



Raising Readers

Start Early: The First Three Years

Just as a child develops language skills long before being able to speak, the child also develops literacy skills long before being able to read. What parents do, or don't do, has a lasting impact on their child's reading skill and literacy.

Children develop much of their capacity for learning in the first three years of life, when their brains grow to 90% of their eventual adult weight. When parents talk, sing, and read to their child, links among the child's brain cells are strengthened and new cells and links are formed.

Play is the work of young children. From the first lullaby to dramatization of a favorite story, music and other creative arts can stimulate language and literacy development. Parents can help build pre-literacy skills through dramatic play and one-on-one interaction.

Many pediatricians believe that a child who has never held a book or listened to a story is not a fully healthy child. Reading aloud to young children is so critical that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that doctors prescribe reading activities along with other advice given to parents at regular check-ups.

Despite the considerable evidence of a relationship between reading regularly to a child and that child's later reading development, six in ten babies and five in ten toddlers are not read to regularly by parents or family members.

Nurture Your Budding Reader: The Preschooler

Preschoolers with large vocabularies tend to become proficient readers. Parents who talk and read with their children can greatly enhance their vocabularies. The vocabulary of the average children's book is greater than that found on prime-time television. Yet more than four in ten preschoolers are not read to regularly.

Children ages 3 to 5 spend an average of 13 hours and 28 minutes a week watching television. When children are plugged into television instead of reading books, they are not developing key literacy skills that will prepare them for school and help them learn.

The single most significant predictor of children's literacy is their mother's literacy level. The more education a mother has, the more likely she is to read to her child.

Some experts believe that for America's poorest children, the biggest obstacle to literacy is the scarcity of books in many homes. And while books are available at public libraries, only 37% of 3 to 5-year olds visit a library at least once a month.

Ready to Read: Heading for the Classroom

Parents are truly their children's first and most important teachers. It is clear that parents should not leave to schools alone the important tasks of language and literacy development.

Reading to a child for 30 minutes per day from infancy helps prepare a child to learn. A five-year old who has not been read to daily will enter kindergarten with far fewer hours of "literacy nutrition" than a child who has been read to daily from infancy. No teacher, no matter how talented, can make up for those lost hours.

Parents who value reading are more likely to visit the library and give books as gifts. Access to quality reading material should continue throughout a child's school years. The NAEP 1998 Reading Report Card found that students with higher reading scores were more likely to report four types of reading material in their homes-encyclopedias, magazines, newspapers, and at least 25 books.

Parents cannot assume that schoolwork makes up for too much TV. Children of all ages watch as much TV in one day as they read for fun in an entire week. Overall, children under age 13 spend 90 minutes a day in front of the TV-one-quarter of their free time.

Adults pass on to children their own expectations about education and achievement, both positive and negative. Shared enthusiasm about books and reading between a parent and child can deepen the child's interest in learning to read. Children who learn from parents that reading is fun may be more likely to sustain efforts to learn to read when the going gets tough.