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HELPING YOUNG READERS: A TEACHER'S TALK FOR PARENTS

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Reading teachers are often asked to speak to groups of parents about ways parents can help their children to be better readers. Lists of tips for parents are likely to be useful and well received, but talks which also try to give parents insight into a current theory or view of reading might be even more useful. If parents have some understanding of the process of reading, not only will lists of suggestions make more sense to them, but they should be able to use such an understanding to generate their own ideas and to modify old suggestions when they unexpectedly fail.

The present article outlines an entertaining one-hour parent talk designed to communicate a current perspective on reading (Goodman, 1967; Rumelhart, 1977) and makes suggestions for helping young readers at home.

The Overview

During the overview, the parents are told that first we're going to talk a little about what a person does when reading, i.e., about the process of reading, or how it happens. Second, after we talk about how we read, we'll go over some specific suggestions for ways to help our children be better readers.

Demonstration and Presentation of a Simplified Version of a Current View of the Reading Process

Five Features of Reading

The parents are told that to help us understand a current view of how people read, I'll ask them to read

something. They're told that a phrase will be flashed (on an overhead projector or a large card), and they should read it and tell what they saw. You might want to flash a following page of this article where Figure 1 shows the phrase, to see if you read what most parents read.

Although the phrase says "Paris in the the spring," nearly all parents see it as "Paris in the spring." When asked why we read it as "Paris in the Spring," parents give reasons such as : It's a familiar phrase. You don't expect to see two "the's" together. You just see Paris and spring, so you think it's "Paris in the spring."

What is the point of the demonstration? That reading is not simply a sequential process of looking at every letter and putting letters together to make words, and words together to make phrases, etc. Instead, it can be characterized as a sampling process wherein we make guesses about meaning. Drastically simplified, reading involves the following five features: background knowledge, expectations, sampling and guessing, comparing, and matching.

Background Knowledge. We start with some knowledge of the topic and of how language works. In our "Paris in the the spring" example, many of us had prior knowledge of the familiar phrase. Similarly, our background knowledge of grammatical conventions of English dictated that it's very unusual to read two "the's" together in a sentence.

Expectations. We use our background knowledge to set up expectations for content and for specific words. Expectations play a very important role in reading. We often read or see what we expect to be there. We interpret experience in the light of our expectations.

Expectations lead us. In The Phantom Tollbooth (Juster, 1961), a book written for adolescents, the character Milo goes on a long journey. As he arrives at a tollbooth, he sees a sign "Welcome to Expectations." He asks, "What is the place--Expectations?" The attendant says "Expectations is the place you must always go to before you get to where you're going."

In reading as in life, one's interpretations are greatly influenced by what we expect to find.

Sampling and guessing. Readers sample and make guesses as they read rather than looking at every letter and word. In order to make guesses, readers must be willing to take chances and risk being wrong. For poorer readers, guessing and taking risks can be very difficult.

A demonstration of guessing and risk taking--During the early 50s, a theory called Signal Detection Theory (Swets, 1973) emerged because military personnel discovered use of radar to detect targets or signals was imperfect and many signals or targets were missed. Sometimes presence of a target or signal was very clear, and sometimes it was very clear that no target or signal was there, but often it was difficult to tell either way. Decision makers, it turned out, were conservative. They were reluctant to guess the target was there when the target was unclear.

Assuming the radar equipment could not be improved, psychologists turned to a graphic display like the one in Figure 2 and reasoned that if the decision maker's task was mainly to increase success, then the incidences in box one must increase. To do that, the decision makers would have to guess the target was present more often. However, because of imperfect reliability of radar, if they guessed the target was present, they could be wrong. Incidences in box 2, failure, would also increase. Thus, they would have to learn to guess the targets present more often, but the trade-off would be increased numbers of failures.

Figure 1. An illustration of the use of background knowledge, expectations, and guessing in reading.

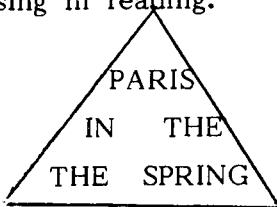


Figure 2. A schematic of the intersections of decision choices (guesses) and reality.

		There	Not There
There	Success	1	2
	Failure	3	4
Not There	Success		
	Failure		

Another example of the relationship between success and failure in risk taking comes from baseball. A few years ago, Rickey Henderson broke the record for the most stolen bases. Note--he also had the record for the most failed attempts.

The relevant point of Signal Detection Theory is that guessing involves some risk of being wrong. Yet in order to be more successful, more guesses will need to be made, and some failure is likely to be encountered.

Comparing. Readers should compare what they sample to what they expected to find.

Matching. If there is a match between what was read and what was expected, reading continues. If not, there are several recourses, e.g., a reader might quit, reread, read ahead, or ask for help.

Reading is Creative

Next the parents are told we'll go just a little farther now with this view of reading to make one more point. We read a brief passage, and ask some questions. The passage: John went to Vescio's, his favorite Italian restaurant. When the waiter brought his food, John was so enraged that he left without leaving a tip. He even forgot his umbrella. (Passage from Pearson & Johnson, 1978)

A question such as "Where did John go (at the beginning)?" is answered by "to Vescio's" or "to an Italian restaurant." The parents are then asked where the answer came from--from the words on the page.

Another question, "What's the restaurant like?" elicits the most interesting responses. Consider three types of Italian restaurants. One is a fast food place. Let's call it "Minute Macaroni." At the other extreme is "Sanatore's" an "uptown" and sophisticated restaurant, where at least four courses are always served, there is a maitre d'hotel, there are white tablecloths with accompanying elegant table settings, and there is a waiter whose only job is to stand at the side of the room and watch for smokers so he can light their cigarettes. A third type of restaurant, which we'll call "Sal's," might fall someplace in between the first two. Sal's is a place where there may or may not be someone to seat you, there probably are vinyl red

and white checked tablecloths, there are candleholders with plastic white webbing on them (the kind you use outdoors to keep bugs away) or old Chianti bottles with candle stubs in them, and a basic one-course menu. Which of these three types of restaurants is Vescio's? If you said "Sal's," you picked the one most parents pick.

Why do people paint Vescio's in their minds most like Sal's? Typical responses are: "Because I know that it's unusual for single people to go alone to a very fancy place." "At a fast food restaurant you pay before you sit down." "At a really special place you probably would not order lasagna." Isn't it interesting that we have a fairly detailed picture of what Vescio's looks like? But notice that such a picture is not directly described any place in the written words!

The point of this exercise is that readers do gain insight into meaning directly from the words on the page, but they also use prior knowledge, feelings, and beliefs to interpret texts and to build and enrich interpretation and understanding. So reading is a powerfully creative process. Meaning is created through the interface of words on the page and what's already in the reader's mind.

Implications for Parenting Reading

Finally, some of the implications of the view of reading presented here are shared, and accompanying specific suggestions for how parents can encourage their youngsters to be better readers are given. These are:

- 1.) Background knowledge plays an important role in reading. Parents can help their children by engaging them in real life and vicarious experiences such as going on trips, sharing movies, watching selected television programs, and reading books, newspapers, and magazines.
 - 2.) Knowledge of how language works affects readers' expectations and guesses before and during reading. Parents can help by modeling good communication, genuinely listening to and talking with their children, paraphrasing, and correctly repeating inappropriate or ungrammatical statements.
 - 3.) Expectations affect interpretation and understanding
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of text and other experiences. Parents can help children to learn to set up expectations to guide and facilitate their comprehension while reading. One way to do this is to ask questions that require children to make predictions about what they expect to find, see, or hear in a movie, program, or book they are about to see or hear, or a trip they are about to take.

4.) Guessing is an integral part of reading. Suggestions for parents to help children make guesses and take risks include talking to their children about the importance of making "educated" guesses about words or ideas while reading, encouraging them to guess at words based on surrounding meaning or prior knowledge, and de-emphasizing word-perfect reading. Also, parents can provide support and encouragement when guesses are off-track and be willing to give partial credit for choices and responses that are only partly right. Asking for opinions and showing that texts can have several interpretations also enhances guesses and risk-taking.

5.) Effort and trying to "fix up" are useful when miscomprehension or mismatches occur. Poorer readers especially are often unaware that effort--trying to do something, helps when there's a problem. Parents can suggest that children use intervention strategies such as reading ahead, rereading, and thinking about what makes sense.

Conclusion

Parents are often very concerned about how they can help their children to read better. They can be eager for insight and suggestions. This article attempted to give a detailed outline of a light but informative and theory-based way to help parents help their children.

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