

Creating Readers

|| *Researchers have shown that an infant's hearing begins in the fifth month of prenatal life and is fully developed by the time an infant is three months old. Reading to children should begin the fifth month of prenatal life and continue until children are able to read to you. Children who have parents and caregivers who read to them develop strong neural connections that lay the pathway for later learning.* **||**

— Dr. Pamela Schiller, *Start Smart: Building Brain Power in the Early Years* (Gryphon House, 1999)

Beginnings Workshop

Over the years, talking with teachers and parents about reading, I have often shared one of our family secrets — we never had a “lights out” rule for children or adults! People respond with looks of disbelief and questions pour forth. “How is bedtime managed? Do children ever want to go to bed?” The answer is yes, they do want to go to bed.

Establishing a bedtime based on the age and development of the child was the first part of our rule. The second part was that you could read until you were ready to turn off the lamp on the bedside table. (Many adults are not aware that children need a reading lamp on a table next to their bed!) Once you were in bed with your books, you never had to get out again. With this rule, reading is the only activity — no telephone, no television. Interestingly enough, even young children are capable of assuming this responsibility, and it makes them feel wonderfully good about themselves. The books we read the night before are often part of early morning conversations, and children want to show special pictures or share part of the story that meant something special to them. Books and reading take on a whole new importance with the bedtime reading adventure. The same rules can apply to

nap/ rest time. This is especially good when very young children are in transition and no longer need long naps. Being able to read on the cot or bed at nap time allows the child to slow up a bit and give her body the rest she needs and perhaps even a few minutes of sleep.

Most young children have figured out that when adults are doing something, that *thing* is usually important. When they see their parents and teachers in an activity, such as reading, it takes on a new importance to them. When adults surround themselves with things such as books and other reading material, those things also become important to children. Helping young children get hooked on books should be the goal of every parent and teacher.

I believe if we read to children every day from the time they are born, surround them with good books at home, in the car, and in their child care settings, and set an example with our personal reading habits, most children will be reading, *without instruction*, before they are five. If televisions are removed from family rooms (put in closets or behind doors, only to be brought out for special programs), the natural reading age will be earlier than five for many children.

An evaluation of our surroundings to see how reader friendly they are for children should be an ongoing procedure. Some ways we can encourage children to appreciate books and reading are listed below.

by Leah Curry-Rood

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■ **Read stories aloud every day, any time, and any place.** Make reading an intimate experience at both the beginning and ending of each day. Read as often as time allows, remembering that you can never read too much. Reading must be an everyday experience if you are seriously committed to helping children develop a love for books and reading.

■ **Travel with books.** We are a very mobile society and often make several trips away from home or school

each day. Delays and standing in line are boring for children and adults and waste much time. Keeping a box of books in the car (which are changed frequently) and suggesting to children that they bring a book for the outing will give some extra reading time. Reading is contagious. When adults see other adults reading in public places such as a long line at the store, a doctor's office waiting room, a restaurant, and dozens of other places, they silently say, "Wow, what a good idea, maybe I should try that with my children." This is the way we will build a nation of happy reading children, and the side benefit will be that there will no longer be a need to worry about test scores.

■ **Set up a library learning center.** The library center should be a place that invites children to come in: a place they choose to go to read. Display books face out so children can see the covers and select ones that appeal to them. Make available other reading materials, such as children's magazines and colorful pictures. Wordless books are also an important ingredient in the child's library. Even very young children just learning to talk can become wonderful storytellers when given stimulating pictures and wordless books. Comfortable furniture and soft floor pillows will encourage children to rest a while and read. At home, children need a special bookshelf or plastic crate that will hold their personal books and other reading materials. Their personal books should be easy for them to reach without help.

■ **Establish regular visits to the local library.** Take children for regularly scheduled visits to the library. Each child should have a library card. This is a very important step and one that often changes a child's self-perception, from that of a non-reader to that of a reader. The only limit on the number of books checked out should be the library's rule. Children should be encouraged to take as many books as they want. It would be difficult to over indulge a child with too many books. I think we should be concerned with the opposite, not enough books. Getting hooked on books needs to happen in the early years.

■ **Encourage children to share favorite books.** Find ways to help children share their favorite books with friends and classmates at school. This provides an opportunity for the child to identify closely with a book and will help children and adults to see the child as a potential reader. This positive image helps both the child who is sharing the book and other children who might be reluctant to spend much time with books to think again about the possibility of giving books another chance.

■ **Turn off computers, VCRs, and televisions.** Watch-

ing television and playing computer games can easily become an addiction. Young children need to be actively involved with manipulatives, games, friends, conversation, exploration activities, and problem-solving experiences. The passive nature of time with electronic machines violates everything we know about how young children learn and grow. Television encourages a short attention span and provides no opportunity for children to ask questions, one of the ways they learn. Eight years old is soon enough for most children to be involved with television. Don't let the common practice of others contradict what you know is the right thing to do. The grumbles and mumbles will end in a few days, especially if the television is replaced with books, games, and other fun activities. Be the first to take a stand. Conversation takes on a whole new dimension without the sounds of televisions, VCRs, and computer games in the background!

■ **Be an adult model.** Having a period of time for personal reading in the presence of children allows them to note an important event in the life of an adult who is important to them. This can be letters, daily schedules, magazines, product labels, directions, etc. Modeling becomes an even more meaningful experience for children if you answer their questions about what you are reading, or share with them what was learned from your reading.

■ **Take time for conversations.** Take time each day to have a special conversation with each child. Engage children in conversation about things they want to talk about or things you know they are interested in. Know the literature available in the classroom to the point that you are able to direct them to a book that will enhance their current interest. Parents can use information gleaned from daily conversations to make special gift selections or to assist on the next visit to the library. Networking between children and books and language is the real job of teachers and parents.

Reading Aloud to Young Children

It is always preferable to read to one or two children who have selected a book from the shelf that is special for them, at that moment. However, in reality, that is not always practical or possible and we find ourselves reading to a group. Reading to groups of children involves some careful planning and preparation. There are a few important things to remember when reading is a group activity.

■ **Be selective.** Choose stories to read aloud that you like. There are too many wonderful stories from which

to choose to read something that you don't enjoy. The effectiveness of the way you read the story will be in some measure related to your own enjoyment of the story.

- **Practice reading the story.** Practice reading the story, making additions and deletions to the text, turning the pages at the appropriate time, holding the book in such a way that you can still have eye contact with the children. When you are familiar with the story and are comfortable with your presentation, read the story in front of a mirror. This will give you an even better perspective on your overall presentation.
- **Express your feelings.** All good stories have emotional content: happy, sad, joyous, disappointment, fear, courage, desire. Reveal the feelings the author has planned through your reading or telling the story. Use lots of expression, and change your tone of voice to suit the story. Your feelings should come through loud and clear.
- **Pace your reading.** Most of us read too fast when we read aloud. Be aware of that and slow down your overall pace. After that adjustment, begin to notice parts of the story that need to be read even slower, and parts that may need to be faster. Children need time to paint their own mental pictures from the words you are reading. Adjust your pace to fit the story, and bring the listeners to the edge of their chairs or to their feet at the appropriate time.
- **Make illustrations or pictures easily visible.** Hold the book in such a way that all the children can see the illustrations as you read the story.
- **Make the story fit.** Elaborate, eliminate, or otherwise change your reading or telling of a story if it improves the story for the children.
- **Plan the story time with children.** It is important to finish a story unless you plan with the children to read only a portion at a particular time. If this is necessary, the plan should also include an announcement of the time the story will be finished. When you interrupt a story abruptly with no explanation, you signal to the children that this is not very important, and it is also disrespectful to them.

Important Things to Look for When Selecting Books

Just as we check the environment to be certain it is reader friendly for children, we need to check our

libraries at home and at the center to be sure our collections contain only the highest quality literature for children. The characteristics below are considered basic to any children's book collection. It is important to identify the characteristics you expect books in your collection to have and be sure that all staff and parents work cooperatively to make these types of books available to children.

- The story must be enjoyable to young children and capture their attention in the first couple of pages.
- The text and illustrations must work together on the same page. Both the text and the illustrations must be free from any stereotype or prejudice about any person or group of people.
- The story should stimulate the child's imagination.
- A sense of self-worth should be encouraged in the story.
- A wide range of family lifestyles and cultures should be included in the book selections for all children.
- Stories with minimal text are preferable for young children. Stories with repetitive phrases, rhyming words, and crisp dialogue are often favorites.
- Illustrations should be of highest quality, with good color, crisp line drawings, and superior photographs.
- A variety of artistic styles should be evidenced in a quality picture book collection.
- Stories should encourage independence and celebrate competency in children. They should affirm the value of each child.

Short List of Favorite Picture Books

Owl Babies, Martin Waddell, Illustrator Patrick Benson

All Kinds of Families, Norma Simon, Illustrator Joe Lasker

Going Home, Eve Bunting, Illustrator David Diaz

Goodnight Moon, Margaret Wise Brown, Illustrator Clement Hurd

Honey I Love, Eloise Greenfield, Illustrator Jan Spivey Gilchrist

Pretend You're a Cat, Jean Marzollo, Illustrator Jerry Pinkney

Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?, Bill Martin Jr., Illustrator Eric Carle

You Be Good and I'll Be Night, Eve Merriam

We're Going on a Bear Hunt, Michael Rosen, Illustrator Helen Oxenbury

My Very First Mother Goose, Iona Opie (Editor), Illustrator Rosemary Wells

The Carrot Seed, Ruth Krauss, Illustrator Crockett Johnson

Dancing with the Indians, Angela Shelf Medearis, Illustrator Samuel Byrd

Mrs. Katz and Tush, Patricia Polacco

Tacky the Penguin, Helen Lester, Illustrator Lynn Munsinger

The Keeping Quilt, Patricia Polacco

All Kinds of Children, Norma Simon, Illustrator Diane Paterson

Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree, William Miller, Illustrators Cornelius van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu

If You Give a Mouse a Cookie, Laura Joffe Numeroff, Illustrator Felicia Bond

Knots on a Counting Rope, Bill Martin Jr., Ted Rand

All the Colors of the Earth, Shelia Hamanaka

Amazing Grace, Mary Hoffman, Illustrator Caroline Binch

My Fried Bear, Jez Alborough

Turtle Bay, Saviour Pirotta, Illustrator Nilesh Mistry

Miss Tizzy, Libba Moore Gray, Illustrator Jada Rowland

If, Sarah Perry

Additional Resources

Start Smart: Building Brain Power in the Early Years, Pam Schiller

Failure to Connect: Why Computers Affect Our Children's Minds and What We Can Do

About It, Jane M. Healy

The Plug-In Drug: Television, Children and the Family, Marie Winn

The Complete Learning Center Book, Rebecca Isbell

Story S-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-r-s: Activities to Expand Children's Favorite Books, Shirley Raines

The Read-Aloud Handbook, Jim Trelease