

Hooked On Phonics LEARN TO READ

Infomercial Talking Points

Nancy Kerr – Aug. 28, 2009

Topics to address in the Script: *Expert: Nancy Kerr - Children's Reading Foundation speaks about the importance of parents' involvement with their children's reading, the importance of using phonics to teach reading skills, the importance of starting early, and the importance of reading for success in school and in life.*

Parents' essential role

It's easy to believe that all caring parents want their children to read, and to read well. They know from their own experience how essential reading is today for just about every aspect of life. But that's where the easy part ends for many parents, who don't believe they can help their children be good readers.

For various reasons, including their own unfulfilling experiences in school, many adults lack confidence. They say, "I don't know what to do." Or, "I'm not a teacher." Others, who work long hours, fear they don't have time to help their children be successful in school. But, whether its self-doubts or time pressures, parents who follow a few proven practices, find they are able to give their children a tremendous advantage, and it doesn't really take much time.

The key for caring parents is to carve out about 20 minutes a day, maybe after dinner or at bed time, to spend reading with their children. The results are really amazing. That small amount of time makes an enormous difference in young lives.

Here's exciting proof. Research shows that parent-lead reading activities at home are effective for both quick learners and for children with reading difficulties. Equally encouraging, a parent's cultural background, education, and income level don't matter. Studies show that a child's achievement increases with the extent to which the parents engage in the program.

This is the simple secret of successful parents: the way children spend their time at home. Choosing to take an active role in your child's education is one of the most powerful decisions you can make.

All parents can have a positive influence on their child's learning. They simply need to have a little guidance and training in fun and effective ways to build reading skills.

How children learn

Mom and dad are the most influential – and most loved – teachers a child will ever have. This is the truth, not a cliché. By example and by their words parents communicate values, behaviors, and priorities that their child emulates. Daily time with literacy tells a child that “you are very important to me” and “reading is a very important thing to do.”

Powerful research on the brain development of young children reveals that they are much more capable, passionate and interested in learning than most adults ever imagined. Children thrive on the love and attention of their parents and learn best by gentle and frequent repetition – one-on-one, in short blocks of time, on a regular schedule, day after day.

Children also need to feel safe in order to learn - safe in a positive, patient, noncritical environment. When a child is scared or apprehensive, the brain goes into a “flight or fright” survival mode. As for learning, it is impossible under such negative circumstances. That’s why children do well learning in the security of their own home with loving family members.

Reading well is imperative

Parents know by their own lives that reading well is imperative for anyone to thrive in this time when technology rules. Reading is a requirement for most adult employment, for using today’s communication tools, for personal fulfillment and self-sufficiency, and a continued democracy.

It’s true that reading is essential for succeeding school. It is the skill used to learn most other subjects, including science, social studies, mathematics, technology, and even the arts. In fact, more than 85 percent of school curriculum is delivered by print – on computer screens as well as in textbooks. On national math tests 40 percent of the errors are reading errors, not mathematical.

In school from kindergarten through third grade children learn to read, and after third grade they read to learn. In kindergarten and first grade, students are taught how to read using phonics and blending. This requires direct instruction. (Phonics, which is pairing alphabet letters with the sounds in spoken language, is an essential step in learning to read.) In second and third grade, reading lessons focus on accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

The reality is that learning to read is a process that begins in the years prior to entering school.

- It starts at birth when parents read, talk and sing to their baby.

- It expands at ages one and two when, during daily story time, parents ask simple questions about the plot, characters or illustrations. Mommy sings the ABC's while child is washing hands.
- By age three, the child understands that squiggles on pages are words and may retell a story with a beginning, middle and end. Three year olds like to say short rhymes and make up silly words, too.
- Four year olds are eager to learn the letter names and sounds. They have seen those letter-shapes in books and the environment their whole lives. They enjoy games of repeating the first sound in words and clapping or jumping syllables. These important pre-literacy behaviors are called phonological awareness.

Third grade is a pivotal year because 75 percent of children who are still poor readers by the end of third grade, will have reading and learning difficulties all the way through high school. Yet, the same research proves that 90-95 percent of children can learn to read at average reading levels through prevention and early intervention programs.

Each year the US Dept of Education reports to Congress on students with disabilities. The data indicates that approximately 80 percent of the children served have special needs in reading.

Studies also show that only 2 percent of poor readers earn a four-year college degree. On the other hand, America's prisons are filled with poor readers. One national study reports that 82 percent of prison inmates' failed to graduate from high school. Low literacy skill, which also causes low self-esteem, is the number one issue for high school drop outs. Low literacy is also a common denominator in gang activity, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and unemployment.

This is a tragic and unnecessary loss of human potential and opportunity. Most children can learn to read adequately if they have an early start in learning.

That's where parents come in. It is essential that they take part in the learning process early on. When parents and other family members read with little ones and take part in other fun learning activities, children blossom. A world of knowledge stretches out before them through the joy of reading. Their young, creative minds soar in imaginative, wonderful ways, thanks to the irreplaceable gift of reading their parents offer them.

By reading together, children's attention spans grow and they learn social and emotional skills, such as getting along with others, sitting still, following directions, taking turns, and using

language to communicate. Curiosity, persistence, enthusiasm, independence are all valuable by-products of reading.

One of the most important things parents can do for their children is to be sure they learn to read early and well.

- The majority of reading problems faced by today's adolescents and adults could have been avoided or resolved in children's early years. No time is as important or as fleeting as a child's early years of life and schooling. Herein lies our greatest hope and our most practical and effective opportunity for prevention. Source: National Research Council, *Starting Out Right*
- "Academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by know someone's reading skill at the end of 3rd grade. A person who is not at least a modestly skill reader by that time is unlikely to graduate from high school." Source: National Research Council, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*.

Reading is a skill

Because reading is a skill that can be mastered over time with practice and positive coaching, it can be compared to learning to play a sport or a musical instrument. Gradually, over time, skill levels increase – it does not happen in a day. In other words, the ability to read grows day by day, a few minutes at a time. And it is a skill that is best learned with the help of another person.

The fact that reading is a skill that must be taught is important to remember. Children intuitively learn to talk as part of their natural development. Humans have used oral language for approximately 4 million years, thus the ability to speak is hard-wired in the brain.

Unlike speaking, learning to read is neither instinctive, nor hard-wired in the brain. Using written symbols to represent the sounds of language is a development only a few thousand years old and for most of that history illiteracy in all cultures was very high. Now, in the Information Age, the ability to read is essential.

Even though understanding the written word is an acquired skill, not a natural process, almost everyone can become a fluent reader. Still, it takes a lot of work and reading is much easier

when the learning starts early. This allows the sequence of age-appropriate skill-building to progress evenly.

True, a small number of children, about five percent, actually teach themselves to read without any instruction. Another 30 percent of children learn to read easily with basic instruction. But for at least 60 percent of children mentoring and practice is required that gradually ramps up reading skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency development and comprehension strategies.

Parents should be gratified to know that good readers typically excel in every other subject. With a strong reading foundation, they enjoy learning a variety of subjects and have access to expanded opportunities. Sadly, those who do not learn to read early and well are hampered at the very start of their education – and for the rest of their lives. The achievement gap for many students is a reading gap.

In other words, the majority of reading problems faced by today’s teens and adults could have been avoided or resolved in their childhood by spending a little time together every day with their parents or other family members, talking, reading, singing and playing games. That’s why The Children’s Reading Foundation is dedicated to providing parents the tools and skills to enable them to help their children. And that’s why I see a great possibility for the future academic success of all students.

“Years of research show clearly that children are more likely to succeed in learning when their families actively support them. When you and other family members read with your children and participate in other learning activities, you give your children a tremendous advantage. Other than helping your children to grow up healthy and happy, the most important thing that you can do for them is to help them develop their reading skills. It is no exaggeration to say that how well children learn to read affects directly not only how successful they are in school but how well they do throughout their lives. When children learn to read, they have the key that opens the door to all the knowledge of the world. Without this key, many children are left behind.” U.S. Department of Education, Margaret Spellings, *Secretary*, 2000