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By Dr. Carol and Dr. Joe Utay

RAISING READERS

Raising Readers: How to Invest in Your Children's Success

Dr. Carol Utay and Dr. Joe Utay

Does reading relate THAT much to a child's success in life that teachers and parents should worry SO MUCH over progress in reading? If so, what are the most time and cost efficient ways to raise successful readers?

Most children will learn to read, no matter what method is used by teachers and no matter what their parents do at home. But what about the 40% of children who do not master basic reading skills? Fortunately, there is much parents and professionals can do to maximize their reading abilities.

Learning is Earning.

According to an editorial in the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, June 4, 2002, the link between education and income clearly shows that reading success and college achievement has the single most powerful relationship with earning power. Put simply, if you want to earn good money by getting a good job, then you need to have a good education. Experts consistently report that even entry-level jobs in the fast food industry will require a good education. High school dropouts earn much less and college graduates earn much more on average than high school graduates do. How is this related to reading? It has been said that one can predict high school graduation fairly well by knowing students' reading skills at the end of third grade!

According to the chart below, there is still a significant difference in earning between men and women, but even more startling is the difference of over \$25,000 per year for women who do not graduate high school and women who have a bachelor's degree. The average difference between men without high school diplomas and those with college degrees is even greater - over \$32,000!

Education Level	Earning Power Women	Earning Power Men
Not a High School Graduate	\$11,353	\$19,155
High School Graduate	\$17,898	\$28,742
College Bachelor's Degree	\$36,559	\$51,405

A college degree is now the single greatest factor in determining access to better job opportunities and higher earnings. By 2008, of the fastest growing jobs, over 70% will require an education beyond high school and 40% of all new jobs will require at least an Associate's Degree. Only 2% of students that score below the half way point on reading tests will complete a four year college program. Dr. Reid Lyon, Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), warns that unless a child's reading scores are in the top 25% of their class, they will not typically choose to read for fun or information unless they "have to" and college will be a struggle.

The need to raise competent readers.

Dr. Rita Bean, a professor in University of Pittsburgh's School of Education and a member of the Board of Directors of the International Reading Association, views helping children develop reading skills as more crucial to later success than in the past: "The demands on the school are much greater today than they were in the past! In order to meet the demands in this modern and global world, students will need to achieve high levels of literacy. Graduates must be able to read difficult and challenging material." So, the new education buzz words related to reading include, "No child should be left behind" and, "We expect ALL children to learn to read."



Nevertheless, reading failure in the United States is epidemic. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) reported 20% of children have significant trouble learning to read. A 1994 national survey of reading ability in fourth graders found 44% of them reading below the basic level.

The cause of reading problems is debatable.

Some point to the amount of television most children watch. A recent survey found that kindergarteners had seen more than 5,000 hours of television—more hours that are required to earn a bachelor's degree. The idea is that children are sitting back and passively watching TV rather than actively reading. There are many other theories, beyond the purpose of this article. For example, learning to read is influenced by such diverse factors as vision and hearing, control over attention and energy, and motivation to learn about the flat two-dimensional lines and curves we call letters. These are crucial prerequisites to reading so problems in these areas will affect the process of learning to read. Whatever the causes, and there certainly are more than one, the question is what to do about it.

A good start is critical. Children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely catch up.

According to many researchers, the first-grade poor reader almost invariably continues to be a poor reader. The consequences of a slow start in reading become monumental as time goes on.

You do not have to be an education expert to accurately predict what often happens when a reading problem is recognized and help is postponed until there is actual failure. People often wait for very strong evidence of a reading problem in order to make sure it is not just immaturity but often students are very far behind at this point. What results too often is, of course, failure. Yet, few school districts have in place a mechanism to identify and help children **before** failure takes hold. Most public school systems are set up on a failure model for getting help: until a student fails, and fails enough, there is no help.

The majority of school districts have no systematic identification process until third grade, by which time successful remediation is more difficult and more costly. So, at this time, it is up to parents to be the ones who make sure their children are not behind in reading. How? Work with the school to stop little problems from becoming big ones. Help your children at home or hire professional help. There are many organizations that are in the business of helping our children have a great start to their school careers.

Do not wait until third grade to get help for reading. The remediation that would have been less time

intensive and less costly at an early stage later often requires very intensive interventions to bring students to adequate levels of reading accuracy. Also, reading fluency (the combination of reading fast and accurately) may be even more difficult to restore because of the large amount of reading practice that is lost by children each month and year that they remain poor readers. In spite of all the research that shows it is easier and more effective to help children while they are young, we can still make good progress with older students too. Read about helping older students improve reading at the end of this article and check out the www.totallearningcenter.com web site for more information.

Early warning signs of later reading problems

Having any of these before age five does not automatically mean a future reading problem. They are, however, “red flags” to signal the need to find out if taking action to strengthen basic skills should take place.

Before Age 5

- **Late talking, compared to other children.**
- **Pronunciation problems.**
- **Slow vocabulary growth, often unable to find the right word.**
- **Difficulty rhyming words.**
- **Trouble learning numbers, alphabet, days of the week.**
- **Extremely restless and easily distracted.**
- **Trouble interacting with peers.**
- **Poor ability to follow directions or routines.**

Kindergarten and 1st Grade

Most children who become poor readers experience early and continuing difficulties in learning how to accurately identify printed words. They have trouble "sounding out" unknown words. Watch for these trouble signs.

- **Slow to learn connections between letters & sounds.**
- **Confuses basic words (run, eat, want).**
- **Makes consistent reading & spelling errors, letter reversals (b/d), inversions (m/w), transpositions (felt/left), & substitutions (house/home).**
- **Transposes number sequences & confuses signs (+, -, x, /, =). Slow recall of facts.**
- **Slow to learn new skills, relies heavily on memorization.**
- **Impulsiveness, lack of planning.**
- **Unstable pencil grip.**
- **Trouble learning to tell time or tie their shoes.**
- **Poor coordination, unaware of physical surroundings, prone to accidents.**

In other words, any time your child is not learning to listen, speak, move, or read as expected don't wait and see – intervene to help your child achieve success. For example, most letter reversals while reading should be gone by age seven. At this time research tells us we can teach 95% of children effectively to read at their grade level regardless of possible learning problems, attention weaknesses, dyslexia, language learning disabilities, etc. The key is to get the right help before they fall too far behind.



What can parents do?

1. Check out all concerns about reading through a professional evaluation.

If you have even a gut feeling that your children are not where they should be with reading, check it out. Ask for some testing at school or if you are told “Wait and see,” get a private evaluation done elsewhere. Typically, parents wait one year after they have a feeling and/or signs that something is not going right to take action. Do not wait. There are low-cost and free evaluations available. If your child is not yet school age, DART (Discovery, Assessment, Referral and Tracking) will evaluate for no charge. DART's purpose is to discover children who may have a developmental delay, provide in-depth assessment aimed at identifying a child's individual strengths and needs, and recommend and provide appropriate early intervention services (412-394-5736). The School Psychologists at Total Learning Centers offer free testing in reading for students 2nd through 12th grade. Some learning centers offer testing directly linked to their own system of helping and typically charge \$150 and up. Some private psychologists are trained in conducting psychoeducational evaluations. Their prices often vary depending on the amount of time required.

2. Read to Your Child

Read aloud to your child no matter how young or old they are. The Pittsburgh Organization of Reading's first goal is that every child is read to every day from birth onward. Read often and have fun with the reading. Go to the library. Go to the bookstore. Go to garage sales. Buy or borrow a variety of books, magazines, and games for reading.

Tips on Reading to Young Children



Start immediately in making certain you are raising a reader. One of the best ways is to read to your child every day. This instills a love of reading, helps them understand the importance of books, and gives them lots of experience listening to the special rhythm and nuance of the written word.

When your child is under two

years old, reading to your child is very important but different than reading to an older child. For example, a very young child may want to chew on the book. Simply have some plastic or cloth books available for some reading they can really “sink their teeth into.” Choose sturdy books that they can handle without ripping the pages. Lap reading is encouraged. Hold your very young child on your lap and show them pictures. Turn the pages slowly and name some of the items they may recognize in the pictures. Short happy sessions are best. Early on, five minutes may be long enough.

When your child becomes a toddler, start finding a set time to read to him or her every day. Continue to keep the reading sessions short as long as they are interested. Nursery tales and children’s classics are great starting points. Ask your librarian for recommendations. Remember to have fun with the reading. There is no rule that says you must start every book at the beginning or that you must finish every book. You are using the book in part to encourage a love of reading. You can be silly with different characters. Funny voices make it even more fun. Talk about what is happening in the story with your child. Make them guess about what will happen next. Involve everyone in reading to your child. All care givers, grandparents, and older siblings should be encouraged to read to your child.

Do not stop reading when your child enters school. As your child gets older, you can read short articles from the newspaper. Comic books and magazine are also possibilities.

3. As a precursor to reading, help your young child become proficient with the sounds of our language.

A great time to play with language is while you are driving in the car. Make a list of potential activities on a three by five card and pull it out during down time. A very experienced local speech and language therapist, Sandra Tommarello, commented there is an added advantage to doing these activities in the car: “It challenges and strengthens auditory discrimination (telling the difference between everyday sounds now and letter sounds later) because of having to tune out background noise.” Your general goal is to make certain your child is comfortable with the sounds of the language before going to kindergarten. Here are some specific objectives related to this goal.



- Children should be able to hear a sound and repeat it.
- They should be able to discriminate between two sounds as “same” or “different.”
- They should be able to rhyme words.
- Blending sounds together by listening is a skill needed before blending sounds together on a page. Practice this a lot! Ask your child to act as a detective and figure out the word made by certain sounds you make, such as /c/ - /a/ - /t/ (cat).
- After those listening skills are mastered, move on to playing with letters.

4. Help your child learn the names and sounds of letters.

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4. Help your child learn the names and sounds of letters.

Children should know all the names of the letters before kindergarten and should be able to tell you all the sounds the letters stand for including the short and long sounds of the vowels before first grade.

The more letters children can name before kindergarten, and the more letter sounds they know for first grade, the better they will do with the reading activities they are taught in those grades.

5. Connect the meaning of new words with old already known meanings.

Learning how to read letters and words is only part of reading. Understanding the meaning of what is read is vital. Dr. John W. Butzow, Dean of the College of Education and Educational Technology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, has co-authored

with his wife Dr. Carol M. Butzow, several books on teaching reading. They emphasize the importance of meaning in the teaching of reading for children to be effective learners: "It is a lot more than sounding out symbols and creating something that sounds in the brain like spoken language. Reading is a process of attaching ideas found in print with ideas we already have in our minds. Raising strong readers involves as much creating the background to understand the newly received ideas as it does picking out individual words." So, while hearing and pronouncing words is important, this is a good reminder to help children actually understand what they are reading.



Helping older students improve reading

It's never too late, but the sooner the better. When students beyond third grade display reading difficulties, everyone involved can easily become frustrated. The good news is that research-based reading strategies can build a foundation for reading success in students of all ages.

Because research suggests that once children fall behind they seldom catch up without help, President Bush has implemented *No Child Left Behind* programs. Good examples are found in California, Virginia, and Texas, states that actively promote early intervention to prevent reading problems.

Save Time, Effort, and Money

According to Pittsburgh area education consultant/advocate Pam Cook, 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.

Help for a kindergartner is different than help for a 3rd or 9th grader. Nevertheless, parents can do quite a bit at home, and that may be sufficient. In addition, parents can request extra help from school, a tutor, an organization, or a learning center. ■

In summary, here is what you can do to help ensure you are raising a lifelong reader who will become a lifelong learner:

- 1) Actively help your child develop reading skills while watching for signs of reading problems.
- 2) If you see possible early signs of reading problems, get professional help in evaluating and helping your child read. Your goal is to have your child read as well as possible as early as possible.
- 3) Take advantage of the many Pittsburgh area resources to help you raise a competent educated reader.

As parents, relatives, community leaders, concerned citizens, volunteers, educators, and other professionals, we need to make sure we are each doing what we can to maximize children's love of and skill in reading. Together will help them, and therefore, our community, prepare today for success tomorrow.

Read more *Raising Readers* ideas at www.TotalLearningCenter.com or call (724) 940-1090 for a free copy.

Dr Joe Utay, graduate of University of Pittsburgh (Pitt), is a school psychologist, family therapist, author, national speaker, teacher, clinic director, and father. He earned tenure as a professor training counselors and school psychologists and is now Director of Counseling and Evaluation Services for TLC and part-time professor for Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Carol Utay, graduate of University of Pittsburgh (Pitt), is an expert in curriculum, learning, special education, and technology. She has experience as a principal, teacher, consultant, national speaker, professor, author, and mother. "Dr. Carol" is Executive Director of Total Learning Centers.

LOCAL RESOURCES

What Pittsburgh is doing to help our children read?

READY for Life is an organization dedicated to seeing that all children have books and adult reading support, so together they can discover the joys and benefits of literacy. READY for Life collects donations from private citizens as well as corporations (such as, the Post-Gazette, Mellon Financial Corporation, and 84 Lumber) so that all children can have new books. A key part of the program is to teach parents, teachers, and volunteers how to read to young children. Their goals are:



- ◆ Every child is read to everyday starting at birth.
- ◆ Every child is ready to succeed at entry to kindergarten.
- ◆ Every child is reading at grade level or higher by the end of 3rd grade.

Donations can be sent to:

PG Charities/READY for Life Fund

Jennifer Zgurich, Community Affairs Coordinator
P.O. Box 715
Pittsburgh, PA 15230

Beginning with Books,

www.beginningwithbooks.org. This center supports families in reading to their children. They are sponsoring a free family reading event – a StoryWalk on

Saturday, September 14th, 10:00 am - 1:00 pm at Frick Park. They are focusing on the following books this year: Abiyoyo, Mrs. McNosh Hangs Up Her Wash, Over in the Meadow, The Very Hungry Caterpillar, and Boo Hoo Baby.



Carnegie Library of

Pittsburgh, www.carnegielibrary.org, is one of the best libraries in the country with an awesome Main Library, 18 neighborhood locations, and Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. Its



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(EPI) Center, <http://www.epi-center.org/Overview.htm>, is supported by businesses such as Equitable Gas. Gregory R. Spencer, Senior Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer, Equitable Resources, Inc. and Vice Chair of the EPI Center Board explained that their goal is to ensure all kids can read, write, and use a computer at their grade level by age ten. They are partnering with local businesses and superintendents to help reach those goals. Dr. James DeTrude, Superintendent of Avonworth School District, Dr. Carol Wooten, Superintendent of South Side Area School District, and Dr. Linda Hippert, Superintendent of South Fayette Schools are part of a pilot program. We will watch these school district leaders with great interest to see how these goals are achieved.

Family Communications,

www.misterrogers.org, is a Western Pennsylvania organization involving our own Fred Rogers and

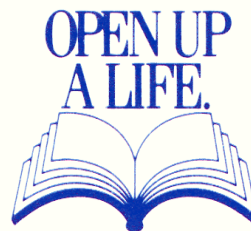


encourages families to learn with their children. On April

4, 2002 President Bush, said about Mr. Rogers, "And there are thousands and thousands of parents and Americans who are grateful for your service to the country. In Mister Rogers' neighborhood, every child is welcome into the world of learning -- not just a few, not just ones from certain neighborhoods, but every child."

The mission of the **Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council**, www.gplc.org, is to ensure that youths and adults in Allegheny County have basic reading, writing, math, English language, and computer skills so that they may reach their fullest potential in life and participate productively in their

community. Their services are free and they have helped thousands of adults in this area.



University of Pittsburgh's LEADERS Program (Literacy Educators Assessing and Developing Early Reading Success),

<http://www.education.pitt.edu/leaders/teach.htm>, was developed to help teachers address the needs of students who are at-risk for encountering difficulties in early reading. According to Dr. Rita Bean, Professor, University of Pittsburgh, School of Education, LEADERS is a professional development project whose goal is to increase kindergarten through third grade teachers' knowledge and understanding of literacy instruction and ultimately improve student performance.

The International Dyslexia Association,

Pittsburgh Chapter, P.O. Box 536, Wexford, Pa. 15090-0536 (website under construction), is dedicated to educating the public about dyslexia and helping students learn to read. They offer monthly support meetings for parents at Northland Public Library, Cumberland Road, McCandless. Upcoming meetings will be held September 5, October 17, and December 5 starting at 7 p.m. The association keeps a list of tutors trained in Orton-Gillingham curriculum, a step-by-step multisensory approach to teaching reading. Their major meeting this year is titled, *Put Yourself in the Shoes of a Dyslexic*, a hands-on workshop that simulates what it feels like to be dyslexic. It will take place October 17, 2002 at the Haine School Elementary Library (Seneca Valley Schools). The workshop is free and open to parents and professionals. For more information, call 724-940-1090 or email Dyslexia@totallearningcenter.com.