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Mary Ruth Loughrin

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WHAT TO DO UNTIL THE TEACHER ARRIVES

Mary Ruth Loughrin

Preparing the child for schooling, the greatest experience of childhood, can be an exciting and rewarding experience for the parents. While the child is under their almost exclusive control in the pre-school years, they can initiate their own Head Start program instilling habits and attitudes in the child by simple methods, lovingly and patiently taught.

From the time the wee one comes into the home, parents should speak to the child in full sentences and in a conversational manner as they would to adults. While the mother is doing her housework, she can chat with the infant who will comprehend a great deal of what she is saying from the inflection and tone of her voice. "Baby talk" should not be encouraged. When the child begins to toddle to the kitchen and asks for "Wa, wa," the parent should hand him a drink of water saying, "Here is your drink of water." If the parents repeat the child's garbled pronunciation, the child believes it is acceptable; this hampers the development of good speech patterns. Similarly, sentence sense can be developed by parents who ask questions of the child which require a sentence for an answer. Parents should assist the child by stating the full answer and waiting for the child to repeat it.

Insistence by the parents that the child identify objects and persons by their proper name will enlarge greatly his vocabulary and sense of discrimination. The parents set the example: "Pick up the book, please," rather than, "Pick that up." When the child says, "Look at them," referring to some birds in the yard, the parent can say, "Those robins certainly are busy seeking worms." The constant admonition should be, "Call everything by its proper name." This extends to naming other children and adults by their proper names, both in conversation about them and directly to the persons themselves.

A child not only needs to be spoken to, but parents should encourage the child to express himself verbally and they should afford the opportunities and occasions for such expression. One such occasion is the evening meal. Parents should lead the conversation at the evening meal when the whole family is present. Each child should be asked questions which enable a child to tell of the important events

of the day. Care must be taken not to discourage the child by interruptions from others and a belittling of what the child considers of importance.

Another occasion for the child to express himself is at the family "conference." Too often the family conference is dramatized as a formal tribal meeting with solemn statements by adults who grant "equal time" to the young ones in a patronizing, superficially democratic manner. But the conference can be simply the mother or father addressing the child before the receiving of company into the home, before the shopping tour, before visiting the ill or handicapped person, before choosing an expensive piece of play equipment, or similar situations. "Children, we are going . . .," "We expect that you will . . .," "The situation will be . . .," "Do you think you should . . .?" "If so, why?" After the event, a discussion with their parents of their behavior gives them further opportunity to verbalize. When a child has conducted himself in a proper and polite manner, the parents should recognize this achievement. A warm hug and a smile in addition to "How proud I was of the way you acted . . .," will raise his self esteem and build his confidence in meeting new people or strange situations. He seeks parental approval above all and to substitute object rewards such as candy or toys confuses his personal sense of values.

Books from the public library are an easily available source for vocabulary enrichment of the pre-school child. When the parent reads an illustrated story, rhyme or poem to the little one whom he is holding on his lap, physical and emotional rapport between reader and child develops and the printed words take on significance and meaning to the child because they tell a story. The reader should relate an illustration to a particular word or sentence. He should name the animal in the picture as a horse, moose, or cow and ask the child to find other objects in the illustration. The reader should then ask "Think" questions. "Why was the little duck so happy?" "Why did they go to the grocery store instead of the drug store?"

After a parent has read a favorite story to the little one, the child will likely look at the book by himself and more often than not will want to "read" the story to his parents or to another brother or sister. The child begins to look upon his storybooks as his friends. The child becomes aware of why his parents enjoy reading the daily newspaper, magazines and books. He realizes that those strange little symbols say something.

Parents can assist a child to create his own books with pictures

taken from magazines or catalogues. Usual groupings are the family book, the house book, the color book, or any subject book containing pictures related to the one subject. This type of activity will assist the child in organizing his thoughts and working independently of the parent.

In addition to grocery shopping with the mother, trips to the library, and overnight visits to relatives, there are other activities to give the child further experiential background. These experiences include excursions to the lake, public swimming pools, museums, the zoo, or any outing of interest to the family.

The pre-schooler's participation in these activities is dependent upon the willingness of the parents to schedule the time ahead, to consider with the child some of the observations to be made on the excursion, to expend the physical effort necessary to the experience, and to sacrifice their personal interests to the child's betterment.

Drawings, paintings or clay models made by the child to depict what he did and saw will enable him to express himself through the art media. Hand puppets made from stockings, using buttons for eyes and red crayon for the mouth and black crayon for the nose and eyebrows provide a means for dramatic play which will stimulate the child's imagination. Monologues and dialogues occasioned by use of hand puppets often will delight and surprise the parents.

If a child continues to speak about a particular enrichment activity, the parent should tell the little one that he will write the story on a sheet of paper for him and then let the child illustrate it. No attempt should be made to make the child learn to read the tale by himself. If a family newspaper is printed, the story would be good front page material. The child's illustration could serve as the wire photo.

All of the above mentioned projects deal with the development of the pre-schooler's facility in vocabulary and comprehension. These abilities are most important, but they do not stand alone. During all the years that the parents are making the child familiar with the spoken language, other habits and attitudes must be inculcated. The child needs to learn obedience; kindness; affection; respect for other persons' property; self esteem; pride of family, religion and country; respect for authority; acceptance of responsibility and the value of needs over wants. The opportunities to develop these attitudes and acquire habits arise many times during the pre-school years. They can be brought about directly and indirectly. Unless the child is taught these traits in conjunction with teaching him to verbalize well, he will be emotionally immature.

All through life people have short-range and long-range goals. Short-range goals can be planned and executed in a small amount of time, such as marketing or getting to the dentist's or doctor's office on time. Long-range goals take much planning, time, patience and perseverance. For parents, their most valuable long-range goal is the proper rearing of their children. The pre-school years are but the beginning, and if the parents have done their best to prepare the child for schooling and meeting new persons and situations in life, they can only hope that they have taken all the necessary precautions while waiting for the teacher to arrive.