
A Parent's Role in Teaching a young child to read.

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The most important concept the mother should be familiar with, in wanting to teach her child to read is the child's "readiness to read". Some people interpret this to mean the chronological age at which the child can be taught reading. Many countries have accepted 5 years as the age where children can be formally taught reading. The wider concept of "*readness to read*", however involves that stage of intellectual maturity marked by the child's ability to communicate orally, his attitude towards learning, his experiences and his use of vocabulary. The child's command of the spoken language is a very important basis on which to teach reading because only then will the sounds that he produces in the process of reading be meaningful to him.

Readiness for reading therefore has to be cultivated in the home even if the parents decide not to bother teaching the child, but to leave all the reading lessons to the school teacher.

The parents have an important role to cultivate the child's readiness for reading. The process should start right from the baby's cradle days. A three or four month old baby could at least be acquainted with the idea that everything has a name. Instead of baby talking to him, the mother could play with the baby, touching his eye, nose, mouth etc., saying the name for each part and end up wriggling his toes. The baby loves such games. The intelligent one would be cackling with laughter just before the mother wriggles his toes.

Teachers have activities which prepare the child ready for reading as pre-reading activities. Such activities include talking to the child, exposing him to many interesting experiences such as, going to the zoo and encouraging him to talk about his experiences. While the child talks the parent must see that he uses the proper vocabulary and supply him with new words that he doesn't know. Many situations can be utilised to encourage the child to talk. Showing him a picture for him to describe is most common; when mother is busy in the kitchen, asking him to describe the activities going on there; when the child is persistently inquisitive asking, "what is this?", the mother can ask him, "well, what do you think it is?, what do you think it looks like?" and get the child to talk.

A useful checklist for parents to help their children get ready to read would be this.

- (1) Do I have the habit of buying books for my child?
- (2) Do I read aloud to him at least 15 minutes a day?
- (3) Do I sing and recite songs and rhymes to him?
- (4) Do I often ask him to describe something he has seen or done. (For the working mothers the best way to greet the child when she comes home from work is "Tell me what you did today"?).
- (5) Do I take my child for excursions and trips?

Such activities not only enrich the child's life but is necessary as a preparation for his reading skill.

The actual process of reading involves quite a set of skills. Assuming that the child is physically normal, there are basically, two methods of teaching the child to read. The first is to teach the child to recognise individual words by sight, through constant drills and practice on the particular spellings. The second method is teaching the child to recognise a word through phonetic analysis. This second method has been said to be more beneficial to Malaysian children who eventually have to learn the National language which has a phonetically written language.

It has been found that children who have been taught to read English through the phonetic method find reading "Bahasa" no problem whilst those taught the traditional word-recognition method get confused when they start reading, "Bahasa" and consequently lag behind in their reading performance.

By far, the most successful approach is a combination of methods. The child begins with the traditional word recognition method, recognising by sight, some common basic words in English. The University of Wisconsin has drawn up lists of words used in order of frequency. Among the first hundred words most frequently used are all forms of the verbs "to be", The articles and the pronouns. The idea is that once the child has mastered some basic words, he then has a background of words from which to compare pronunciation with when he is later taught the phonetical elements of words. The Ladybird series is based on this approach.

The skills involved in breaking down a word into phonetic elements can be separated into the following steps in order of sequence.

(1) The child must first be able to distinguish sounds and visual shapes. A one and a half year old child can be taught to recognise alphabets through the very simple process of play. I have tried it out on my 1½ years old son by buying him a few sets of plastic alphabets. For each lesson, I laid out before him several copies of 2 or 3 alphabets. To teach him alphabet 'A', I showed him 'A' and then asked him to find another 'A'. With encouraging comments the child responds happily to this game and learns his alphabets easily.

(2) The second step to get the child to see how the consonant and vowel sounds he has learnt can be made up to form words. This is a very abstract concept and may take a long time for the child to understand. My son took a month to get the idea. Ladybird again supply materials to help teach the child this concept. They have many pictures in a page and the child is asked to identify which pictures has a name beginning with "b" or "g". A common game is playing, "I Spy". Mother would say "I spy with my little eye something beginning with "S" (or other letters) What is it?" Of course it must be something physical that both Mother and child can see. The child can have his turn asking mother.

(3) The third step involves consonant substitution. It is easier to start with substituting initial consonants. The child is given a known word such as at, and learns to substitute other consonants or producing words such as bat, cat, sat, mat and so on. Final consonant substitution is done in a similar way.

(4) The fourth step tackles with consonant blends. These are sounds such as "th", "uh", "sl" and "st". It is important that these be recognised as belonging to a special category or else the parent and child will be frustrated in trying to tackle them as combination to single consonants. As for the rest of the reading problem vowels are easily learnt as they have been met with at the consonant substitution stage. The pronunciation of the soft "c" and "s" as in "city" and "gentle" will have to be handled as and when they come in. The importance of phonetics in teaching, reading, has been recognised to be so beneficial that in England, primary schools have devised a new system of teaching, incorporating new

alphabets; the system being called the Initial Teaching Alphabet System or ITA system. This system can be adopted only if many books are available locally which are printed in the ITA language. In Malaysia we do not have such material.

At any rate, I believe the international phonetic system serves Malaysian children well.

I realise many mothers today work outside the home. Such mothers, thus having less time with their children should all the more so, organise the nature of the playtime with their children. A minimum of an hour a day of consciously structured teaching is ample. I find the best time is just before the child goes to bed. This contact with the child is good also for other emotional reasons – the child feels loved and cared for and you will be surprised how much more reasonable he becomes.

I would like to end by reminding you of what every parent should know. The parent is a model for the child. If the parent speaks carefully, the child may also speak correctly. If the parent takes an interest in reading, the child develops the interest without coaxing. In providing an atmosphere for the child to want to read is achieving a big step towards teaching the child to read, for such an atmosphere would expose the child to books, discussion, the way written language works and the rewards that go with reading.

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