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OUR DAUGHTER LEARNS TO READ AND WRITE:  
LOOKING BACK

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I enjoy reminiscing about our earliest years with Giti and her language learning. My husband, Hafiz, and I were graduate students at Indiana University and interested in everything there was to know about life. When I found out I was pregnant, I never doubted that our child would read. I had spent entire days in my childhood whipping through piles of library books and swapping Nancy Drew and Judy Bolton books with cousins. My husband had taught himself to read under the most miserable of circumstances, and begged for paper and pen in a Central Asian village where neither could easily be found. Even as struggling students, we would always buy books before clothes, and treasure owning them. We remain infatuated with the special feel of libraries. How could we not share these emotions with the newest member of our family?

One night before Giti was born, we were washing dishes together and having a typical pre-parent conversation about how we would be as parents and how much this absolutely new person would have to learn. We wondered, as parents, how we could help him or her learn. I remember remarking how wonderful it would be to follow how a child becomes a reader. Even when Hafiz and I could agree on no name for a boy, we jumped at "Giti" as our name for a girl. We chose a Persian name meaning "universe, or world without borders" for we saw her as belonging to the world and reading as opening the world to her.

When Giti was born, we were overwhelmed with her maintenance, colic, and our classes. Yet somehow even in the distraught first year, we managed to work in rhymes,

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games, songs, and picture books. I decided to study her reading and writing development as an academic topic.

Although I knew I was looking for outstanding achievements when I began the case study, what impresses me today is how much I underestimated her ability. During a trip when she was 24 months old, we stopped for a red light near the junction of several shopping malls. Giti shouted, "K-mart!" The stores were so numerous that the marquee was not immediately visible to us. Farther along she noted "Ayr-Way" and was also correct. At home, for example, she had been saying, "Sears" when we went into Sears but because of her age, I assumed the building rather than the print triggered an oral response. However, at our next rest stop, Hafiz printed K-mart on a napkin for Giti and she read it. Until Ayr-Way was written exactly as the logo, she could not read it. Once the "A" was printed typographically and the tail of the "y" swung to the left, she read it immediately and pointed to the space between the "Ayr" and "Way" and said, "Flower," directing us to put a flower rather than a hyphen between the words. She was reading, and I didn't even know how long this connection with print had been going on!

After our trip, Giti began to question, "That?", with rising intonation, and point from her car seat as she passed familiar places. I cut out some logos and glued them on cards held together with pieces of yarn. One night she went to the table to look at her homemade books and showed me the card for "Special K." Rather than reading the card, she put her finger on the K and said, "K-mart." I probably would have thought she had made a mistake if she had not then turned to the "K-mart" card, pointed to the "M", and said, "McDonald's." Giti was making associations not only with sounds and letters, but with letters across words she recognized. I was overwhelmed!

There were other highlights in Giti's journey to facile literacy with which I was pleased, but these landmarks produced a high above any teachable moment. They also produced some guilt. Why should I have been surprised? Why didn't I better anticipate what Giti could handle? I had been trying to be an aware adult in interaction with her own child. Shouldn't I have done better than other parents and teachers? Are we so enculturated to underesti-

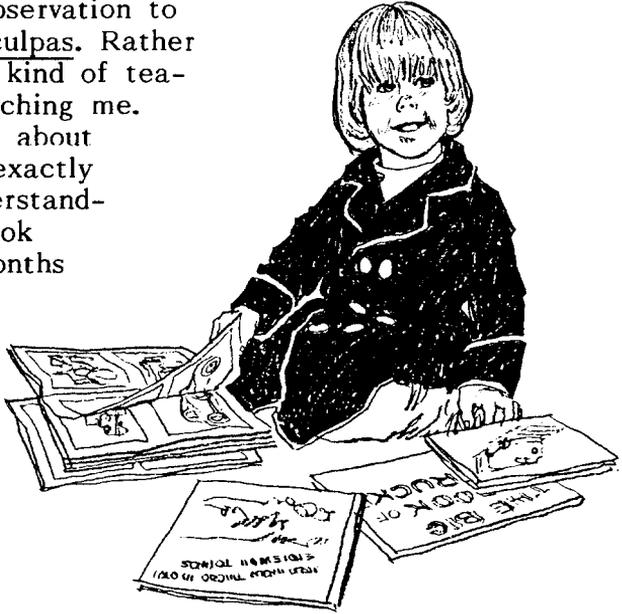
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mate children?

And another observation to bring on the mea culpas. Rather than my doing any kind of teaching, Giti was teaching me.

Giti taught me about reading. I learned exactly how much her understanding of the same book could grow over months of hearing it again and again.

Giti taught me about writing helping reading, and I learned that I better collect those scribblings she threw around the house.



Giti taught me about drawing and writing, and I learned that I better save her pictures and find out more about how children's art develops.

Giti taught me about stories and I learned to listen to and read her organizations.

I learned that I should not have been surprised at how much she knew.

I learned that I should have known her better.