



Encouraging Pre-Reading Skills in Young Children

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Imagine walking into the den and your 39-month-old child is sitting on the floor surrounded by books. Open in her lap is *Owl Moon*, and to your surprise she has turned to the last page and begun to read aloud, "When you go owling you don't need words or warm or anything but hope..." How were you to know that all the reading the two of you did would result in her reading a wonderful children's book, on her own, at three years of age. All the parenting books you devoured during the pregnancy encouraged you to read, read, read to your child, but little did you know that the result would be a child reading before starting school. Walking out of the room, you pat yourself on the back for a job well done.

What a wonderful scenario this is and it plays itself out over and over in the homes of toddlers and preschoolers, back seat of cars, and on the couch at the sitter's house. Is she really reading? Not likely. But this three-year-old girl is showing important early stages of pre-reading. She has likely memorized words associated with pictures on a page, and begun to "read" words just like mom and dad do every night. This is a wonderful reflection of a concept referred to as conventions of print; that is, she is developing an understanding of books and the written word, including that books must be held up right, reading moves from left to right, that letters and words are distinct from other markings on a page, and that certain markings have meaning. These early reading skills, while not pre-requisite to, are predictive of good early reading development, and reflect an interest in literacy that places this girl on an encouraging path for being interested in learning to read and engaging in other literacy activities.

In addition to regular and consistently reading *with* children, what else can parents do to prepare kids for learning to read? First, although reading is valuable, how one reads with their child is important. A child's love for reading, curiosity, vocabulary, and language are enhanced when parents make books come alive by talking about what is being read. This includes going beyond simply reading the words of a book to a child, but also encouraging questioning and responding to both the words and the pictures, relating what is read to a child's and family's life, and making reading an enjoyable and exploratory activity. Second, encouraging a child's awareness of sounds associated with language is extremely important. A child's ability in kindergarten and first grade to be able to recognize that words they hear are made up of sounds and that those sounds can be manipulated to create different words plays an important role in early word reading. How can parents encourage this skill? Engaging in rhyming activities, including pointing out rhyming words, reading books that rhyme and books that have good alliteration (e.g., Billy Bob's bunny bounced all the way to Binghamton). Pointing out objects in your child's environment that have sounds similar to those in the child's name, including beginning, middle and ending sounds. Exposing children to letters of the alphabet and identifying their names and sounds is of value. This might take the form of cutting out felt letters and playing "Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See? I see a brown 'l' looking at me.". Placing magnetic letters on the refrigerator, putting up letters on the wall of a child's bedroom, and talking about their names and the sound they can make.

There are several activities that parents can use to encourage early reading preparedness, and only a few have been mentioned here. Most important is that the process can and should be enjoyable for the child and parent. Preschool children should not be expected to be reading, but there are enjoyable activities that parents can use to help prepare their child to begin to learn to read in kindergarten and first grade. Additional information for helping a child to develop pre-reading skills can be obtained from several reputable sources, including www.getreadytoread.org and www.schwablearning.org.

Research in the area of reading disabilities has progressed to the point of allowing us to identify factors early that might place a child at increased risk to have reading problems. Recognizing these risk factors and intervening early to address them has the potential of allowing a child to avoid a reading disability diagnosis. There is strong genetic component to reading problems. Therefore, if either parent has a history of reading difficulties and/or experienced delays in language development or processing, their child is at increased risk for similar problems. Children with early language (understanding language and use of language to communicate) delays are at risk for reading problems. Difficulty consistently recognizing upper and lower case letters of the alphabet by the end of kindergarten, as well as limited understanding of sound-letter relationships as first grade progresses also place a child at greater risk for developing reading problems. Parents with concerns should not wait until third and fourth grade to have their child evaluated for a disability. As we have established, there are early reading and language skills that can be taught that may help to avoid later reading problems in some children.

Parents concerned about their child's language and reading development are encouraged to talk with their child's pediatrician. Public schools offer evaluations for children with suspected developmental delays, and early childhood services for those with identified disabilities. The School Performance Program at Children's Hospital's Child Development Center offers comprehensive evaluations addressing a range of needs, including learning, behavioral/emotional, and attention challenges. More information about the services offered through the Child Development Center can be found on the CHW Web site (<http://www.chw.org/childdevelopment>) or by calling 414-266-2928.