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# THE READING THERAPIST AND PARENT CONFERENCE

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Parent conferences are vital and can play a decisive role in the success of the remedial reading program. As the reading therapist confers with parents he has the opportunity to explain the nature of the corrective program and also the particular remediation being provided for their child. This encourages the parents to an understanding of both the program and the child's reading problem. The therapist also gains a better concept of the whole child, the emotional atmosphere of the family, and the total home environment as it relates to the child's reading problem. Ultimately and of greatest importance are the advantages to the child which evolve from the conference between the reading specialist and his parents.

The conference is of utmost importance to the parents of children who have reading disabilities, for these mothers and fathers need to be informed so that they might better understand their children's problems. The initial conference may serve as a means of explaining the corrective reading program to the parents and the reason for selecting their child for remediation. Every effort should be made to establish friendly relations with the parents so that the remedial work being carried on with the child will be given positive reinforcement in the home. The reading teacher should strive to end the first conference with the way left open for continued cooperative communication.

Subsequent conferences may serve to inform the parents about their child's progress or lack of progress and the vital role which they play in contributing to his success in reading. The goals of the parent conference begin to be realized as the reading specialist is able "to help the parent and to get help from the parent in a mutual effort to understand the child and the conditions that are preventing him from reaching his potential reading ability."<sup>1</sup> As the parents begin to sense a genuine interest and respect on the part of the reading specialist they will feel they can meet on common ground with him and honestly discuss their child's problem.

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1. Strang, Ruth. *Diagnostic Teaching of Reading*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964. p. 237.

At the time of the second conference those conditions which are adversely affecting the child's growth in reading should be brought tactfully to the parents' attention while the therapist is in direct contact with them. The reading teacher can no longer accentuate only the positive factors operating in the home but must bring clear understanding to the characteristics of the home that are not good for the child, providing good rapport has been established.

In conferring with the parents the therapist must be truthful and honest, "but at the same time be courteous, understanding, and empathetic."<sup>2</sup> At all times the reading specialist must maintain a sensitivity to the way parents are thinking and feeling. He must be cautious in his approach and avoid technical terms unless he explains them clearly. Neither should he talk down to the parents, but explain in everyday language the information he has to offer about their child. He must be careful not to condemn, blame, or expect the parents to do all of the adjusting. The therapist must be humble. He must be real. He must be matter-of-fact. The conference has real value for the parents when they can come away with a good understanding of how the reading specialist is attempting to help their child; and are able to perceive their vital role in helping to alleviate his reading problem.

The conference offers a valuable opportunity for the therapist to learn about the child in his total environment. It is important for him to know about the child's home and neighborhood and to understand conditions which may be preventing him from achieving in reading. The therapist can also become aware of positive conditions which exist and give special emphasis to them in providing reading therapy for this student.

The reading conference provides the opportunity whereby the reading specialist may both offer and obtain information about the child as well as learning pertinent information which may come up incidentally. To initiate the conference he may wish to inform parents about the reading program and how it will benefit their child. He could show the parents some of the materials and briefly acquaint them with some of the techniques and methods he uses to make reading meaningful and enjoyable to their child. At this time an example of the child's work could be shown and an explanation as to what was being emphasized in his therapy sessions.

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2. Heffernan, Helen and Vivian E. Todd. *Elementary Teacher's Guide To Working With Parents*. West Nyack, N. Y.: Parker Publishing Company, Inc., 1967. p. 107.

At this point in the conference the parents will usually begin to offer information about their child and this opens the way for the therapist to ask some questions. It is important to the reading teacher to know whether or not the child has responsibilities in the home, the kind of discipline he receives and how he reacts to it, the amount of rest he gets each night, what he does for fun at home, his friends in the neighborhood, and what he has to say about his reading class at home. Most parents will be honest in answering these questions if proper rapport has been established with them.

During the course of the conference the therapist may learn about the general feeling of the family, what they expect of the child, his place in the family, their aspirations for him or their lack of concern. The reading teacher will become aware of modifications to be made in his therapy sessions and may also suggest changes to be made in the home as the parents strive to help with their child's reading problems. In addition, the teacher will have the opportunity to counsel and help this student make adjustments to those circumstances which cannot be changed. As the reading teacher learns to know the child in both his home and school situations he can plan more effective ways in which to work with the child.

One of the greatest values growing out of the parent-therapist conference is to the child. He gains a greater feeling of security in knowing that his parents and teacher are so very interested in him. He realizes that this reading class is planned exclusively for him and becomes aware of his reading disability in a more positive way. The conference helps to build a clearer understanding between the child and his parents. It seems to break down a barrier concerning his problem so that they are able to work together in a compatible way.

An example of parent involvement in a child's reading problem is that of Mrs. Blank who explained to the therapist that she had been attempting to help her eight-year-old son with reading at home. She spent one hour each evening with him and would instruct him to stop and sound every word he missed. She had him do this repeatedly until she felt he had memorized it. After reading a selection she proceeded to quiz him for comprehension and was discouraged to learn that his understanding of the story was practically nil. Each of their evening sessions terminated with both the mother and child being very frustrated. The therapist commended the mother for her interest in helping her son and recommended several less difficult books that she might use at home. She also explained kindly to the mother that it would be better to work with her son only fifteen minutes each eve-

ning in order that it remain a pleasant experience. The therapist explained how important it was to keep a reading experience meaningful and enjoyable so that her son could experience success which would lead to a desire to read more. It was pointed out that it would be better to supply unknown words so that more meaning could be obtained from the story. Later they could return to the unknown words and determine their meaning by the use of contextual clues, which was also explained to the mother. At a later conference the mother had much happier experiences to share and the therapist was prompt to commend her and inform her that her son had improved both his attitude and his performance in reading.

The reading therapist cannot successfully conduct a corrective reading program without the parent conference, for "the whole child comes to school and brings the influence of the home with him."<sup>3</sup> The conference is essential for both the therapist and parents as they share information and discuss the child in the home and the school situations. The parent conference is indispensable to effective and real remediation of the disabled reader.

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 103.