

Visit With The Utays To Wait is To Risk: Reading Research

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Dr. Joe Utay, a graduate of Pitt, has been a counselor, psychologist, family therapist, author, national speaker, teacher, clinic director and father. He earned tenure as a professor training school counselors, marriage and family therapists, and school psychologists; and is now Director of Counseling and Evaluation Services for Total Learning Centers. Dr. Carol Utay, also a graduate of Pitt, has experience as a Principal, teacher, computer trainer, national speaker, adjunct professor, author, and mother. With a doctorate in education, she has trained thousands of teachers and parents to help children achieve success and feel good about themselves. She is Executive Director of Total Learning Centers. Joe and Carol live and work in Wexford with their daughter Andrea.

I wasn't worried about my kindergarten's disinterest in books until a neighbor complained that her 3rd grader still has to be pushed to practice, much less enjoy, reading. Then we got into a discussion about which is the better way to learn to read- phonics or whole language. It didn't take long to discover we didn't know enough about either to take a stand. What do you two think?

We recently attended an informative and inspiring presentation by local education consultant/advocate Pam Cook that addressed this very issue. She gave us permission to share her fresh-from-the-research-oven findings to help respond to your question.

First of all, your neighbor does have reason to complain. Research indicates that 74% of children who are poor readers in 3rd grade remain poor readers in 9th grade. **It is not too late** for the 3rd grader (or 9th grader or adult for that matter) but earlier is easier and much cheaper. According to Dr. Reid Lyon, Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), "If kids are at risk, we can address it with 30 minutes of intervention a day at the kindergarten level. By the time the children are 8 or 9, it takes at least 2 hours a day of special training."

Now to the phonics vs. whole language battle raging since the 1980s. Whole language supporters say children will learn to recognize individual words by using context clues, pictures, and previously learned words to understand what they read even if they can't pronounce each word. Advocates for teaching phonics concentrate on the importance of children learning to decipher or decode (in other words, read) each word for optimum understanding of what is read.

Research shows that a phonics focus works. According to an October 1997 article in *Time Magazine*, "Indeed the evidence

is so strong that if the subject under discussion were, say, the treatment for mumps, there would be no discussion."

Learning the rules of phonics does not require long boring hours of painstaking repetitions of letters and syllables. Also, contrary to the whole language faith in context clues, eye movement studies have indicated that skilled readers actually do process each word. Their decoding skills though are so automatic that they speed through sentences and paragraphs gaining meaning as they flow along.

Phonics is unnecessary for 1/3 of children who simply don't need it to learn to read. Another 1/3 will learn to read but may fall behind without early phonics instruction. For the remaining 1/3, reading will be one of the greatest challenges they face in life. According to Dr. Reid Lyon, for them, phonics is non-negotiable.

Research is crystal clear: don't wait to take action! If your child is even somewhat behind expectation you are taking an unnecessary risk with their academic success (not to mention self-esteem) by waiting to see if they get further behind and begin to get at best frustrated and at worst fail. Of course, there are many children who do suddenly catch on or mature into adequate readers without help; the point is, why risk it?

Help for a kindergartner is different from help for a 3rd or 9th grader. Nevertheless, you can do quite a bit at home, and that may be sufficient. Otherwise, consider requesting extra help from school, a tutor, or learning center. Whatever you and your neighbor decide what's best for your children, do it now to maximize their ability to prepare today for success tomorrow.

Note: For more information about the research contact Pam Cook at 412-851-0252 or email her at ccook@nb.net