

Literacy: It's More than Reading

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There is nothing that seems to strike more fear into the hearts of parents and families these days than the possibility that their child may struggle at reading. This fear is driving too many parents to fall prey in placing their trust in unproven methods that promise to enhance and build skills in their young children. Impressive seals of approval may back such products. However, a seal of approval is not the same as hard scientific evidence backed by studies relevant to young children and their development. Even grown ups are victims of peer pressure and marketing schemes. For generations children have learned to read and write on the laps of their parents and caregivers and by hearing and using language without pressure or using trendy toys with exaggerated promises. For our purpose, literacy is the ability to communicate through the written and spoken word in a meaningful way. Literacy is not just reading or just writing. It is a combination of both. Several reading specialists in documented works refer to *critical literacy*, the ability to read and write as a critical thinker, to be the most important and most desirable form of literacy achievement. Critical literacy involves asking thoughtful questions about what one reads and writes, and understanding and using information resources wisely. Even with formal education not everyone rises to this level of literacy development.

The first symbol system a child learns to recognize and use is her or his own language. Early literacy skills develop by first, hearing others speak, experimenting with sounds (babbling), and finally saying real words. Every language has its own intricate rhythm and beat. It is vital that children be sung to, spoken to, and played with using word games and finger plays. Childhood rhymes like Pat-a-Cake, This Little Piggy, are essential for a child to develop speech patterns. I am concerned at how seldom I see parents using rhymes and finger plays with their children. Babies watch and imitate sounds and facial expressions as they learn to talk. From the work of Barry Sanders, *A is for OX: The Collapse of Literacy and the Rise of Violence in an Electronic Age*, Sanders describes language as a discourse between persons and features language and the art of oral discourse as a prerequisite to literacy. Says Sanders, "Orality supports literacy, and provides the impetus for shaping it. The skills one learns in orality are crucial because literacy is more than a series of words on paper. It is a set of relationships and structures, ...A person's success in orality determines whether he or she will 'take' to literacy....The human voice...sounds the way to literacy." In other words children need to talk and have real conversations with real people.

The single most important activity parents can do with their child, outside of talking, is read to them. Reading aloud to children helps build understanding that there are other symbols that can be used to communicate ideas. These patterns or marks are later understood as letters that carry special meaning along with pictures in a book. I have never met a young child that was not intrigued with books and that did not enjoy being read to. Why some of these same children grow later to hate reading is anyone's guess. My belief is that somewhere the joy of reading was somehow taken from them by introducing formal lessons to soon and with too much rigor.

Developing the **disposition** to read is more important than learning to read. Without the disposition there is no motivation to do or try anything new. Read to your child often. Go to the library. GET A LIBRARY CARD AND USE IT. Let your child make independent choices of books. Expensive book clubs are unnecessary. Used books are just as wonderful as new ones.

Let your child see you reading and writing. They need to see reading and writing in action by those around them that they love and trust. If you are a reader and you are using writing for a purpose your child will most likely be a reader and a writer. When we model and demonstrate our children learn.

Children's play builds a large 'brain' bank of words. Children with a large bank have had rich language experiences that the brain can attach words to. David Elkind in his newest book, *"The Power of Play: How Spontaneous, Imaginative Activities Lead to Happier, Healthier Children"* places value in children's authentic play as a springboard to developing literacy and other skills. "Play...serves not only as a means of building skills but also as a way of expanding and elaborating them."

Symbol recognition: Early on children begin to 'read' their environment. They become familiar with restaurants and stores by the logo or 'symbol' that is used. This activity-of reading ones environment- is important as children build awareness of how we use symbols in the community. Children move into advanced symbol recognition (the alphabet) when ready. When we try and teach children how to read, to recognize symbols and the rules behind their meaning before the brain is ready the child can be left feeling awkward and inadequate.

Scribbling and drawing: Children must be given sufficient time and opportunities to scribble and draw. Provide unlined paper, crayons, colored pencils, chalkboards and chalk. I am personally not fond of markers because I don't believe they build the motor strength in their hands and fingers as well as crayons and colored pencils do. Children like them typically but I would like to see a child have access to a variety of writing and drawing implements if they are using them. Don't skimp on quality. A child will not want to return to an activity if the materials are flimsy and do not produce vibrant colors and marks. Provide a box with pens, paper, old envelopes, recycled (junk) mail, for the child to explore. As children put their first marks on paper they begin to associate meaning with symbols. At first it looks like a jumbled mess to an adult who must be very careful not to interfere. There are stages of scribbling that a child must pass through to strengthen the small muscles in their hands and eyes. Children eventually separate their 'writing' from their drawing. This is a significant milestone that I watch for as a teacher.

Journals: When my daughter was about 4 or 5 I bought her a journal. Each night I would write what she dictated about her day, the good stuff and the bad. She enjoyed watching me write what she told me. I would always read her words back to her. Sometimes she wanted to 'write' as well which I encouraged her to do. Sometimes she wanted to draw something. At age 12 years she now keeps her own journal.

Movement and the vestibular regions: Movement is fundamental in developing the centers of the brain relative to reading and writing. Kids need to jump, spin, run, play, and be active.

Research does not support some of the current practices in many early childhood (preschool/Prek/kindergarten) classrooms using sedentary activities that include worksheets, memorizing facts and rote learning. Young children should have every

opportunity to actively explore language through songs and rhymes, reading and writing using a variety of materials and tools, to have relevant experiences to attach words to, to develop the speech and language centers in the brain through creative play. Creative play, dramatic play, thematic play: all allow the child to develop mental images and story lines. Above all, children need to see us reading. They need to see us deeply involved with a variety of reading materials. They need to see us crying, even sobbing over books. They need to see us laughing hysterically over something that we have just read. We need to read aloud to one another-passages from books, essays, poetry, and letters from friends. If children can get a sense of passion and wonder from us about words, stories, and books, they will want to read themselves. Even more tragic than someone who is illiterate is one who is *alliterate*; someone who has all the skills necessary to read and write but lacks the desire to do so.

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