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PARENTS, SCHOOL AND READING

Sandra Sloan

Much has been written about reading. Hundreds of research projects have been carried out to determine just what can be done to improve the teaching of reading in the nation's schools. From all sides come advice, suggestions, panaceas and gimmicks to make all children accomplished readers. School mail is filled with advertisements extolling new books, workbooks, programs, and what-have-you that will greatly improve the school reading program. Millions of dollars have been spent purchasing these materials and yet reading is still a major problem in every school.

I would like to say at the outset that every child cannot become an accomplished reader for we have learned long ago that you cannot "make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." What we can do, however, is approach reading with a common sense objective of teaching each child to read to the best of his ability.

Through the past few years several ideas concerning reading keep popping into my mind. First, the idea of reading readiness; second, the great influence the home has on reading readiness; and third, the need for parents to be made aware of their important role in the development of reading readiness.

Readiness is a Must

Most parents and teachers realize that in beginning any activity children must be ready. Readiness for anything is a state of being. A child must be ready to be weaned, ready to walk, ready to talk, ready to be toilet trained before these activities can be successfully learned. Readiness is a composite of many factors and it must be measured in many ways. It is not a thing to be taught. It can neither be purchased in a box nor developed on paper. It is part of life.

A state of readiness manifests itself in many ways. Sometimes the outer appearances represent only a superficial readiness. Something vital must shine through! It is a kind of reaching out which is recognizable to the skilled teacher as she works with children at any age level. It is a recognition which goes beyond the limits of testing.

Readiness evolves from practice with the environment, people, and materials which promote the desire to look beyond the commonplace, beyond self-interest; to reach a level of physical maturity, of social competence, of emotional control and of mental alertness. Readiness for reading, as for anything else, is built on such experiences

over a long period of time. It is the solid substance of growth, personality, imagination, and self-realization.

Although the concept of reading readiness has been “tossed around” for more than twenty years, its nature and purpose still are not clear to all teachers. Many teachers today appear to believe that a child is ready to learn to read the day he completes the reading readiness workbook. They seem unaware of the fact that readiness is not a point in a child’s development in the sense that he is ready one day but not the day before.

Reading readiness means that a child’s mind, body, emotions, and interests are all ready for learning to read. When thought of in this way, it becomes apparent that for most children there is not one day or week when they are completely ready to read.

The modern concept of reading readiness is that it is a combination of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social factors. Thus it is evident that reading readiness involves a multiplicity of factors which gradually mature or are modified by training until the whole picture is favorable for initial reading success.

Reading readiness involves a sort of all-around growth where one phase of development affects another. And we cannot force this readiness any more than we can force a child to walk. Too many teachers forget and parents don’t realize that it takes several years to ready a child for reading—years in which he becomes prepared physically, mentally, emotionally and socially to work with reading symbols happily and easily. Pushed beyond his readiness, the child may become confused, lose confidence, wonder if he’s backward or stupid, and be convinced that it’s useless to try. Feelings like these make learning to read more difficult.

Parents Can Help

Exceedingly important is the contribution of the home to the child’s readiness for reading. As Monroe pointed out in her book *Growing Into Reading*, pre-reading experiences begin to lay a foundation as early as two years of age. Educators agree that children whose parents enjoy reading usually anticipate learning to read. Recognized is the importance of attitudes stemming from family interest, cultural opportunities through family life, and the child’s intellectual curiosity. Benefits resulting from parents reading aloud to their children encompass not only liking books and reading, but also giving background which will aid the child in understanding more difficult stories. A

great degree of the child's reading readiness is dependent upon his previous environment.

Very often I'm amazed to find that some children have had absolutely no background. I've found out that they've never heard a nursery rhyme or have never had a story read to them when they were small children. When people speak about how children can't learn or won't learn to read, I don't know how they can expect them to, if they have nothing to relate it to, nothing in their own lives that is beautiful or imaginative.

Children who have opportunities for rich firsthand experiences in their environment have their own collection of meaningful concepts to bring to their first reading experiences. Beginning books, on the whole, devote their content to stories based on home and community experiences. If the child has had these same experiences, he will understand and vicariously appreciate the experiences of the characters in his books.

No less important are the verbal experiences acquired in preschool years. They are often the most significant factors in the child's readiness. At any age or grade level the child must be able to use sentences orally comparable in difficulty to those he is to read if he is to read with comprehension. Some children enter school unable to speak in simple, direct sentences. It is small wonder they have difficulty in learning to read. Facility in the use of spoken language may well be the most important skill which the child brings to beginning reading. Good language development certainly helps prepare the child for the verbal task of reading.

It seems reasonable to say that success or failure in reading has its roots in the preschool years. Parents can not only foster favorable attitudes toward reading, but can also instill a desire to learn to read, help develop the child's vocabulary, encourage his speaking in sentences, answer his questions, and promote his growth in visual and auditory discrimination. The preschool period is an important one and deserves much concern.

Many educators and parents feel that what the home doesn't provide, the school should. True, guided by readiness tests and observations, the primary teacher tries to help her children overcome their peculiar handicaps and to achieve eventual reading success. In the physical area, she may determine their visual and auditory needs and, partly with the aid of vision and visual training specialists, attempt to have their defects corrected or train their discriminations. In the intellectual area, she may provide firsthand experiences which

form a common core of information and background for beginning reading. In the social area, she may attempt to direct and guide social experiences which will promote the child's adjustment to school demands. Finally, in the emotional area, she may help the child adjust to the demands of work in a group and to life with his peers. But what chance of success does she have when the home has failed to do its part?

Now really, isn't it time we use a little common sense? Is it possible for the teacher to make up in one year what some parents have neglected for four or five years? It is time we faced the realization that the school and its teachers can do only so much. A few simple exercises which require ten or fifteen minutes of each school day just won't do the complete job. Letting a child know that you like him and respect him is fine. But when he arrives home after school and there is nothing but an empty house or uninterested parents awaiting him, that old feeling of insecurity and the feeling of not being wanted will creep slowly back into his heart and mind.

As was previously stated, the modern concept of reading readiness is that it is a combination of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social factors; and that there are certain things that can be done by the teacher to help the child grow in each of these areas. However, I feel that the school desperately needs the help of the parents to assist in this growth. I'm convinced that there are circumstances existing in too many homes that overshadow any attempt made by the teacher to help a child grow in any appreciable degree in the four readiness factors.

It is generally recognized that various physical factors are related to learning to read. Learning to read requires a well-developed body. This is evident when we think of the various ways a child uses his body while reading. His eyes have to be developed to the point where printed symbols both in books and on the board can be clearly seen. Eyes must be able to follow a line of print. Ears must pick up the sounds of oral language. The brain must link sensory impressions with each other and with meaning. Hands must be able to hold books and turn pages, and speech organs should be adequate for reproducing oral language. He should be able also to give his undivided attention to the task of reading, at least for brief periods. It stands to reason that, other things being equal, a child who is free from visual and hearing defects, and who enjoys excellent health will naturally have been more alert to reading situations before coming to school than a child who has been hampered by physical handicaps.

Of course physical health alone does not insure readiness to read, but it is such an important factor in the learning process that it is recommended that the teacher make every effort to maintain a high health status among her pupils. Here again, I ask this question—how much can the teacher do alone? And many times she is alone. Her program can include a daily health check-up. The children can take turns playing doctor and nurse. They can examine each child's hands, fingernails, neck, face and hair; they can ask if he brushed his teeth, what time he went to bed and what time he got up. They can discuss correct eating habits and develop many other health activities. But what can a teacher do when parents seem unconcerned about their child's physical health? It seems that she has no other course to follow than to make the best of it. And this does not always result in helping a child grow in physical readiness.

As far as intellectual factors are concerned, it has been proven repeatedly that a child's intelligence is one of the strongest factors contributing to beginning reading success. Studies have revealed a close correlation between IQ scores and reading test scores. Their results can be summarized in one general conclusion: Intelligence is a major factor in reading success at any level. However, it would be wise to remember that we cannot assume that high intelligence necessarily will ensure reading success. High mental age alone does not ensure early reading success when other aspects of readiness are unfavorable. Many bright children are not reading as well as they should and too many are seriously failing. The implication is that other factors seem at times to overshadow the gift of intelligence by preventing children from making normal reading progress.

It would seem that the teacher has little control over the mental age of her children. However, she is in a position to adapt her instruction in beginning reading to those who are mentally immature, those of average maturity, and those who are above the expected level of maturity for a given grade.

In the emotional and social areas, again the home is out in front. Lack of preparation for entering school is responsible for the lack of adjustment with many children. This difficulty occurs most frequently when the child enters school. If he has not felt secure in his home situation, he is likely to feel more insecure in the new experience. Many times the parents have not handled the child wisely. They are overprotective and cause him to be too dependent. He is afraid to try anything new. He has not been allowed to move from the family circle to the neighborhood group. Thus he is

not ready to step into the wider circles of the school group.

Unfortunate home situations may be another reason the child is not well adjusted. Parents who nag a child constantly or who are quarreling between themselves leave a mark on him. Sometimes the child feels he is forced to take sides between the two people he loves most.

The child's attitudes toward himself, his understandings, his habits, his interests in the things about him and in the various phases of school life, his reactions to requests, to suggestions, and to criticisms are all important factors in the undertaking of beginning reading.

Is it possible for a teacher to make a child feel more secure in his home situation? Can she change his attitudes and interests in the importance of school? For five years little Joan has been "ruling the roost" at home. Will her teacher be able to change her attitude toward requests and suggestions? I wonder.

Parents put pressure on the schools and their teachers to take on responsibilities that belong to the home. They seem to think that the school can make up for their shortcomings. But this can not be done.

Yes, the preschool years are important and deserve much concern. But it seems to me that today's parents need to be more concerned. There are many things only parents can give. The school should not be expected nor forced into taking responsibilities belonging to the home. The home and school must work together. Neither can do the job alone.

It's Time Teachers Spoke Up!

When the local department store advertises a book or kit of materials "guaranteed to teach your child to read," there is a sellout. And when Johnny's report card shows a low grade in reading, his mother comes marching in armed to the teeth. There is no doubt that the whole matter of Johnny's reading is a burning issue in her mind. For on the subject of reading, almost all parents feel qualified to speak. They learned to read, didn't they? And they see reading as important in their everyday lives. "New math," science, and social science arouse only slight concern. Reading stirs them to their toes.

Yet in the face of this overwhelming interest, many parents seem to feel that they must keep hands off and leave reading to the teacher. This feeling may come from the fact that few parents know enough about the school's goals and techniques to provide appropriate direct help to their children. Nor do most parents have the

type of objective working relationship with their child that would permit them to teach him.

A surprising number of parents are so busy seeking their own pleasures, they simply can't find the time to be of any help in the development of reading readiness. On the other hand, the help offered by some parents does more harm than good. They become irritated and disgusted. They try to force their child to read at home and often talk about his reading difficulties in front of family or visitors.

When such a situation exists, it is clear that parents have a basic misconception of the nature of reading and the way children learn. As previously discussed, a child's reading is much bigger than the nine-to-three school day when the teacher can guide and direct. Everything he does outside of school can bear on his reading in school. If he has been read to since playpen days, he is likely to make progress in reading at school. Thus, the teacher needs the parents' help at home just as parents need the teacher's help in school.

The majority of parents today whole-heartedly agree that they need and expect help from the classroom teacher. Their cries for help are loud and clear. It is time teachers spoke up! When teachers speak up, the public listens. Their opinions and suggestions command respect. With the daily contact they have with parents, they can be the most effective spokesmen of our educational program.

Making parents aware of what reading readiness is and their importance to their child's reading readiness is a most important task of the primary teacher. Parents who were themselves reared without books around them would not know that they are depriving their youngsters of the next best gift to that of health and life itself. They would not know that, if introduced to books at an early age and allowed to taste the prideful joy of owning one's own books, many children would not exchange them for all the talking dolls and firetrucks in the world. It is important that teachers do all they can to make parents aware of their importance in getting their child ready to read.

There is much teachers can do to inform parents of their importance in the development and growth of the reading habits of their children. This means education through home visits, through group meetings of parents, and by demonstrations with children. It may mean showing films that explain the reading readiness program or distributing pamphlets and books which parents would find useful. Teachers and librarians can join forces in demonstrating to parents

how to read aloud to their children and how to select books and stories for reading aloud.

It might be well to recall a quotation from Anthony Trollope: “Love of books is your pass to the greatest and most perfect pleasure that God has prepared for his creatures. It lasts when all other pleasures fade. It will support you when all other recreations are gone. It will last you until your death. It will make your hours pleasant to you as long as you live.”

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