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# TEACHERS, PARENTS, AND READING INSTRUCTION: A LEARNING ALLIANCE

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In any discussion of reading instruction, there is usually considerable debate about what teachers should and should not do to help children read. However, it is a narrowly focused view to think of reading instruction as solely the responsibility of teachers. Recent research (Artley, 1975; Rich, 1973) has clearly demonstrated the role of parents in affecting children's success in reading. Parents can and do have a profound influence upon children's subsequent reading achievement. Therefore, it is mandatory that teachers and parents take an active role in reading instruction to insure success for children during the learning to read process.

This paper explores some ways in which teachers can direct the efforts of parents so children gain the best possible advantage in learning to read.

## *The Child and Reading Instruction*

The discussion should begin with a word about the child. Learning to read is not easy. It is a task which will require much effort on the part of the child. Basically, the child will be attempting to develop two sets of skills: (1) word recognition skills—needed for decoding unknown words and (2) comprehension skills—needed for understanding what has been read. If and when these skills are established, the child will spend less time learning to read and more time reading to learn. However, a certain level of skill attainment will be necessary before this point is reached. These skills can be taught in a variety of ways and there is continual debate as to the best method of teaching reading.

## *The Foundation for Reading*

Children are different and come to school with a variety of skills and attitudes which either enhance or hinder reading achievement. This raises the question: What should parents be encouraged to do to help their child's reading so the child comes to school with skills and attitudes which enhance the formal instruction supplied by teachers? Teachers must play a role in a child's reading instruction both before and after formal schooling begins. By forming an alliance with parents very early in a child's schooling, teachers can suggest activities and procedures which will benefit the child in preparing for the difficult task of learning to read.

Teachers should outline specific aims which parents should attempt to work towards with their child. It should be remembered that the child's education for the five years before formal schooling begins is completely guided by parents, consequently parental actions will influence later

outcomes. What should the teacher suggest parents work towards on the part of their child? The aims should include helping the child achieve:

1. sufficient command of simple English sentences;
2. wide speaking vocabulary;
3. reasonable facility in use of ideas, in conversation, and in simple reasoning;
4. a wide range of experiences;
5. genuine desire to read.

The first three aims are primarily concerned with language development and are quite important if it is realized that reading is a communication process just like language. A child is never really taught to speak in a formal manner; it is a process of exposing the child to spoken language in interesting and meaningful ways. The child needs input and once given that linguistic input, the child reveals a remarkable ability to create language (McNeil, 1971). Therefore, the time a parent spends with a child is invaluable. Talking with, not at, the child and listening to, not anticipating, the child will express a great deal of love and attention on the part of the parent and aid the language development of the child. Specifically, the teacher should suggest the following to parents:

1. give the child ample opportunity to listen since this is in the main channel of information;
2. readily supply a label for unknown objects.
3. avoid overcorrection of grammatical faults;
4. avoid making the child struggle to be understood;
5. engage in real conversation with the child.

Hopefully, the outcome is the establishment of an adequate language base upon which reading instruction can build. Just as the child was exposed to spoken language, the child can be helped to succeed in reading by offering increased exposure to written language in interesting and meaningful ways. The goal here is directed at achieving success for the last two aims mentioned above.

#### *What Parents Should Do—Three Important Activities*

I. The first and foremost activity that teachers should encourage for parents is to read aloud to their child at home. Reading aloud at home is one of the most affective ways by which a parent can help a child's reading. This is an activity that should begin during the playpen days if the child is to grow up with the conviction that reading is an important activity worth the time and effort.

Research (Monroe and Rogers, 1954) has clearly demonstrated that a child's early experience with printed matter has an influence on later attitudes towards books and reading. By about two years of age, the child learns to turn pages without tearing them, learns to recognize the front and back of a book, learns that pictures have a top and bottom, learns where the story begins, learns how to get meaning from pictures, and how to follow the sequence of events in a story.

In short, the child is laying a foundation for reading. This is important if reports (Downing, 1969) which show that children with reading problems lack a real conceptual understanding of what reading and reading-related concepts mean are believed. However, this situation is easily avoided if there is reading in the home. A child cannot be taught to love books but by reading to a child, an atmosphere that will help the child appreciate the gifts that reading and books can bring can be created. Reading to children enriches their language. Unconscious and conscious memorization of words, phrases, and images often results. Depth and breadth of vocabulary is enhanced. Reading to children develops their concepts, knowledge, and thinking ability. The vicarious experiences obtained are essential in order to broaden the child's understanding of the world. The importance of reading to the child cannot be emphasized too strongly. To facilitate the activity, some specific points should be enumerated to parents by teachers. These points include:

1. The materials read to the child should include poems and prose, fiction and nonfiction, adventure, fantasy, myths, fairy tales, legends and folk.
2. If possible, both parents should become involved with reading to the child either together or on alternate occasions. It should be pointed out that the influence of a parent is far greater if the parent enjoys reading. If parents themselves read, it is a graphic demonstration that reading can give continuing satisfaction.
3. Parents should be encouraged to make the reading-listening period a time for enjoyment and relaxation. It should not be a formal type of instructional period; instead it should be what Gates (1954) referred to as "easy-going guidance." It should probably last about a half hour. During this time, there should be no television, no record player, no radio and no friends of the child present.
4. Parents should be cautioned not to read longer than the child can sustain attention to the reading. The time spent will vary depending upon the moods of the child and parent, the amount of time available, the child's interest and other unpredictable factors.
5. Teachers should emphasize that withdrawal of the reading-listening period should not be used as punishment for misbehavior. This is the fastest way to destroy the positive effects of the activity.
6. Parents should interpret the mood, tone, and action of the passage being read. Parents should not be afraid to be dramatic.
7. A very good adjunct activity is the educational television programs such as *Sesame Street*. They are enjoyable and also manage to give some formal instruction. Daily watching of these programs plus the parents reading with the child will be most profitable in insuring a solid foundation for formal reading instruction.

Initially, the child should simply be read to, for the enjoyment and pleasure of listening. Gradually, parents should read to the child with the child in their laps so the child is able to see the print. Slowly, the child will begin to associate print and speech, follow along, and learn persistence to

print. The goal of this activity is to instill in the child a desire to read and to establish some basic ideas about what is involved in reading.

Even when the child is in school, parents should be encouraged to continue reading aloud at home. The beginning reader has limited skills and needs to hear the rhythmic language of an experienced reader. An obvious question of parents is: "Won't reading to a child who can read spoil the child?" and "Doesn't the child need practice in reading?" The teacher's answers should be no and yes, respectively. The child needs practice but also needs the parents' guidance through a variety of new stories and, most importantly, the warm, reassuring experience of talking over what has been read. Gradually, as the child becomes more independent in reading, parents can become the listeners as the child reads aloud. Much discussion should follow in which the child takes the leadership position. This will greatly enhance the child's feelings of maturity. One procedural guide should be suggested to parents: If the child cannot pronounce a particular word, tell the child what it is. Guard against telling a child to "sound out" a word – if the child could do so, it would have been done and while struggling, the sense of the story is lost!

II. A second activity in which parents should be encouraged to make a contribution is in relating a child's reading to the child's interests. There is little or nothing which can sidetrack the child who is interested in what he is doing. Children will make an extraordinary effort over a long period when the subject is close to their hearts.

What does this mean for parents? It means essentially three things:

1. The child should be encouraged to pursue individual interests;
2. Parents should aid the child in developing new interests through new experiences;
3. Parents should help the child find reading matter that will whet the curiosity and answer the questions that stem from interests.

The interests of the child can become a springboard to reading. Teachers need to point out that the important thing for parents is to be aware and alert to the question, "Why?" From this question "Why?", parents should try to cultivate an attitude of "Let's look it up," which will lead the child to home reference books. They, in turn, can lead to more extended reading of books and magazines. But the bridge from curious question to extended reading is not built by itself. Parents need to lead the way in helping the child select books and sometimes aid the child in accumulating the information.

III. The final way parents should be encouraged to help their children with reading is to supply them with adequate tools. A carpenter or electrician could not work without the proper tools; a child also needs tools, that is, books at home which will increase interest in reading and provide the practice that the child needs to become a fluent reader. Without attractive reading material, the child is likely to turn to comic books and TV as his only entertainment. While this is not necessarily bad in and of itself, it does not foster the desirable reading habits which improve chances for

success. The child should be provided with a wide array of books so access to an interesting book is as easy as access to a TV program.

Some parents may raise the question, "But doesn't the child read in school?" The teacher's answer should be yes but with qualifications. It should be explained that most of the reading time in school is spent in learning new skills and refining existing skills. It should be pointed out that some reading materials used in school may not be particularly interesting and motivating for the child because of the constraints put on them as teaching materials. In addition, it should be noted to parents that the school day offers precious little time for free reading because of the demands of other curriculum areas. However, if the amount of time a child spends out of school is considered, it is not unreasonable that parents set aside time for their child to read. If parents join in this reading, soon enough the child will discover the joy of books and reading then becomes a self-perpetuating activity.

#### *What Parents Should Avoid*

Teachers should strive to make parents cognizant of the learning to read process and how they and their child can avoid experiencing difficulty with it. A very important factor affecting the learning to read process is the pressure which is put upon the child (Heilman, 1972). This pressure can come from three major sources: (1) The school. Grades and scores are often used as a threat; certain grouping procedures, or comparisons of and contrast to another child's work are sources of pleasure; or learning materials are often inappropriate. (2) The child. When a child cannot keep up with school work or fails to adjust adequately, disappointment and a sense of failure and despair put pressure on the child; the outcome can be either regression or rebellion. (3) The home. Outside sources unduly influence parents and put pressure on them; they, in turn, overtly or covertly put pressure on the child to learn to read. This pressure starts with the first day of school and continues with the first report card or the first parent-teacher conference. Consciously or unconsciously, the parents' influence is felt by the child in school. By probing questions and invidious comparisons, the overanxious parent may have a paralyzing influence on the child; at the other extreme is the parent whose apathy may be deadening for the child.

#### *Reading and Learning*

Teachers must bring parents to the realization that their actions have an effect on the child's reading achievement. Reading cannot only be thought of in terms of special books, special word lists, and special teaching procedures. If three basic principles of learning are emphasized for parents: (1) we learn by doing, (2) we learn best the things we like to do, and (3) we comprehend more readily the information and ideas that have immediate relevance for us, then the guidelines and activities outlined will be in line with these basic principles of learning and allow parents to take an active role in their child's reading instruction. This additional help can only be beneficial for the child in attempting to cope with the difficult task of

learning to read. The ultimate goal, of course, is a child who is a skilled reader and knows the joys of reading. It is doubtful that any parent would argue with that goal or not actively try to help their child achieve that goal if made aware of the importance of such help by the teacher.

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