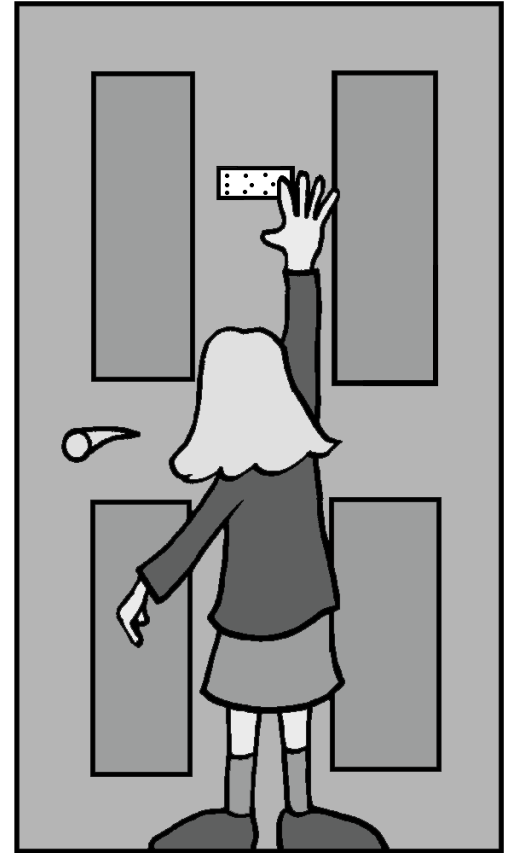
- Borrow books with the text in print and braille from ClearVision – see Sources page. Encourage your child to find the braille and to pretend to read it. This will help your child to learn that braille is a written version of the words we say aloud. Children may also like to put their hands on the backs of yours while you pretend to read it by touch, running your hands from left to right along the lines of braille.

“Braille is important to me, because it’s my primary method of being literate in today’s knowledge and high-tech society. In my work life as a policy analyst, I’m utilising braille for note taking, presentation and brainstorming purposes. I would not have been able to fulfill my job tasks in a competitive environment if it wasn’t for braille literacy skills.”

(Martine Abel-Williamson, Policy Analyst, New Zealand)

Around and about

- Try to make or get hold of some braille labels to stick on things within your child's reach at home – the fridge, the bedroom door, a favourite toy. In the early stages, just the first letter of the word – or your child's name – may be enough. You can buy sticky-backed plastic sheets from RNIB if you want to braille your own on a Perkins braille. A Braille Labeller (also from RNIB) has a print and braille dial which will enable you to make sticky-backed braille labels on Dymo tape even if you don't know braille.
- Hunt for braille when you are out and about. You will often find braille labels in lifts, on buses, in museums, and on medicines and cleaning products in the supermarket.

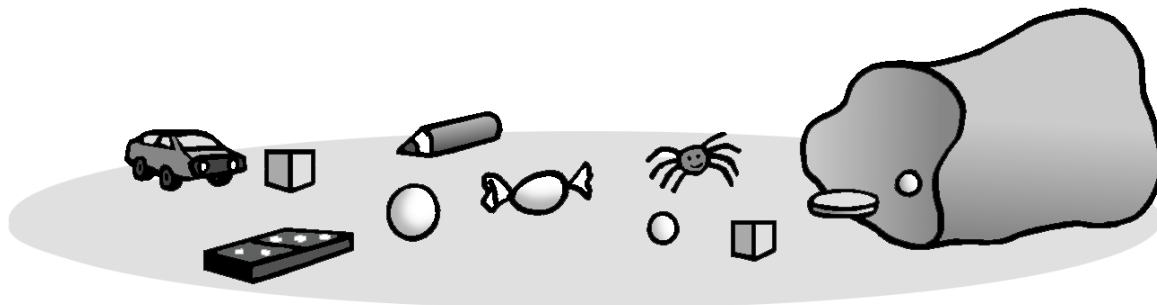
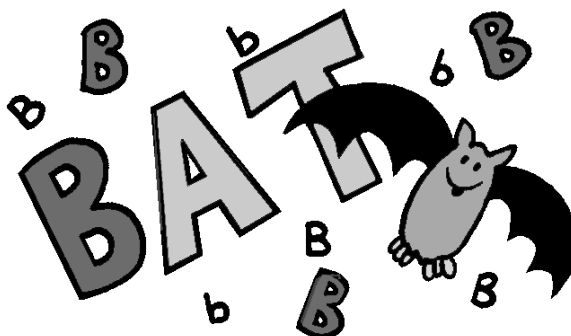


“I find braille a useful tool for extensive reading. Unlike synthetic speech, braille allows me to read at my own pace without having to pause and re-adjust speech settings. It is also useful for reading aloud, such as reading a story in front of a class or for referring to notes while giving a presentation.”

(Year 11 pupil, London)

Fun and games

- Enjoy reciting simple poems and learning nursery rhymes together. If you can't remember any, your local library should have plenty of nursery rhyme books.
- Play rhyming games. What other words sound like BAT? What other words start with a 'b' sound?
- Textured dominoes may be fun and will help your child develop tactile skills. Play games with objects in a bag: put your hand in and try to guess what they are, or find two objects the same.



“Braille is important to me because it allows me an important human right – that of being literate, able to both read and write efficiently. I am passionate that all blind people who wish to learn and use braille should be able to do so. I remember far more of what I actively read in braille than I do when listening, so I greatly prefer braille for study or understanding complex material.”

(Sheila Armstrong, UK)

GETTING STARTED

once your child begins to learn braille

Ask for advice

- Speak to whoever is teaching your child braille and find out as much as you can about what they will be doing and how you can help. There is a space at the end of this booklet for their suggestions.

Find a role model

- Many young braille readers do not know anyone else who is learning to read braille by touch, and do not know any adult braille readers. See if your local Society for the Blind or VI Service can put you in touch with any other families with a braille reader.

“Without braille, my life would be much more difficult and exhausting. Because of my hearing impairment, I cannot understand spoken texts very well, so it is a good help that I can also read with my fingertips. I wish all blind people had the possibility to learn it, so that they could experience its great advantages for their everyday lives. It helps you reach a new status of independence from other people’s eyes and voices.”

(Katrin Dinges, Student, Germany)

Get ready

- Braille reading can be affected by lack of interest, tiredness, over-excitement or anxiety – so pick a good moment and give lots of praise. Don't ever make braille reading or writing into a test and don't let your child feel like a failure or a disappointment.
- The child should be sitting up fairly straight rather than slumping. For easy reading the braille page should lie completely flat, on a table or a tray if possible. The child will need to have warm, dry hands as it is very hard to read braille with cold or damp fingers. Both the child's hands should be on the page. The child's fingers should be curved like a piano player's, so that just the fingerpads touch the page.

“I've always used my BrailleNote (a small portable computer with a braille keyboard and display) and without it I'd be pretty much lost. It's how I write, it's how I read and it's also a form of diary, a planner as well as a calculator. Technology plays a pivotal role in my life. Facebook, Twitter, MySpace: I'm pretty much addicted to the social networking side of things.”

(Ahmed, A-level student, UK)

Finding the braille

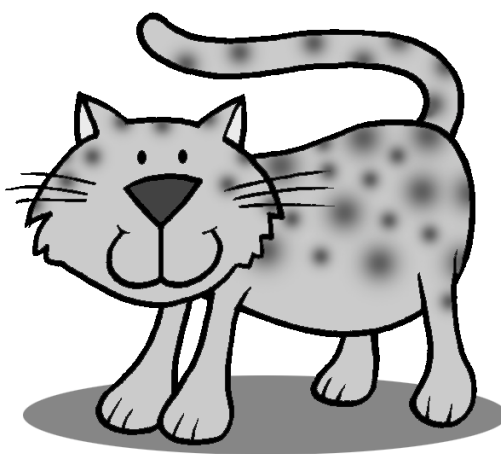
- You will be reading almost all the text to start with but try to involve the child in identifying simple braille words or letters, for example the first letters of their names.
- Ask your child to find the centred heading (if there is one), and to run their hands over the whole page and say if there is lots of braille on the page or just a little. It doesn't really matter what the answer is: it's the scanning which is the important part! See if your child can count how many lines of braille there are on the page. Close your eyes and see if you can count them!
- Try to collect some brailled books for your child to own (see Sources page).
- Some parents have bought a pack of large magnetic reception year words (from eBay and elsewhere) and stuck clear braille labels onto them. In this way the child can enjoy building sentences on the fridge - and all the family can read them!
- Continue to read aloud to your child and enjoy books together – just for pleasure.



Fun and games

- Some of the old word games are still a lot of fun – especially on long car journeys. ‘I Spy’ is an old favourite; if anyone feels unhappy about the name it can be changed to ‘I Spy, quite nearby’ ... (and who says you can’t spy just as well with your fingers?) Another variation is ‘I hear, with my little ear’ – ideal for public places where there are lots of different sounds.

- In ‘The Parson’s Cat,’ every player tries to find a word to describe the cat, starting with each letter of the alphabet in turn. ‘The parson’s cat is an angry cat.’ ‘The parson’s cat is a big cat ...’



- You may all enjoy games such as Beetle, with tactile dice. Dominoes are available with raised tactile dots and you might also find a tactile version of Connect 4 or Shut the Box.

“Without reading I would basically be lost. You’ve got to read to improve your braille ... If you keep on going you can achieve anything. You’ve got to just persevere with reading; it’s really important that you do.”

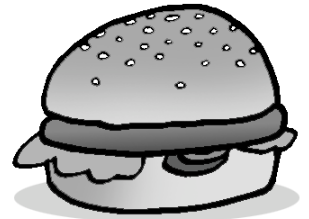
(Ellie, aged 11, UK)

GETTING GOOD AT BRAILLE

as your child becomes a reader

Read together

- Regularly listen to your child read and give help with difficult words. Give plenty of praise and encouragement. Stop as soon as the child get tired or cross or loses interest.
- Encourage your child to read a familiar text aloud to family and friends and in social situations.
- McDonalds and Pizza Express boast that braille menus are available in all their food outlets. This could be very good news for some young diners!



Write together

- Involve your child in everyday writing tasks: a shopping list, birthday cards, phone numbers, labels for presents. Can she or he braille them?
- You may like to write little braille notes for your child and leave them where he or she will find them, for example in a lunch box or on a pillow. How about a short braille joke to go with a Christmas cracker?

Top tips

Fast and accurate braille readers use the following techniques. Encourage your child to use them too!

- Use the left hand to find the start of the next line while the right hand is still reading the end of the line above.
- Try not to rub the fingertip over individual braille letters, 'scrubbing' at the dots.
- Touch the dots lightly and move on. Hands should ideally keep moving from left to right along the line of braille.
- Usually you need to read slowly and carefully and try to get every word right. But sometimes, try reading as fast as you can, guessing a few words if you need to. Speed reading can even be timed so the reader can try and beat the clock!



“Braille was invaluable in enabling me to read stories to my sighted children from babyhood until they were fluent readers. It was such an enjoyable experience for all of us.”
(Mother of three, UK)

Good books

- Make sure the child has books appropriate to his or her age, taste, interests and reading ability. When children are tired – and especially if they have a lot of reading for school – they may enjoy something short and easy just for fun.

Fun and games

- Continue to play word games like ‘I Spy’ or ‘Ghost’ (where each player has to think of, and say aloud, a word starting with the last letter of the previous word spoken).
- Try some brailled card games, including Uno and Happy Families, available from RNIB (see Sources page).

“In my opinion, everyone should be able to have the right to learn and read braille. I think braille is important to visually impaired people because it lets them have the freedom of reading the way other people do. This is essential for their education and learning. Nobody should be in a position where they cannot access the books they want.”

(Key Stage 3 pupil, London)

Be proud

- It's not easy to learn to read and write braille when everyone else is learning print. Most young braille readers are behind their sighted classmates when it comes to reading. Celebrate every bit of effort your child makes, and every bit of progress however small.

**Be proud to have a braille
reader in the family!**

SOURCES

Your local **Visual Impairment Service** offers specialist help and advice to families of babies and children with visual impairment. It may also lend resources such as braille machines.

Your local **Society for the Blind** offers advice, resources, possible loan of a braille machine and contact with other local braille readers.

ClearVision has thousands of children's books in print and braille available to borrow by post. The collection includes novelty board books with added braille for very young children. The service is free to families. ClearVision can also provide copies of the Crack the Code booklet to help sighted parents learn the braille alphabet, numbers and punctuation. www.clearvisionproject.org. 020 8789 9575.

My Home Library, a scheme set up by author Anne Fine, provides a pack of free braille and print books to all young braille readers in the UK. Contact ClearVision for more information. www.clearvisionproject.org. 020 8789 9575.

Living Paintings lends books with audio picture descriptions and tactile versions of some of the print illustrations. The books also have braille text. www.livingpaintings.org. 01635 299771

RNIB has a list of appropriate toys available from ordinary shops and websites.

www.rnib.org.uk/earlyyearslearning. It also sells a wide variety of resources, including tactile toys, brailled playing cards, sticky-backed plastic sheets for braille, braille labeller and Dymo tape, braille novelties and braille children's books (including a few in print and braille).

www.rnib.org.uk. 0303 1239999.

VICTA may be able to provide your child with a braille machine to use at home. **www.victa.org.uk** 01908 672163

Cobolt Systems Ltd stocks one or two tactile games, including '4 in a Row' which is similar to Connect 4.

www.cobolt.co.uk 01493 700172

Reading Sight has several video interviews with young braille readers and their families in the Young Reading Lives section. The videos also show some of the equipment and resources mentioned in this booklet.

www.readingsight.org.uk

"Reading braille has been a real comfort to me."

(Fred R, aged 88, UK)

Use this space for advice and suggestions from your child's braille teachers

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teachers, braille readers, parents and other experts.
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