

PARENTS, CHILDREN AND EMERGENT

LITERACY: STRATEGIES THAT WORK

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The literacy level of American children and adults is currently an enormous societal problem. In 2004, approximately 90 million Americans lacked the ability to read adequately, and two-thirds of children in the United States had below grade level reading skills (Weitzman, et al.1248). This lack of sufficient reading skills disproportionately affects children from socially and economically disadvantaged families. Studies have shown that the failure to read at grade level leads to frustration and low self-esteem (M. Weitzman and Siegel 55).

In a study from the year 2000, the National Research Council concluded that most of the reading problems faced by today's adolescents and adults might have been avoided or resolved in their early childhood years. The National Research Council found that "reading is typically acquired relatively predictably by children who... have had experiences in early childhood that fostered motivation and provided exposure to literacy in use." Since early childhood experiences with literacy are vital, parents must help foster this exposure to literacy by reading aloud to them while children are young, especially before they start school.

READING ALOUD

As a toddler, Kara pestered and begged her mother to read aloud to her. Kara's family did not own a television in her early childhood. Instead, Kara developed a love of books. She loved the language, the sounds, the pictures, the rich emotional stories, and the way she felt

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loved when her mother read to her. Growing a bit weary of the persistent badgering, one day her mother decided to put aside her chores and read to Kara until Kara was sick of it. She was determined to finally satisfy Kara's desire for books. Two hours later, Kara's mother gave up. She had (rightly) decided that her daughter was never going to be satisfied. By reading aloud she had ignited in her daughter a love of literature and had set the groundwork for a life-long love of reading. Such an achievement is important in each child's educational life, and is imperative for helping every child succeed in every area of education.

The most essential activity that parents can do to help children gain emergent literacy skills is reading aloud together (National Institute for Literacy). In seeking to understand the importance of reading aloud, parents may ask why is it important, why are parents so critical in the process, and what they can do to maximize the use of the time they spend.

OWNING BOOKS

First, in order to read aloud at home, parents and children need access to books. The importance of owning books cannot be overstated. Jeff McQuillan's book, *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions*, which examines 275 literary studies, concludes:

The only behavior measure that correlates significantly with reading scores is the number of books in the home. . . . The availability of books to read – and the subsequent amount of reading done, appears to be as critical, and certainly not less so, in determining success in reading as the classroom instructional methods.

McQuillan maintains that owning books is more important than the style of teaching or any other of the myriad of variables in each child's educa-

tional experience. In addition, as McQuillan points out, it can be very difficult to read when there is no reading material available.

In addition to having book available to them, children also benefit from the pride of book ownership. Mem Fox, a university professor who educates language arts teachers and an author of over 30 children's books, describes the importance of book ownership:

[An] essential factor in the making of eager, competent readers is that the children have books, and *bookshelves* of their own so that favourite books can be owned and read over and over again. Ownership is important. I know of a child who read a particular favourite book until it was in tatters. His parents replaced it not once, but three times. Being able to own, and therefore able to re-read the book for years made that child into a reader.

Without the support and commitment of parents, children have little chance of having their own books and living in a literary environment. Parents can purchase books or suggest them as birthday and holiday gifts from relatives and friends. If that is not feasible, there are many programs, such as the Ferst Foundation for Childhood Literacy, which will help parents and children obtain books for their home.

READING HELPS KNOWLEDGE GROW

Once children have access to books, parents need to read to their children. Reading with children is vital because it helps them “learn new words, learn more about the world, learn about written language and see the connection between words that are spoken and words that are written” (National Institute for Literacy). These are all skills that are vital for literacy and build a foundation for learning in school and beyond.

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Children start building vocabulary and grammatical structure by hearing speech, but conversational speaking can only take children so far in this learning process. The next step is hearing books read aloud because it “exposes children to grammatical forms of written language and displays literate discourse rules for them in ways that conversation typically does not” (Bus, van Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini 2). Without frequent and quality exposure to books, children cannot gain knowledge of language beyond that which is spoken in day to day life. Parents are critical in beginning this process of learning, since they are there from the moment of birth, ready to begin loving, teaching, and reading to their children.

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Caught up in a bookish world. At bedtime, they are warm and safe with a big, loving, protective parent beside the bed reading them stories night after night. In the daytime, they squeeze onto a comforting lap and in the security of a parent’s loving warmth listen to all manner of horrors and joys coming out of books. The relationship between parent and child during the stories is one of warmth and love, which makes the child associate books with warmth and love and pleasure and security. How attractive books become! (Fox 100).

Studies have been done that prove she is quite right. Andrea Bus and Marinus van Ijzendoorn, in particular, did several studies that demonstrated that if the parent and child do not already have a firm attachment that the pleasure of reading a book out loud is low. If that is the case, then it can actually harm literacy skills (Bus and van Ijzendoorn 988). Purely reading aloud with no interaction and no “warmth and love”

does not make readers. Parents need to read to their children, but making it a positive experience is paramount to creating achievement in literacy (Bus and van Ijzendoorn 1009).

MAKING THE MOST OF READING TIME

Assuming that the parent and child relationship is secure and healthy, parents should start early to make the most of their reading aloud time. Babies love the rhythms, repetitions and cadences of language. Even though they may not understand the words (and indeed, many nursery rhymes and lullabies are nonsensical), they will respond to the sounds, building a foundation for later growth. Reading to infants does not always feel rewarding for parents, and too few start early (de Groot and Bus). Indeed, I. de Groot and Andrea Bus found that reading to infants may be the key factor in showing the family's commitment and passion for literature, and in establishing a literary family culture (de Groot and Bus).

Touch is another important tool. Research shows that when children are touched, they form firmer attachments, stress decreases and it is easier for them to learn (Leo). Reading sessions can start with snuggling or the child can sit on the parent's lap. Because touching is not accepted in most school settings, it is all the more important for parents to provide this in their home environment.

Talking about what has been read is also a key point in developing understanding and in advancing literacy skills. Research done by Isabel Beck and Margaret G. McKeown suggests that asking questions, particularly "generic probes that prompt [children] to explain," such as "What's that all about?" or "What's that mean?", helps children give answers that expound beyond one word. Beck and McKeown also suggest that "when children had difficulty responding to a probe, it was useful to

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reread the relevant portion of the text and repeat the initial question” (Beck and McKeown 16). This type of discussion will help children make connections and construct meaning. Of course, as was demonstrated earlier, it is important to not get frustrated and to make this as pleasant and fun as possible.

And thus we come to the most important thing parents can do while reading to their child—get excited! Parents should *not* read things they don’t find interesting. They need to read with passion, enthusiasm and drama (Fox). Jim Trelease points out that reading too quickly is the most common mistake made by parents, and he advises to “read slowly enough for the child to build mental pictures of what he just heard you read. Slow down enough for the children to see the pictures in the book without feeling hurried.” Parents should keep in mind that how many books a child has been read or how many pages are read is utterly unimportant compared to basking in an atmosphere of learning, sharing and growing.

PARENTS HAVE THE KEY

Parents are essential to developing literacy in their children. No one is better suited to read to their children. If all parents, no matter their economic circumstances or educational backgrounds, would take an active part in their child’s literacy, educational outcomes in this country would improve. Children would also grow up with the confidence and literary background they need to succeed in every avenue of life. If parents teach their children to read and promote literacy, their children will be more likely to pass on the gift of literacy to their children, and so on, leaving the future of this planet in very good hands. Parents have the key to unlocking this future.

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