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ABSTRACT

A resource guide to help parents foster young children's interest and skill in reading, this paper offers parents of preschool and elementary school students 31 ways to help children read. Suggestions range from talking to children in infancy to having books and magazines available in the home to setting aside a family reading period each day. A rationale and explanation for each suggestion is provided. (AEA)

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THIRTY-ONE WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN BECOME GOOD READERS

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THIRTY-ONE WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN BECOME GOOD READERS

The greatest concern most parents seem to have for their children—other than physical needs—is that the children's education enables them to enjoy a better life than the parents were able to have. Most people believe that future success is linked to educational success. In order to insure this educational success, parents want their children to be good readers. To a majority of parents, being a good reader means two things: First, that the child is able to figure out what those "squiggles" on the page mean, and second, that the child does actually want to read for enjoyment and information. In fact, most people agree that the first aspect of reading—the skill—is useless if the second aspect—the desire—is lacking.

Reading is a complex process, but since almost everyone has at some time either learned to read or at least has been subjected to reading instruction, almost everyone has an opinion of the "right" way to ensure success in reading. For those parents whose children are reading and enjoying it, this confusion of information about reading instruction is rarely a problem. But the parents of non-readers, or of pre-readers often feel confused as they attempt to help their children learn to read.

There is no "best" way to teach reading. It is impossible to melt down all we know about reading into one basic "truth." There simply is no one way to teach reading to all children. People are individuals with strengths and weaknesses. We don't expect all second grade children to wear the same size shoe, to have lost the same number of teeth, or to have had all the same experiences. Neither should we expect them all to read at a particular grade level. Grade level is simply the level of reading difficulty that the average child in that grade is able to read. Most newspapers and magazines are written

in the fifth to seventh grade range.

Obviously, the concept of grade level is too complex to be covered as simply as it has been here, but the point to be made is that while everyone expects children to develop physically according to general standards, as long as a child is within a certain range, no one becomes unduly alarmed. For example, a child's doctor says, "Susie weighs fifty pounds. This is normal for her age, although she is in the 35th percentile which puts her on the low side of children her age." This we accept. However, as soon as the measurement is based on intellectual or learning criteria, we become concerned if Susie is not "the same" as all others in her class. Variations in the learning process are as normal as they are in the physical process. While we wouldn't "stuff" Susie full of food in an attempt to get her up to the 50th percentile on the weight chart, we might be more careful with her diet to ensure a balance of healthful foods. In the same way, one wouldn't "stuff" Susie full of reading instruction to get her up to the 50th percentile in reading, but would instead continue a careful program of reading instruction. While this instruction might take place primarily in the school, Susie's parents should be aware that just as her weight is related to their size, so too, her reading success is related to some things under their control.

Providing the proper reading setting for their children is probably the most important contribution parents can make to their children's reading success. An environment that will help children become readers includes such things as talking and listening to children, arranging experiences about which they can talk and read, and surrounding them with positive book experiences. Following is a list of things that can be done by any parents, anywhere, regardless of their own educational background, occupation, financial situation, etc. Keep in mind, though, that this list is not meant to be a total one—it's just a beginning.

Talking and Listening to Your Children

Talking and listening are language skills. So is reading. The more experience your children have with spoken language, the more easily they will be able to handle written language.

1. Talk to your children from the time they are born. You don't have to carry on deeply intellectual conversations. For new-born and younger children, simply talking about what you are doing (tying shoes, cooking dinner, etc.) the weather (the sun is shining, look at the snow, etc.), or singing nursery rhymes or nonsense songs is enough. As the children grow older, the level of conversation will automatically become more complex.
2. Use real language, not baby talk! Children need models of acceptable language, not language which may interfere with their learning.
3. As your children begin to respond to your talking, they will also begin to talk to you. Be a good listener—one who makes listening the most important item of the moment. Stop other activity and show children that what they have to say is valuable.
4. Allow some time in the day for conversation with each of your children. This is especially important in larger families and as children grow older and increase the amount of time spent away from the family.

Providing Experiences for Children

It is very important that children have a background of experiences. Without these, they will find it hard to relate to what they read. The more experiences children have, the more likely that what they read will make sense to them. The more experiences they have, the more likely they will become curious or interested in finding out more through reading.

One way of providing experiences is to take your children on trips. These

don't have to be major or expensive excursions. Places that to you may seem quite common, but are exciting places to your children, will give them a variety of experiences to enjoy and about which to talk.

5. Go to a park. Talk about nature, our environment, other parks or things one finds at a park.
6. Visit an airport. Talk about planes, people at airports or places planes go.
7. Take your children on a shopping expedition. This experience can be varied according to the type of store visited. (Grocery stores offer a great variety of experiences.)
8. A walk around the block can turn up many interesting conversational topics.
9. Visit a friend—yours or one of your child's. This allows your children to see how others are alike and different—an important concept in reading.
10. Museums and art galleries contain many items to stimulate a child's imagination.
11. Farm animals are particularly interesting to the very young child.
12. Fire stations, police stations, hospitals and other places where people work add a sense of balance to a child's concept of the world.
13. Bus, train, ferry, boat or even car trips can be exciting experiences for children, as well as ones that can keep them talking for a long time afterwards.
14. Let your imagination guide you on where to take your children. Just remember, they will be excited about many places and things that seem quite ordinary and everyday to you.

Playing games with children is another way of providing experiences for them. These games, like trips, need not be elaborate. The simpler the game, the more likely the child is to enjoy it. There are many games about words

which can be played anywhere and which can be played with or without physical materials.

15. Rhyming games in which you ask your children to find words which sound like ones you have given can be fun and educational. For example: You give "sing." Your children supply one or more of the following: Ring, fling, sling, ding, king, wing: You give "bat." Your children suggest cat, fat, pat, rat, sat, mat, hat.

16. Games in which your children have to find a word with the same sound as one you have given are also beneficial to them. For example: You suggest "mat." What words have the sound that mat begins with? Your children suggest moon, monkey, milk, mask, etc. This game can be made more complex as the child gets older. "I'm thinking of a word that begins like mat and ends like turkey." (me, money, many, monkey, etc.)

17. Let children cut pictures from old magazines. They can classify pictures, (put all kitchen things in a pile, all bedroom things in another, etc.; put all green things in a pile, all red things in another, etc.; put all big things in a pile, etc.), or find pictures that start with the same sound (cat, coat, cake, cap, etc.) or tell you stories about their pictures. (If you write down their stories, they can often read them to you.)

18. Make word cards with pictures from magazines. Paste a picture to one side of an index card. Print the name of the item on the other side. See how many (or how quickly) words can be learned by your children. Make up games (matching, war, authors, etc.) with these cards.

19. Commercial games (puzzles, scrabble, other word games) can also be used to provide experiences for your children.

Television, radio and movies can be other good experiences for your children. Unfortunately, they can also be pretty bad experiences. Choose

programs for children very carefully, being sure to select for educational values as well as entertainment.

20. Watch TV programs with your children, then talk about the program with them.
21. Plan some of your trips around television program topics.
22. Help your children write letters to some of their favorite characters or actors from television, radio or movies.

Providing Positive Book Experiences

Perhaps the most important part of the reading environment for parents is that of providing positive experiences with books. While the importance of the previous points is certainly not to be underestimated, this particular area is thought to be the most crucial in many ways.

23. Be a good model—let your children see you reading. If they don't see you reading, nothing you can say will convince them that reading is important (or fun).
24. Read to your children. This again is good modeling. They learn what good reading sounds like. They learn to appreciate books. Most important, they will be more likely to read themselves when you make it a practice to read to them regularly.
25. Listen to your child read 5 minutes each day. (Whisper beginning sounds that are new or difficult.)
26. Encourage children to practice reading to themselves before reading to you. They will read better, and thus will feel better about their reading. Praise their efforts.
27. Have many books, magazines and other reading materials in the home. This, too, will show your child that you value reading.

28. Take your children to the public library. Children love to choose their own books. Stay for story hour, too.

29. Give your children books as gifts—birthday, Christmas, anytime. Ask a children's librarian for help in selecting really good ones.

30. Set up an "everyone in our house reads for 15 minutes each day" time in your house. This stresses the importance of reading.

31. Enroll your children in a book club. They'll look forward to the arrival of each new book. Again, this shows that you think books and reading are important.

These ideas are not meant to cover all the many ways in which you can help your children in their reading. Neither are they meant to be new, never-heard-of ideas. They are simply meant to be a sampling of what is available to parents who are interested in helping their children become successful readers. Most of the ideas can be found in various pamphlets distributed by a variety of reading-related organizations throughout the country. If one does use most of the thirty-one ideas listed here with children, however, the positive impact on the child's reading should be quite easy to see. In fact, if only these thirty-one ideas were used with children, adapting them as the children grew older, the number of non-readers would fall drastically. The truth of the matter is, without your involvement in ways such as these, no school system can be completely effective at teaching your child to read or to enjoy reading. In the long run it's up to you.