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HELPING PARENTS HELP THEIR CHILDREN

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Reading specialists are often besieged by calls from frantic parents. "What can I do? My child is having trouble with . . ." Many times, a long conversation follows in which, consistently, one fact emerges--the parent, genuinely concerned about the child's problem, wants to know something specific and concrete to do. We usually suggest the procedure of having the child's problems diagnosed and followed up by prescriptive instruction, either in the classroom or through a clinic or tutor. Still, though, many parents are not satisfied. They feel very concerned about their child's problems and want to know about something they can do. For many parents, the best answer is "nothing," but others are so emotionally involved that they need to know something concrete to do. What, then, are some techniques that the reading specialist can teach parents to do?

Such techniques need, in most cases, to be fairly simple and structured. The specialist should also try to get to know the parents before making recommendations. However, the literature reveals several techniques that meet these criteria and that parents can learn to help their children. (While these ideas are directed toward parents here, they could be used by para-professionals and volunteers as well.) The remainder of this article will focus on a sample of these techniques in various skills areas of reading.

Letter or Word Recognition

Parents can learn Grace Fernald's old remedial VAKT technique. There are filmstrips available for teaching parents (Brook, 1976) or a handout with a half-hour training session might be used. Perhaps the best use of this activity

is for the teacher or reading specialist to send home a very small number of words (in the range of one to five) per week for parents and children to learn through VAKT. By tracing it in crayon, writing in string or tracing in a sand tray, parent and child can say the words, trace them and practice until visual memory is perfect. Word cards can be kept for review every three or four weeks.

High Frequency Word Recognition

Parents might modify the Words on the Wall technique (Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham & Moore, 1983) to help their youngsters master recognition of high frequency words. The teacher should supply a list of words to be learned from sight (from basals, sight word lists, content area units, etc.). Over a period of a couple of weeks, the child could choose a few words to learn each night. The parent writes them on scraps of paper, index cards, or memo sheets. Together, they say the word and use it in several sentences. Then they place the word cards on the wall (or refrigerator with magnets or a flannel board, or a piece of cardboard) so that they can continually be kept in alphabetical order. Every few nights, the parent gives a "spelling" test of five words, but the child is allowed to look at the words. Through these many repetitions, the words should soon be learned.

Comprehension

Anthony Manzo's Guided Reading Procedure (1975) can be a helpful technique for parents and child to work on comprehension, either in content areas or narrative reading practice. Teachers might suggest this technique to parents whose children can decode but have difficulty with literal comprehension, but they should be certain that the material the children will be reading with their parents is at least an instructional level and about a topic with which the student has some familiarity. With these cautions in mind, the technique can be used in much the same way it is used in the classroom. The parent would briefly introduce a short to normal length assignment, have the youngster read silently, record in writing what s/he can retell about the reading, have the child reread to correct and verify information, organize the data for easier recall, and finally check comprehension with a short oral quiz. The technique should definitely not be a nightly ritual; once a

week should be the limit. This same technique may be adapted for listening by having the print read to the child.

Vocabulary Development

An easy, game-like vocabulary technique suggested by Kaplan and Tuchman (1980) can be modified for use by parents to study vocabulary. The teacher might send home a list of words related to a unit about to be studied in class. The parents and child then take the list and read it over briefly. Then, with a one or two-minute time limit, the child writes (or dictates if very young) as many words as s/he can think of that relate to the listed words. After some brief discussion, the youngster writes or dictates sentences or a paragraph that include as many of the listed and suggested words as possible. The words might then be placed in a file box or on a poster for future review.

Impress Methods

If children need to improve their understanding of the relationships of print to oral language, impress methods that combine hearing language while simultaneously seeing and reading print can be used by the parent. To do this activity, the parent and child sit close together while the parent reads a story aloud. The child reads along just slightly behind the rate of the parent. The parent and/or child may move his/her index finger along the print. The sessions should stop before the youngster becomes fatigued and may be varied slightly according to different authorities (Carbo, 1978; Heckleman, 1969; Hollingsworth, 1970).

Improved Decoding

Repeated readings and imitative reading can make decoding more automatic and therefore eventually improve comprehension. The parent would use repeated reading by timing the child's reading of a passage selected by the teacher, perhaps from a book and record or cassette combination. The reader then practices with the recording until it can be read more fluently. The parent then retimes and checks comprehension and, if improvement has occurred to a rate of approximately 85 words per

minute, the child moves to another reading. If not, practice continues. Imitative reading is similar, except that the child listens to the tape and follows the book for as many times as necessary until the story can be read without the text. At that point, the parent notes word recognition and comprehension problems and sends a note to the teacher for follow-up or a new assignment.

Model Reading

The technique of Sustained Silent Reading (Hunt, 1971; McCracken, 1971), so useful to many teachers may help parents model reading for their children. It would be used in homes essentially the same way that it is in classrooms. At a designated time and for a specific period on a certain number of days, everyone in the household would read self-chosen materials; very young children or non-reading older ones might look at books. Care should be taken that the period is short enough to be pleasurable for everyone. However, having everyone involved in reading on a regular basis can be a very helpful technique that all parents can do with their youngsters.

General Textbook Study

As students reach the middle grades they are often expected to read and study independently. Parents can help them develop or improve these skills by using the PQ 4 R technique (Thomas and Robinson, 1977). This technique stands for five study steps designated as pre-view, question, read and reflect, recite, and review. The teacher might duplicate handouts such as the following:

Date _____ Book _____

Pages _____

Preview: Oral; use headings, beginning and ending paragraphs, pictures, charts, etc. to get a general idea of the assignment

Question: Use the headings, bold face type, italics, headings and/or first and last paragraphs to make

questions. Jot down a few good ones here.

Read and Reflect: Read each section of the assignment silently. Think about the answers to the question. Reread if confused.

Recite: Say the answers to the most important questions to your parent(s).

Review: Briefly go over the steps above, especially the trouble spots, with parent(s).

We have studied this assignment together.

Parent _____

Student _____

Date _____

Questions or Comments:

The student and parents could then follow the technique, if the material is not extremely difficult for the youngster. If a severe reading problem exists, the same general procedures might be followed with the parent reading to the child while he listens and does the steps.

All of these strategies are ones that parents should be able to learn easily and ones that should not interfere with the classroom teacher's instruction. Yet, with a little planning and training, they can answer the parents' pleas for "What can I do to help my child?"

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