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Developing Good Readers

Much has been written and discussed lately about the right way to teach reading - even to the point of a reading "debate." No matter the controversy, there is basic knowledge that all early care and education professionals must have about developing readers. We must become intentional about developing readers and be able to explain to parents and others what and why we do what we do. There is more known about how to teach reading than ever before, but we have fewer children who enjoy reading.

Infants

As teachers of infants, we can play an important part in the development of reading. By enhancing language development in infants, we help them to become readers.

Begin by surrounding infants with language. When we mimick an infant's cooing and babbling, we are engaging the infant in conversation. These early attempts at language development are being reinforced, while he/she is learning the "give and take" of conversation. Adults in an infant's world can also practice "self-talk" and "parallel talk". Self-talk is the act of describing what you are doing or what you are going to do (i.e. "I am going to pick you up and change your diaper. Is that alright with you?") Parallel talk is describing what the infant is doing (i.e. "I see that you are trying to reach that orange ball. Stretch a little more and I think that you can get it.") In the beginning, infants will not understand what you are saying, but as they develop, they will begin to connect the words with the actions.

Singing to infants also develops language in infants. Singing songs, repeating finger plays, and the old favorite "Patty-cake" and "This Little Piggy Went to Market" are good activities to do with infants as they begin to make the important connections between words and actions.

Children who have a wide vocabulary are more successful in learning to read. Infant teachers should have conversations with the infants in their care by talking with them about what is happening in their world.

Reading to infants and exposing them to books at an early age helps them become readers. What is read to an infant is not as important as the rhythm of reading. Expose infants (birth to three months) to books by placing them where they can see the pictures in the book. Introduce them to books by standing up board books in the crib or on the floor beside them.

As an infant gets older (four to six months), replace the hard, board books with cloth books. These soft books are easier for the infant to grasp and are washable after being chewed, drooled on or sucked. All of these books should have colorful pictures of objects in the baby's world.

At 7 to 12 months, begin to use the board books again. The stiff pages make it easier for an infant's little fingers to turn the pages. Remember that reading to a baby may take place in spurts as their attention allows, but these moments are important in developing readers. Also, reading to an infant at this age requires "labeling" the object

in the picture and adding a comment to which the baby can relate. For example, “There is a spoon. You used a spoon this morning when you ate your cereal.”

Toddlers

The toddler teachers’ role is to expand the work of the infant teacher. Enhancing language development in toddlers helps them to become readers. As toddlers begin to use words, adults should expand on the child’s two word utterances. “Momma go” can be expanded as “Yes, momma went to work in her car.”

Singing songs and finger plays helps toddlers learn about their world. Songs like “Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, brush your hair” will help children connect the words with the action of brushing hair.

Provide toddlers with books that contain colorful, but simple pictures that are relevant to them. Again, board books work best for this age.

Using everyday objects around the house or center, “read” to the children by pointing out the object and encouraging a conversation about it. For example, “What is that? It says meow.”

According to the book, *Things to Do With Toddlers and Twos*, adults would do well to use the “flop and do” method of book reading. When a toddler says “read” and brings you a book, adults should be prepared to “flop” (sit down) and “do” (read the book.)

Toddlers listen longer when it is their idea to read

rather than at a set story time. As the toddler grows into a two-year old, he will enjoy books with repetition, rhymes and pictures that relate closely to the words (i.e. Brown Bear, Brown Bear).

Preschoolers

Preschool teachers should be committed to providing enriching activities that develop children as readers.

The most important thing you can do to develop pre-school readers is to read to them often. Books that have repetitive phrases, few words on a page, and topics that children can relate to are popular with three-year olds. Older children are interested in longer books with more complicated stories.

Create a print rich environment by labeling objects in your room or turning your dramatic play area into a restaurant and making menus. Children need to understand the connection between reading and writing. Language experience stories are an effective way to help children

understand “what I think can be spoken, what can be spoken can be written down and what can be written down can be read.”

After a field trip, ask children “what was your favorite part of the trip?” Write down their answers and read them back to the children. Writing a title on a painting, creating a Mother’s Day card, making a book with their drawings and their words, or just writing down whatever the child wishes will help the child make the critical connection between reading and writing.

Encourage children to “play with words” by reading and acting out nursery rhymes and poetry. A favorite of four-year olds is Shel Silverstein’s *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. Sing songs, make up poems and let children fill in the rhyming words.

Sharing informal conversations with children is the best way to build their vocabulary and help them begin to use higher level sentence structure. Stimulate this through conversations you have with the children away from class time such as at lunch or snack time, on the playground or during dramatic play time.

Talk about the alphabet as it relates to the child’s real experiences. Ask about the letter that begins his/her name.

(i.e. “Your name begins with a ‘J’. Who else’s name begins with a ‘J’?”). These types of teachable moments occur all the time. They are learning opportunities that are not in your activity plans, but just happen. Take advantage of these times to help children read.



Create a cozy reading area with quality early childhood books, placed neatly on a shelf where children can see the book cover. Be sure to rotate the books periodically based on your theme or the season of the year, but make sure that alphabet books are always included.

In addition to reading to large groups of children, spend time reading in small groups to a few children at a time. Different learning takes place in a one-on-one reading session, compared to a group reading session. Whatever the setting - large, small or one-on-one, the children should be introduced to the book's author and the illustrator with an explanation of what each person does to create the book.

Because comprehension and becoming a critical thinker is important to reading, teachers should become familiar with and implement Bloom's Taxonomy, a theory on teaching critical thinking skills and reading comprehension. The steps to becoming a critical thinker are outlined in Bloom's Taxonomy. The following is an example of using Bloom's Taxonomy with a children's story.

Bloom's Taxonomy and The Three Bears. After reading *The Three Bears*, ask the children follow-up questions. Based on the age of the children in your group, decide which questions would be on your children's level. It is important that this exercise **not** be done after reading every book. Children need to enjoy stories for their own sake and not feel that they will be tested after **every** story.

Step 1: Knowledge: Ask children questions that would evaluate their ability to recall the simple facts of the story: How many bears were in this story? What bed did Goldilocks like the best?

Step 2: Comprehension: Ask questions that help you evaluate whether the child understands the main idea. It is important to accept all answers that the children give you. Why do you think that Goldilocks ran out of the bears' house?

Step 3: Application: Ask questions that require the child to give answers based on what they might have learned by listening to the story. Again, it is important to accept all answers given by the children.

Do you think that you would ever go in someone's house when they are not at home? Why or why not?

Step 4: Analysis: Ask questions that require the child to think critically and more in depth. This discussion could lead to role playing and to creating a different ending to the traditional Three Bears' story.

Why do you think that Goldilocks went into the three bears' house? How do you think Baby Bear felt? How would you feel if you were Baby Bear?

In conclusion, learning to read is a process. It is the responsibility of the early care and education professional to understand the steps in learning to read and to be intentional about providing learning activities that will support children's optimal development in becoming a reader who enjoys reading!

More information about reading:

Learning to Read and Write, Neuman, S., C. Copple & S. Bredekamp, 2000.

Much More Than The ABC's, Schickendantz, J, 1999.