

November Is Literacy Month

Raising Lifetime Readers from the Start

By Dr. Jenn Berman

After seeing 18-month-old child prodigy Elizabeth Barrett read flashcards on The Today Show, many parents asked me what they could do to help their children acquire similar skills and get the same thrill out of reading.

Experts say that most children learn to read between the ages of six and seven and it is not beneficial to try to push a child to read before then. In fact, one of the most damaging things you can do is to create pressure for her to read – a negative association between your child and reading.

There is, however, one simple and inexpensive thing you can do which will guarantee an uptick in your child's reading success: reading aloud, which parents can even start while their child is in utero. This is also an excellent bonding ritual with other beneficial elements for both parent and child.

Most important is the positive association between reading and pleasure. It can last a lifetime.

The single best predictor of language acquisition is the number and quality of words a child is exposed to each day. Reading has the added benefit of exposing children to "rare words," complex sentences, literary devices like alliteration and rhyming, descriptive language and original synonyms and story conventions (i.e. "in a land far, far away").

According to Betty Bardige

and Marilyn Segal, authors of Building Literacy with Love, "children who have lots of experience with books are likely to develop richer vocabularies and deeper understanding of the meanings, sounds and uses of words than those with less literary experience. They are also likely to be familiar with the conventions of language and story form."

The study results very clearly show that reading makes a world of difference in achievement.

It Starts at Home

It is up to parents to create enthusiastic readers. Studies show that children who come from what researchers call a "print-rich environment" consistently score better in writing, reading and math skills than those from "print-poor environments." Print, in this case, relates to a wide variety of materials, including: books, magazines, newspapers and even comic books. When researchers examined 21 kindergarten classes to see who displayed high interest in reading and who showed low interest in reading it became clear that the home environment and parents' reading habits are crucial factors. Of the high interest group, over 78 percent had mothers who read for leisure, 60 percent had fathers who read for leisure, more than 98 percent of the kids were taken to the library and more than 76 percent were read to daily.

Book ownership is a significant factor in reading enthusiasm and achievement. Children need to have books that they own, ones that they can put their name in and don't have to share with siblings. As they get older they should be able to mark up books by writing in margins, highlighting and earmarking pages. This allows kids to learn new words, come back to passages that intrigue them and make the reading experience their own.

Start reading to your child right away. Children, even infants, are never too young for a picture book. Attention span is a learned process. Infant reading studies show that most infants average a three-minute attention span. However, like exercising a muscle, those who are read to regularly can have an attention span as long as 30 minutes a day.

Be a role model. Children read more when they see other people



reading. There is a direct correlation between how often children read for leisure and how often their parents do.

Create reading rituals. Create regular times in your children's day when you read to them. My daughters look forward to hearing two books after every meal while they are still in their chairs. We started this ritual as soon as they were able to use a highchair. Many parents use nap or bedtime for a reading ritual.

Keep books on hand at all times. Bring books with you wherever you go: to the park, doctors' appointments, play dates, relatives' homes, etc. Keep them in the car, in the diaper bag, in your purse and any place else you can think of, especially around the house. Have book baskets in your children's rooms, bathrooms, the kitchen and living room.

Read to your child regularly. A study of early readers, like Elizabeth Barrett, found that their parents not only read them books but also read package labels, street signs, billboards and other reading material that they encountered throughout the day.

Give your child a bed lamp. As soon as your child is old enough to read in bed get him a night light and allow him to stay up past his bedtime to read.

Point to the words as you are reading them. The visual receptors in the brain outnumber the auditory receptors 30 to 1 and therefore the chances of a word being retained in our memory are 30 times greater if we see it instead of just hearing it.

Use books to help you deal with difficult situations. A toddler who is hitting a sibling can learn from *Hands Are Not for Hitting*.

Get books about topics that interest your kids. If you notice your toddler showing interest in birds, buy books about birds. If your child seems interested in fire engines get books about fire engines.

Always read the name of the author and illustrator. This helps children understand that people create books. It also gives them the opportunity to pursue other books by the same author if they like the book.

Turn off the TV. Every minute that your child sits in front of the

television is a minute he is not reading, playing, exercising or being creative. Not only does TV viewing directly cut into reading time, but once exposed to television and given the choice, most kids will pick television over books. The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that parents limit their children's viewing to fewer than 10 hours a week. This makes sense since an international study of children in four countries found that those who view more than 10 hours of television in one week experienced a proportional decline in their academic scores.

Dr. Jenn is a licensed Marriage, Family and Child Therapist in private practice, and the author of "The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy Confident Kids." Her next book, "SuperBaby: The 12 Ways Parents Can Give Their Child a Head Start in the First Three Years," will be released Mother's day 2010. For more information on Dr. Jenn go to: www.DoctorJenn.com.



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