

Visit With the Utays

School Psychology and Education Specialists

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"Properly, we should read for power. Man reading should be man intensely alive. The book should be the ball of light in one's hand. "

--Ezra Pound

11 Ways to Improve Your Child's Reading

Encouraging A Life-Long Love of Reading in the Process

Research is crystal clear: Do not wait! If reading is even somewhat behind expectation, parents take an unnecessary risk with their children's academic success, as well as self-esteem, by waiting to see if they naturally improve or else get further behind. Of course, there are some children who do suddenly catch on or mature but, why risk it when there is so much parents can do? Here are **11 ways** parents can do their crucial part in helping their children not only read, but come to view reading as an important and enjoyable experience.

1. Place high value on literacy in general and reading in particular.

Why all the fuss about reading? Where do math and other areas of study fit in? Reading is a gateway to learning. Even strong math students will often slip without good reading skills. For example, to solve practical story problems a student must first read and understand all the written words. Students work on reading skills through third grade and at fourth grade they are expected to use those reading skills to learn, thus the saying, "First children learn to read then read to learn."

Students with mediocre reading skills can get through the reading requirements of elementary school but over time learning requirements become much more complex. According to a U.S. Department of Education report, "Good reading skills are required to study geography, do math, use computers, and conduct experiments. Even motivated,

hard-working students are severely hampered in their schoolwork if they cannot read well at the end of third grade.” Placing a value on reading is an important precursor to children wanting to learn to read.

2. Emphasize learning reading skills.

The “phonics vs. whole language” battle has raged 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 cannot 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 *Time Magazine* article, “Indeed the evidence is so strong that if the subject under discussion were, say, the treatment for mumps, there would be no discussion.” So, if you are in a position to help your child learn or improve basic reading skills, phonics – learning to pronounce words – is the way to go.

3. Have a variety of types of reading materials available at home.

Books, and entire bookshelves, are often off limits to the family members who need the most free access, the children. Books, from very easy with loads of fun pictures to high-level tomes, should be in sight and physically available. Magazines and comic books count too. They offer reading practice and connect fun with the act of reading.

4. Offer your child rich and varied language experiences.

Talk with your children. Provide many opportunities for conversation. Tell stories, sing songs using words and/or sign language, describe the world around your child and encourage your child to do the same.

What does this have to do with reading? Children develop literacy skills before being able to read. When parents talk, sing, and read to their children, links among the brain cells are strengthened and new links are formed. Language therefore is an important predictor of how well a child will read. Develop the use of language and you further optimize the ability to read.

5. Read to and with your children.

With easy books, the old, “You read a page then I’ll read a page,” can work wonders. Also, read to your children harder books, depending on their intellectual level, for exposure to higher level vocabulary and to train the ears to hear the rhythm and nuances of written language. The National Research Council concluded that regularly reading to a child has a greater effect on later reading achievement than any single early reading program.

6. Have your child’s eyesight and hearing tested every year.

General health, nutrition, and good functioning of the senses are important for the foundation of reading. It may seem obvious that vision problems would affect reading but

hearing difficulties do too. Words are at least in part sounded out according to how we have had experienced hearing them pronounced.

7. Make certain all caregivers do their part.

Whether a paid babysitter or kind relative, there will be other influential folks spending time with your children in your home. Go through this list and have them do whatever fits with the situation. For example, let your babysitter know it is encouraged for your children to look at books before bed.

8. Ask your child's teacher for an assessment of your child's reading and how it compares with the others in the same grade.

Parents as Teachers (PAT) recommends screening to determine early in a child's life the need for reading assistance. According to reading research, as many as two-thirds of reading-disabled children can become average or above average readers if identified early and taught appropriately. There remain about 2% of students that will need even more specialized techniques and even special education services to be able to read. For these children, says the Council for Exceptional Children, the evaluation is critical. Besides schools, some learning centers also offer a variety of assessment tools to give you the information you need to decide if extra help is needed and if so, exactly what help will be most useful.

9. Expose your children to as much age-appropriate cultural literacy as you can.

Cultural Literacy and *What Your 3rd Grader Needs to Know* (or whatever grade level is appropriate for your children) both by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., are good resources. Visit the library and bookstores. While there, let your children find books or other resources about books, sayings, plays, poems, etc, that they may have heard mentioned but did not know about. Let them witness you doing the same.

10. Every child that needs a tutor should have one during or after school.

If you already know these suggestions are not enough or you do not see reading growth, have a professional assist with improvement. A private tutor or learning center will have curriculum to improve reading. Double check too on availability of help from school. Also, if the teaching style and attitude of the tutor is not a good fit with you or your child, the best tutoring program in the world will be much less effective. Look for a friendly, open, accepting tutor with a definite plan of attack and means to measure success.

11. Have and convey confidence in your child's potential to improve.

The following experience was reported by the authors earlier this year in Northern Connection, a local magazine covering news in and around northern sections of Pittsburgh.

If reading came easily for you and your children then you might not have the personal experience of what it can be like to be slightly (or even a lot) behind in reading. Let us share an experience we had recently. It begins the usual way. A young man and his mother come to a learning center for advice. John (not his real name) sheepishly follows

his mother in. Looking unsure and nervous, he surveys the people and students and tables and books, wondering how long it will take for the people here to find out just how dumb he really is. His mother explains he is having a horrible time in school. The school had tested him and found that he has a learning disability in reading and writing. She shares how depressing it is to want, yet be unable, to learn.

Realizing that John needs to hear what I am about to explain, I invite him to join us. I talk for a minute about what our goals are for students and then I say, "Let's look at your individual profile." I bring out a copy of the bell curve and explain to John that if you test enough people on just about anything, everyone can be placed somewhere on the chart. Some are very low (less than 2%), some are very high (less than 2%) and half of us are in the middle (50%). I then ask him where he would be on the chart for his intelligence, not school achievement. He points to the lowest end. I was certain he misunderstood so I ask if he thinks about guys his age, some are very short, some very tall, and many in the middle so, "Where would you be on this chart?" He points to the high-average range which I agree is a good guess.

I ask him again to show me where his intelligence is. He again points to close to the lowest end of the chart. I know it is not because he does not understand the chart. "Okay," I continue. "Where would your mom place you?" He answers, "My mom has a really high opinion of me so she would think I am here" pointing to the low-average area. I then ask about his dad's opinion. He explains that his dad thinks he is even below where he had placed himself. Then I ask about friends and he says many think the same as he does though a few have higher opinions of him – in the low-average range. I then ask about each of his teachers. Most of his teachers, in John's opinion, think of him as he thought of himself, very low, except for one. That one, not surprisingly, is John's favorite teacher.

I then tell John, "Everyone including you is wrong. The test you took at your school shows that your intelligence is in the high-average range. You are smarter than at least 6 out of every 10 people your age around the country." At that, this 17-year-old young man bursts into tears. He never knew he was capable. He never knew that he could learn. He always looked around class convinced he was not as smart as the other students.

After recovering his composure, he asks if we can help him with English: "I have stories in my head I want to write." John's posture straightens as he pleads, "Please help me learn. I have stories and characters in my head I want to share. It isn't about the money. I want people to love the characters. If I can get them out and share them, I can die happy. I will give my heart and soul to learning. I know it won't be easy but it will be worth it."

I wonder how many other students have given up because they were not successful learning from traditional methods of teaching. Help your child realize that there is not always an automatic connection between IQ, school achievement, and how you feel about yourself. IQ tests are indeed important. John's helped him recognize one aspect of his worth and gave him hope. But there are many factors not measured by IQ tests including

motivation, curiosity, creative talent, work habits, study skills, personality, imagination, social behavior, achievement in particular academic subjects, spirituality, and how effectively a person integrates these factors.

No test or person can tell you anyone's real potential. Help your children see themselves as "smart" meaning they have incredible potential regardless of their IQ or school grades. You having faith in their potential can make a vital difference in their attitude toward themselves and learning. Once you have helped them realize they have what it takes to move toward whatever goals they have set for themselves in life, do what John's mother is now committed to doing: give them the support and tools needed to prepare today for success tomorrow.

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. 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 show early signs of reading problems, we can address it with 30 minutes of intervention a day at the kindergarten level or many days each week of special training later.

Help for a kindergartner is different from help for a 3rd or 9th grader. Nevertheless, parents can do quite a bit at home, and that may be sufficient. Otherwise, or in addition, parents can request extra help from school, a tutor, or learning center. Whatever parents decide what is best for their children, they should do it now to maximize their children's reading ability and love of reading, both of which will help them prepare today for success tomorrow.

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