Learning about sentences

As children begin to write sentences rather than single words, and particularly as they start to write several sentences, they need to be able to mark the sentence boundaries with punctuation. It is difficult to give a meaningful explanation of what a sentence is, but through experiences such as shared reading and particularly shared writing, and the discussion of sentence punctuation, children can develop a sense of what sentences are. The Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage (ref: 00266-2008BKT–EN), pages 59–60 sets out some basic elements of the developmental pathway that leads from early mark making to the early learning goal for five year olds: Write their own names and other things such as labels and captions, and begin to form simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation. Practitioners may support this development by using relevant terminology in context: ‘Let’s read the next sentence now,’ or ‘I’m going to think about what to say in my sentence,’ or ‘Have I finished my sentence yet?’

This developing understanding can be enhanced by quick group activities, such as the following.

Human sentences

Write each word of a sentence, and the full stop, on separate cards. Give each card to a child, and ask the children to sequence the words to make a sentence (Letters and Sounds, DCSF 2007, has examples of sentences at each phonic phase). All the children then read the sentence together.

Beginnings and ends

Write out some sentences on cards, and cut each sentence into two parts. The sentences could be taken from a familiar book or from Letters and Sounds. Give each child a card, and ask them to find the other part of their sentence. Each pair should show their sentence and read it to the rest of the group.

Example sentences from Letters and Sounds Phase 3:

- I can hear an owl/hoot at night.
- Nan is sitting/in the rocking chair.
- The farmer gets up/at six in the morning.

Is it a sentence?

Write some sentences and non-sentences on strips of card. For example:

Sam sat on the.

The dog ran up the hill.

The cat and the fish.

Jumps on the bed.

The doll is in the cot.
On top of the rock.
I can go to the log hut.

Ask the children to show thumbs up for a sentence and thumbs down for a non-sentence.

**Rainbow sentences**
In shared writing, write each sentence in a different colour. Some sentence ends should fall in the middle of lines, so children do not think that they need a full stop at the end of each line. A similar activity can be done in shared reading, with different colours of highlighter tape used to mark the different sentences.

**Jumbled sentences**
Use magnetic words and punctuation to make a sentence and then jumble up the words. Ask the children to reorder the words to make the sentence.

**Finish my sentence**
Give the children an oral sentence starter, such as ‘My favourite food is…’ or ‘When it rains …’ or ‘In the middle of the wood I saw…’.
Ask for several suggestions to add to each starter in order to make a sentence.

**Noisy sentences**
Read a text together. Ask the children to clap, knock on the floor or click their fingers every time they come to a full stop. Different sounds can be used for question marks and exclamation marks.