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AUTHOR Reddin, Estoy
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ABSTRACT

This document discusses the role of parents and the role of the community at large in the reading development and improvement of children. One way parents can assist in reading improvement is by surrounding their children with language from their earliest years. Nancy Larrick, in her "Parent's Guide to Children's Reading," suggests that parents read to the young child, even before the child has reached his or her first birthday. Larrick also states that parents can help to foster an interest in print by answering children's questions about letters and signs. And finally, parents can help by making books available to children either through purchase or by borrowing them from a library. There are at least three major ways in which the community can help foster and maintain reading skills--by supporting the public schools; by sponsoring book fairs or setting up book banks or exchanges; and by reading with children either in groups or through voluntary tutoring in the schools. If children see parental and community efforts to support reading activities, they will likewise place value on reading. (LL)

READING IMPROVEMENT - A COOPERATIVE COMMUNITY COMMITMENT*

Estoy Reddin

Since the colonial beginnings of our nation the teaching of reading skills has been a large and important part of the work of schools for young children. The act passed in 1746 in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which was to be subsequently known as the "Satan Deluder Act," made it mandatory that teachers be provided to teach children to read. No other curriculum was prescribed until many years later. Through the intervening years the teaching of reading has been a prime concern in the ever-growing number of elementary schools. With the development of compulsory school laws it became a national goal that all children learn to read through this teaching of reading so that they might then proceed to other learning. Thus a goodly portion of the school day has been, and still is, devoted to this activity. For many years the schools were considered the only place for learning to read because the idea had gradually developed that only the school should attempt to teach reading skills, even though in earlier times many children had learned to read in the home. By the 1930's there was an attitude of hands-off for the home. Parents were not supposed to even teach their children the time-honored A B C's.

Meanwhile school programs were expanded; new methods and procedures were instituted and a variety of materials introduced in an attempt to teach all children to read. Readiness programs were developed for those who were not ready for reading when they entered school.

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Eventually, however, educators became aware that the foundations of reading should be laid long before entrance to first grade. Thus in the 1960's attention was once more directed to the importance of the home in learning to read.

During the decade of the sixties, the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement, through its twenty-two national research centers scattered around the world, made studies of achievement. In writing, in May 1974, on the implications of these studies Benjamin S. Bloom stated:

> Learning in the schools is, now and for the foreseeable future, likely to be based on verbal instruction to groups using textbooks and other instructional materials which are largely verbal in nature . . . . The early development of verbal ability (vocabulary and reading comprehension) appears to be necessary if the child is to learn well — or even to survive — in school.
>
> Over the past decade studies in the United States, England, Israel, and other countries show that much verbal ability is developed in the home. In the IAE study of reading comprehension the three most important variables related to students' level of reading comprehension are reading resources in the home, socioeconomic status (father's occupation and parents' education), and parents' interest in the child's education and the encouragement they give the child to read.[1]

The Role of Parents

In light of these findings it becomes relevant to consider how parents can participate in reading improvement. One way is in using language with the young child. Reading is an aspect of communication through language. Children who will be successful in learning to read are those who have a good command of their language and who have been surrounded with language from their earliest years. While it may seem strange to many who are present today to so state, there actually are parents in our land who do not talk to their infants; they say that

they would feel foolish in so doing since the child cannot talk to them. The young child, however, can hear before he can talk and an environment rich in language is a great aid in learning to talk. Nancy Larrick, a native of your state, in her Parent's Guide to Children's Reading, describes what parents can do in surrounding the baby with language during that important first year.[2] I recommend the book to you.

Larrick also discusses a second thing that parents can do, namely read to the young child, even before the child has reached his first birthday.[3] Others have also noted the interest of young children in being read to and what they get from the experience. Foster, who read to her son John from the time he was three months old, found that characters in the various books John shared with her became his friends so that he was referring to them by the time he was three years old.[4] Through such experiences children also acquire beginning concepts of what reading is, as did my friend Lisa. Approaching an adult with two of her own cherished books, she handed one to the adult, saying "Let's read." Busily engrossed with the other book Lisa did not realize until some minutes later that the adult had closed the book after having read it through silently. Whereupon she took the book from the adult, opened it and returned it, admonishing the adult, "Talk to it." At thirty-three months Lisa was recognizing, albeit vaguely, some connection between reading and language.

Parents can also help by setting an example as readers. Each evening fifteen-month-old Lenny sees his parents, both professional people, sit down after dinner to read. Wanting to share with them

Lenny brings his book and little chair to sit at their feet. A different kind of experience, however, was that of Mark who was undertaking to make bookmarks as Christmas gifts for his favorite people. Cutting the heavy felt and fastening the pieces together with glue proved to be such a hard task for five-year-old fingers that only one bookmark was made. Then Mark had to decide which person was to be the recipient of it. He announced that it should be somebody who read and would be able to use the bookmark. He finally decided in favor of an aunt, saying that he knew she read because "she has lots of books." When his mother asked, "Why not give it to Daddy?" the reply was, "He doesn't read." The startled mother suddenly realized that Mark probably never did see Daddy reading, for his father, a college professor, maintained his personal library in his office at the college and what reading he did at home was done after the young son was in bed and asleep. Hence Mark concluded that Daddy did not read. Feelings toward reading may result from what is observed in the environment rather than from what people say about it.

A fourth contribution that parents may make is through answering questions. Small children notice print in many places — on signs along the streets and in stores, buses or streetcars, and even on the television screen — and they ask, "What does it say?" "What is that letter?" The parent who willingly responds to such questions, not once but many times over, is helping to foster interest in print, a contributing factor to success in reading.

Still another way in which parents can help is through making books available, either through purchase or through borrowing

them from a library. Frequently the latter option is chosen over the former, the excuse being the lack of funds for the purchase of books, even when there appears to be money for the purchase of another toy when requested or demanded by the child. Yet children gain so much joy from the ownership of books, as those who have bought books for children so well know. About a year ago, while in Russia as part of a seminar studying education in the Soviet schools, I had the opportunity of visiting the largest bookstore in Leningrad. Probably because Saturday afternoons are relatively free from work for most people, the bookstore was crowded in all departments, even in the one devoted to books for children. There I found adults (probably parents) who were purchasing children's books. There were also other parents who had brought their children with them. Still other purchasers were little groups of two or three children who had come alone. Everyone appeared to be happily engaged in selecting the right book for some child and then making the purchase.

How I wished that I could understand the Russian language for I might have been able to learn something of the basis on which books were being selected for purchase. I thought of another afternoon two years earlier when I had spent some time in the children's alcove in the University bookstore in Oslo, Norway. I had been busily examining books for some time, noting the different languages in which there were books for children, when I suddenly became aware of a young lad, probably no more than nine years of age. He took one book after another from the shelves until he found one that apparently pleased him, for then he started to read it and continued doing so until his mother returned

several minutes later. He indicated to her that he had found the book he wanted to buy. She apparently did not think it appropriate, but he begged for his choice. Finally she opened the book and indicated a page which she wanted him to read to her. When she was satisfied that he was recognizing all of the words she assented to the purchase. Apparently her only criteria for selecting a book was whether the words were correctly recognized. Parents often seem afraid to let children select books yet Larrick has noted that:

> When children are free to choose the books they are interested in, they show remarkable skill in finding what they can read.[5]

I wished that summer afternoon that there had been an opportunity to ask the child why he wanted that particular book for I believe that his reasons would have been different from those of his mother. I also believe that children's reasons for selection should be heeded if we wish them to become readers. This also holds true when books are being obtained from a library. Parents or other adults often try to unduely influence the selection of books to be borrowed. When one parent was highly enthusiastic about a certain book in an attempt to get her child to take that one, the child's response was, "Why don't you check it out on your card if you like it so much?"

The Role of the Community at Large

More recently has come awareness that the acquisition and maintenance of adequate reading skills is a three-pronged endeavor, that of the schools, the parents and the community-at-large. Just as parents may help in more than one way, so may the community. There are at least three major ways in which this can be done. The time-

honored way, even though somewhat indirect, is through support of the public schools. Such support, which has been customary in our country for many years, should be sufficient to provide special reading teachers if needed.

Funds should also be available in school budgets for school libraries, for children need to have an abundance of books. Children, as we well know, are different and have different interests in reading. One child may wish books about animals, while another is interested in biography and a third in cars. If there is something in which they are interested children read, otherwise they often do not. One child in Lehigh University's Centennial School for children told me one day, "Every lion and cat book I see I read." When asked how many, the reply was "About nine." On the other hand an eight-year-old girl in Sierra school, a little rural school in the district of Aibonito, high up in the mountains of Puerto Rico, spoke enthusiastically of the book she had just read about a cat, but she went on to tell me that she was not going to read anything more "because there are no more books about cats." Children also need books that they can read. Another child at Lehigh University's Centennial School referred to his teacher saying, "she helped me in finding things to read. I usually don't get many things to read." Larrick notes that:

> When each child reads on a comfortable level, about a subject dear to his heart, reading becomes a pleasure instead of a punishment. But this can only happen when there are many attractive books from which to choose.[6]

However, far too many children do not have the opportunity to choose among attractive books and thus may be discouraged from becoming readers. A second way, therefore, in which the community can cooperate

is in making books available to young readers. Different community groups can do this in a number of ways, as can be seen by examining some of the things that have been done in various communities. They may make special funds available for the purchase of more books for the school library than are provided by the school budget. This was done by a group for the Tiera Fria rural school in the district of Maricao in Puerto Rico.

Such funds may be raised in various ways. In the city of Bethlehem, where I live, the American Association of University Women each spring holds a book fair in which used books, collected from persons in the community who no longer need them, are sold at reduced prices. Besides making books available to some who might not otherwise be able to have the joy of owning books, the fair each year also results in proceeds of hundreds of dollars that are used for college scholarships for young girls of the community. In other communities funds raised by such a fair might be used for providing books for libraries for children in schools and/or other places in the community.

In some semi-rural areas of Pennsylvania that I have visited, where there are no local bookstores, local community groups sponsor a new book fair. At some suitable time in the fall of the year representatives of various book companies bring children's books to the school and set up an exhibit. At this time children may purchase books with money that they have saved for the purpose. Parents may also visit the exhibit and order books that they will use for Christmas gifts. Two things are accomplished by this endeavor: one, books become accessible to the community, both children and adults, and

secondly, there may be a small commission for the local organizers of the fair which can be used for books for the school library.

Some communities, lacking funds to purchase many books, find other ways to make books available to children. Last spring, while on sabbatical leave, I visited children's libraries in several South American countries. In a school in Córdoba, Argentina I found classroom libraries consisting of books that belonged to the children. At the beginning of the year a parent of each child selected one or two books from those at home to send to the school. All children in the class were able to read the books at school during the week and borrow one book to take home to read over the weekend. Thus the children had an opportunity to read far more than the one or two books they had contributed to the classroom library. At mid-year all books were returned to the home from which they had been brought and other books were brought for the second half of the year.

Another interesting way of meeting the need for books is that which was used in starting El Banco del Libro, that is, the Book Bank, in Caracas, Venezuela. In 1960 Sra. Virginia de Betancourt, who had studied in Boston and had graduated from the University of Puerto Rico, returned to her country and voluntarily undertook to bring together a group of women who set about collecting books from the community. Using these books as a nucleus they initiated a system whereby a child could bring a book he owned and exchange it for one of those they had collected. When the child finished reading the book he had received he might exchange it for still another one. This program of book exchange is probably that for which El Banco del Libro is best

known, although it is now a foundation supporting a number of other activities, one of these being the establishment of a children's library in the Aristides Rojas Park in Caracas. Another activity of the Foundation is that of an extensive system of book mobiles that take books to schools and other centers throughout the city of Caracas.

A somewhat similar project was undertaken a few years ago in the Bronx in New York at P. S. 150[7]. At first some staff members had been passing on to the pupils of that school some of their own children's books. As the faculty gradually recognized the eager way in which the children received the books the idea for the project was born. For some of these disadvantaged children it was the very first book to be called "my own." The idea conceived was to give some of the old books from the school library to pupils who asked for them in writing, which in turn encouraged functional writing. Once a week about a dozen books were "advertised" over the public address system of the school. These books were to be distributed to the writers of the best letters of request. The response was great and so much interest was aroused in the project that many community friends as well as publishers began to donate books for distribution. Thousands of letters were written and more than five hundred books were distributed during the year. My only concern is that some children who wrote letters may not have received books even though they requested them. The project did demonstrate that children do appreciate the opportunity to have books of their own.

Bookstores may also help in fostering interest in reading. Although many stores simply have some tables where children's books

are displayed there are other stores where an entire section is set aside for children's books, with children being made to feel welcome if they care to come in to browse. I have found some such stores in other countries. One is the big Campos bookstore in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico where an entire floor is devoted to children's books in both Spanish and English. At the Palacio del Libro (Book Palace) in Montevideo, Uruguay a large room connecting with the main room is devoted to children's books. Especially interesting is the bookstore of Sr. Salomón Literat in the city of Corrientes in Argentina where books are arranged on low bookshelves which children can easily reach. They can sit on the carpeted floor as long as they wish, reading books they take from the shelves[8].

Other kinds of stores or places of business can help in getting books and readers together. In the large department store of Harrods on Calle Florida in the heart of the shopping district of Buenos Aires there is a lending library which was founded nearly a half century ago under the name "Lending Library" with a predominance of English and French books over those in Spanish since the services were more used by those residents who had come from European countries and were accustomed to using libraries. Through the intervening years the Spanish-speaking clients have increased and the services of the library have expanded. The library, which today is known as the "Biblioteca Circulante" and which contains some 150,000 volumes divided into three groups according to the language used, is designed to serve the general public, not only of the city of Buenos Aires, but also of the interior of the country. For the latter group books

are sent in packages by mail and returned the same way. By paying an initial membership fee of one dollar (U.S.) and a monthly quota of less than three dollars one can borrow three books at a time and keep them for fifteen days. If one were capable of reading three books a day one could have 60 books a month for less than it would cost to buy one paperback novel. The library has a large collection of children's books in Spanish and English. For the children of members the monthly fee is only half of the regular fee although other children pay the same as adult members[9].

In this case it is a large department store in South America that initiated and sustains facilities for obtaining something to read. In North America other types of business have undertaken to get books and readers together. Some bowling alleys in the United States now have collections of books which children can read while waiting for their parents who are bowling. My doctor provides a number of children's books and magazines in his waiting room for his young patients. According to a recent newspaper article a supermarket in Alaska, known as the Christian Supermarket, provides a story-hour for children while mothers shop in the store.

It would seem that a shopping mall, of which we have so many today, might also make a contribution. In one of the malls near my home a variety of activities take place along the central walking area. Youth groups at times hold bake sales to raise funds for some project. Puppet shows are given on other occasions. On a recent weekend there were exhibitions of many different types of hand crafts and other hobbies practiced in the area. Some demonstrations were

being given of how the craft was done. Another weekend there were many booths displaying a variety of antiques. One thing that I have not seen but believe could be helpful would be exhibitions of books. There might be a display of old books showing the differences between those of today and earlier years. These could be books for adults and/or for children. There might also be exhibits of children's books from other countries. Such exhibits would be indicating that books are important to people just as are antiques, handcrafts and other hobbies.

Communities that have a real commitment to the improvement of reading can also help by seeing that arrangements are made whereby children and youth needing such facilities have access to private, specialized libraries which organizations such as churches and synagogues maintain. Recently the son of a colleague was able to get information for a school report on Christianity, Islam and Judaism because he had access to the library of the local synagogue.

In addition to supporting schools and making books available to children and youth through some of the ways just mentioned, the community can also help in a third important way, that is, by reading with children. Many children have no one at home who will listen to them read and talk with them about what they read, yet children like to have such opportunities. If these children are to have such opportunities, it will have to be done through the school. In some schools volunteers from the community are meeting this need, particularly for children who are slow in developing skills in reading. Sometimes the volunteers are mothers who are not employed outside of the home and are able to arrange to come to the school at suitable

hours each week. Other volunteers are retired persons who likewise can meet the school schedule, but in a few cases of which I know employed persons are also serving as volunteers. One large company in our area, the Pennsylvania Power and Light Company, allows its employees released time each week to go into the schools to work with children on a one-to-one basis. In some cases the work is in reading.

Usually a volunteer is assigned one child for the school year and often a close relationship develops between the child and his volunteer. One of my friends, a professor in another university, tells of a child, who on learning at the end of the year that he had been promoted, hastened to ask his volunteer whether she, too, had been promoted! The child did not wish to break the relationship, so wanted to be sure that both of them would go on to the next grade the following year. One of our doctoral students at Lehigh University, Mr. Robert Barth, is principal of a large elementary school which has made considerable use of volunteers. He has been collecting evidence on what the relationship with the volunteer tutor means to a child. To him I am indebted for the following statements third-grade children have made in response to the questions:

"Tell me one thing the volunteer did which you think helped you read better."

> She helped me with the words. When I got the word wrong she wrote it down on a piece of paper so I could study it and then I knew the word. Then I could use it in a story and I wouldn't miss the word."
>
> She helped me stop from bouncing when I read. Like when I read the period means stop, the comma means pause.

"Tell me the one thing you liked most about working with your volunteer."

Working with my word bank.

I liked to go over the story best when she read it to me. Then I can make a book and she would help me draw the illustrations and we would check my vocabulary words.

"Would you like to work with a volunteer again? Why?

Yes, because now in third grade I can learn more words than I did because I still don't know many words and I can't pronounce them and she could help me with that.

No, I think she did such a good job with me I can do it by myself.

No, because I had a volunteer in first grade and in second grade and now in third I want to see what I can do by myself with my teacher.

Conclusion

In concluding his keynote address at the annual reading conference at Lehigh University in 1966, the well-known writer, Louis Untermeyer, used the following quotation from an address given by Sir John Hershell in 1830 at the opening of a library at Eton, England:

> Give a man a taste for reading and the means of gratifying it, and you cannot fail to make him a happy, as well as a better man. You place him in contact with the best society and the best minds in every period of history, with the wisest and the wittiest, the tenderest and the bravest, those who have really adorned humanity. You make him a citizen of all nations and a contemporary of all ages.[10]

The late James E. Allen, a former U. S. Commissioner of Education, was one of many who would like all people to be able to enjoy the benefits of reading of which Hershell spoke. He believed that the Right to Read is as fundamental as the Right to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. Speaking before the annual convention of the National Association of State Boards of Education in Los Angeles in September, 1969, Allen proclaimed his crusade to assure

that

> No one shall be leaving our schools without the skill and the desire to read to the full limits of his capability.

Allen referred to this as "education's 'Moon' — the target of the decade ahead."

We are now well along in that decade. If the target is to be reached it is imperative that reading improvement become a cooperative community commitment, one in which the school, the home, and the community-at-large join forces. It is not enough that one of these is doing a good job if the other two are not supporting the endeavor. In an article that appeared in the AAUW Journal three years ago, Harris described the alienation of her son from school. While his parents had helped him develop a keen interest in reading and the necessary skills to follow that interest, an uninspired school program finally made him a "sixth-grade dropout."[11]

On the other hand, the school personnel may be capable of doing a superior job in teaching reading and wish to do so, but may not have the materials or the time to do that kind of a job. In such cases the help of the community-at-large is needed. If children see parental and community efforts to support athletics or other such activities they come to value them. Likewise they must see value being placed upon reading. It is not enough to provide funds for the schools alone. The community must get actively committed to and involved in efforts for reading improvement. Only then may we hope to realize Allen's goal, that is, that

> No one shall be leaving our schools without the skill and the desire to read to the full limits of his capability.

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