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The Parents' Role in Helping Children to Develop Reading Skills

Rola rodziców w rozwoju umiejętności czytania dzieci

KEYWORDS

children's reading skills, parents' help, reading activities, kinds of children books

ABSTRACT

The article deals with the development of children's reading skills that are regarded as the major foundational skills for all school-based learning, academic and occupational success. Thus, parents can and should play a significant role in helping their children to develop reading skills and in encouraging their growth in this respect. It is often emphasised that starting early is the best way for parents to prepare their child for school and life progress.

As parents can have a huge impact on how quickly their children learn to read, the ways parents can help their children with reading are suggested in the article. It also includes activities for families with children that can make learning experiences out of the everyday routines in which parents and their children participate if they want to help children to gain the skills they need to become readers. The resulting steps that parents can take to help the child become a successful reader are offered. The author considers that it is important for parents to know what children like in books and the kinds of books that are the most suitable for children at different ages, and that the books that parents pick to read with the child are very important.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE ABSTRAKT

umiejętności czytania dzieci, pomoc rodziców, czytanie, rodzaje książek dla dzieci

Artykuł dotyczy rozwoju umiejętności czytania dzieci, która jest uważana za podstawową umiejętność szkolną, akademicką i zawodowego sukcesu. Rodzice mogą i powinni odgrywać znaczącą rolę w pomaganiu dzieciom w rozwijaniu umiejętności czytania i zachęcaniu ich do rozwoju w tym zakresie. Podkreśla się, że wczesne rozpoczynanie nauki jest najlepszym sposobem, aby rodzice przygotowali swoje dziecko do rozwoju w tym zakresie. Podkreśla się, że jak najszybciej nauka czytania jest najlepszym sposobem, aby rodzice przygotowali swoje dziecko do pomyślnych osiągnięć w szkole i życiu.

Ponieważ rodzice mogą mieć ogromny wpływ na to, jak szybko ich dzieci uczą się czytać, w artykule zasugerowano sposoby, które rodzice mogą zastosować by pomóc swoim dzieciom w czytaniu. Obejmują również zajęcia dla rodzin z dziećmi, które sprawiają, że doświadczenia edukacyjne wychodzą z codziennych zajęć, w których uczestniczą rodzice i ich dzieci, jeśli chcą pomóc dzieciom zdobyć umiejętności, których potrzebują, aby stać się czytelnikami. Można zaproponować następujące kroki, które rodzice mogą podjąć, aby dziecko mogło być szczęśliwym czytelnikiem. Autorka uważa, że wiedza na temat tego, co dzieci lubią w książkach i rodzaj książek najbardziej odpowiednich dla dzieci w różnym wieku, jest ważna dla zrozumienia przez rodziców. Podkreśla się, że książki, które rodzice wybierają do czytania z dzieckiem są bardzo ważne.

Introduction

Reading and writing skills are important factors towards a child's success at school, at work and in life. In addition, reading can be a fun and imaginative activity for children, which opens doors to all kinds of new worlds for them. The reading skill serves as the major avenue to learning about other people, about history and social studies, the language arts, science, mathematics, and the other content subjects that must be mastered in school. When children do not learn to read, their general knowledge, spelling and writing abilities, and their vocabulary development suffer in kind. Reading serves as the major foundational skill for all school-based learning, and without it, the chances for academic and occupational success are indeed limited. In order for students to study maths, science, English, history, geography, and other subjects, reading skills must be developed to the point that most of them are automatic. Students cannot struggle with word recognition when they should be reading quickly for the comprehension of a text.

It should be said that some children learn to read and write with ease.¹ Even before they enter school, they have developed an understanding that the letters on a page can be sounded out to make words. Some preschool children can even read words correctly that they have never seen before and comprehend what they have read. The research literature suggests that about 50 percent learn to read relatively easily once exposed to formal instruction. Unfortunately, the other half of children find learning to read to be a much more formidable challenge. It is one of the most difficult tasks that they will have to master throughout their life. It is clear from studies that follow good and poor readers from kindergarten into young adulthood, that young poor readers are largely doomed to failure. By the end of the first grade, the substantial decreases in their self-esteem, self-concept, and motivation to learn to read appear if they have not been able to master reading skills and keep up with their age-mates.

In this context, since reading is so important for the success at school and in future life, parents can and should play a significant role in helping their children to develop reading skills and in encouraging their growth in reading skills. Research has long shown that parents' positive involvement with their children's reading skills development is related to many positive outcomes.² When children receive the right kind of their parental help in their early years, reading difficulties that can arise later in their lives can be prevented.

It is crucial to help young children by working with them to develop early literacy and reading skills. Because strong reading skills form the basis for learning in all subjects, it is important to identify those who struggle with reading as early as possible. Research shows that children learn about reading before they enter school and, in fact, they learn in the best possible manner – through observation. Young children, for example, see people around them reading newspapers, books, maps, and signs. Children who have been read to at home come to school with important early literacy skills. They are prepared to learn to read and write. Children who have not had many experiences of listening to books read aloud or talking about books typically start school with poor early literacy skills.

As many researchers have shown, when parents and families are involved, the children are more successful in developing their reading skills. There are many resources to help educators reach out to parents and other family members to encourage and support them in their involvement in their child's reading progress.

So, this article is aimed to generalize some efficient ways of helping a preschool child develop these essential early literacy skills. It includes activities and advice for families with children from infancy through age 6 that make learning experiences out

¹ G.R. Lyon, *Learning to Read: A Call from Research to Action. Get Ready to Read*, 1997, Retrieved from: <<http://www.getreadytoread.org/early-learning-childhood-basics./early-literacy>> [12.07.2017]

² M.K. Berardi, *Parental Participation in Non-formal Education Activities*. Pennsylvania State University. The Graduate School. College of Agricultural Sciences 2009.

of the everyday routines in which parents and their children participate if they want to help children to gain the skills they need to become readers.

Learning reading skills as a complex process

As G. Reid Lyon states, the psychological, social, and economic consequences of reading failure are legion.³ It is for this reason that the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) considers reading failure to reflect not only an educational problem, but a significant public health problem as well. Some of the NICHD studies have been continuously ongoing since 1965. The majority, however, were initiated in the early and mid-1980s with youngsters at five years of age, and have studied these children longitudinally over the succeeding years.

A large, well-coordinated research program has been working extremely hard to understand the following:

- the critical environmental, experiential, cognitive, genetic, neurobiological, and instructional conditions that foster strong reading development;
- the instructional procedures can be applied to ameliorate reading deficits at the earliest possible time.

In this context, there are two important considerations that current research in children's reading reveals:⁴

1. Children who read well early, and read widely, become better readers.
2. Reading and writing are complementary skills.

So, as it was noted, in helping children to develop their reading skills, parents may have a crucial role to play. Starting early is the best way for parents to prepare their child for school and life progress. Parents are important to children both as role models and as supporters of their efforts.

The research has identified five essential early reading skills that should be taken into account by parents helping their children to develop reading skills:

- phonemic awareness – the ability to hear, identify, and play with individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words;
- phonics – the ability to connect the letters of written language with the sounds of spoken language;
- vocabulary – words the child needs to know to communicate effectively;
- reading comprehension – the ability to understand and get meaning from what has been read;
- fluency (oral reading) – the ability to read text accurately and quickly.

³ G.R. Lyon, *Learning to Read: A Call from Research to Action*. *Get Ready to Read*, op. cit.

⁴ B.B. Swanson, "How Can I Improve My Child's Reading?", *Parent Brochure*. ACCESS ERIC 2001.

Since that reading leads to the development of complementary skills, parents should consider that skilled reading requires the integration of several skills and abilities. You cannot learn to read an alphabetic language like English unless you understand that the words that you hear contain smaller sounds called “phonemes.” Phonemes cannot actually be “heard” by the ear because when we speak, the sounds in each syllable and word are folded into one sound to permit rapid communication. Thus, when saying the word /cat/, the ear hears one sound, not three as in /c/ /a/ /t/. Many readers must be taught “phoneme awareness” if it does not come easily to them.⁵

Understanding that spoken words are composed of phonemes is critical because when one starts to learn how to read, new words are decoded by linking the phonemes to the letter symbols. Once children learn how to apply sounds to letter symbols, they must practice the process to ensure that their reading becomes rapid and fluent. Reading requires phoneme awareness, phonics, reading fluency, and comprehension skills. Each of these skills is necessary and none are sufficient in their own right. They must be integrated and applied in text through consistent and frequent practice. According to Lyon,⁶ learning to read is not a natural process — it requires systematic and well-informed instruction.

Parents have to be aware that the individuals who are at risk of experiencing reading difficulties are those with limited exposure to oral language interactions and little prior understanding of concepts related to the sounds of our language, letter knowledge, print awareness, and general verbal skills. Children with limited proficiency in language, speech and hearing impairments, or from homes where little reading takes place, are especially at risk of reading failure. However, there is a substantial number of children who have had substantial exposure to language, literacy interactions, and opportunities to learn to read, who nevertheless have significant difficulties acquiring reading skills. Whether the causes are environmental or genetic in nature, reading problems occur due to deficits in phoneme awareness, phonics development, reading fluency, reading comprehension, or combinations of these.

According to Wolf and Stoodley,⁷ there are five stages of reading development. They are: the emerging pre-reader, the novice reader, the decoding reader, the fluent comprehending reader, and the expert reader. It is normal that children will move through these different stages at different rates. Children become readers step by step and parents must be aware of this fact. Researchers offer steps that parents can take to start a child on the way to becoming a successful reader.

Every step a child takes toward learning to read leads to another. Bit by bit, the child builds the knowledge that is necessary for being a reader. Over their first 6 years,

⁵ G.R. Lyon, “Developing Reading Skills in Your Children”, *Great School Staff* 2016, March.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ M. Wolf, C. J Stoodley, *Proust and the Squid: the Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, New York 2007.

most children talk and listen, listen to stories read aloud, pretend to read, learn how to handle books, learn about print and how it works, identify letters by name and shape, identify separate sounds in spoken language, write with scribbles and drawing, connect single letters with the sounds they make, connect what they already know to what they hear read, predict what comes next in stories and poems, connect combinations of letters with sounds, recognize simple words in print, sum up what a story is about, write individual letters of the alphabet, write words, write simple sentences, write to communicate, read simple books.

Children can take more than one of these steps at the same time. This list of steps, though, gives parents a general idea of how a child will progress toward reading.

Ways and activities through which parents can help their children with reading

Parents should know that a baby's road to becoming a reader starts on the day he or she is born and for the first time hears the sounds of their parents' voice. Every time her parents speak to them, sing to them, and respond to the sounds that they make, they strengthen the child's understanding of language. With parents to guide the child, he or she is well on the way to becoming a reader⁸.

To understand the connection between the child's early experiences with spoken language and learning to read, you might think of language as a four-legged stool. The four legs are talking, listening, reading, and writing. All four legs are important; each leg helps to support and balance the others.

Parents can have a huge impact on how quickly their children learn to read and research offers numerous ways in which parents can help their children with reading.⁹ The following suggestions have been beneficial to many parents:

1. *Set aside a regular time to read to your children every day.* Studies show that regularly reading out loud to children will produce significant gains in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and the decoding of words. Whether children are preschoolers or preteens, it will increase their desire to read independently.
2. *Surround children with reading material.* Children with a large range of reading materials in their homes score higher on standardized tests. Tempt kids to read by having a large supply of books and magazines at their reading level.
3. *Have a family reading time.* Establish a daily 15 to 30 minute time when everyone in the family reads together silently. Seeing parents read will inspire children to read. Just 15 minutes of daily practice is sufficient to increase their reading fluency.

⁸ M. Sénéchal, J.-A. LeFevre, "Parental Involvement in the Development of Children's Reading Skill: A Five-Year Longitudinal Study", *Child Development* 2002, Vol. 73, No 2, March/April, pp. 445-460.

⁹ B.B. Swanson, "How Can I Improve My Child's Reading?", op.cit.

4. *Encourage a wide variety of reading activities.* Make reading an integral part of children's lives. Have them read menus, roadside signs, game directions, weather reports, movie time listings, and other practical everyday information. Also, make sure they always have something to read in their spare time when they could be waiting for appointments or riding in a car.
5. *Develop the library habit.* Encourage children to read more by taking them to the library every few weeks to get new reading materials.
6. *Be knowledgeable about children's progress.* Find out what reading skills they are expected to have at each age or grade level. Track their progress in acquiring basic reading skills on report cards and standardized tests.
7. *Look for reading problems.* Teachers do not always detect children's reading problems until they have become serious. Find out if children can sound out words, know sight words, use context to identify unknown words, and clearly understand what they read.
8. *Use a variety of aids to help children.* To help children improve their reading, use textbooks, computer programs, books-on-tape, and other materials available in stores. Games are especially good choices because they let children have fun as they work on their skills.
9. *Show enthusiasm for your children's reading.* The parent's reaction has a great influence on how hard children will try to become good readers.

It is beneficial to use some reading activities by parents while building children's reading skills, as Sh. Ackerman considers:

- **Play Time:** Read aloud a favorite story or poem as though it is a play or using different voices for the character and the narrator to help your child practice her pacing and expression. A child can also read a book to parents.
- **Read and Draw:** Ask a child to draw a picture of her favorite scene, character, or page from a book. She can then write a description of what she drew and why she chose to draw it.
- **Become Poets:** Find small and simple poems. Read them together and talk about the feelings they convey. Try making up your own poems together about objects, people you know, or anything you like!
- **Word Games:** Use magnetic letters, letter tiles, or cards from games to create both real and silly words. Practice building longer words by putting together shorter words and sounds.
- **Create Your Own Dictionary:** As a child learns to read new words and understand the meaning of those words, keep track of them in own dictionary. A child can write them down, draw a picture to illustrate the word or its definition, or write a sentence with the word.

However, these activities are only a starting point. Parents and their children can enjoy them enough to create and try many more on their own. Parents are their

child's first and most important teachers. They do not need to be the best reader to help – their time and interest and the pleasure that they share with the child as part of reading together are what counts.

Choosing books to read with the child is very important

To know what children like in books and what kinds of books are the most suitable for children at different ages is significant for parents, as Berardi¹⁰ says:

- for *infants* (6-12 months): board books with photos of babies, sturdy, brightly-colored board books to touch and taste, books with pictures of things they see every day – balls, bottles, chairs, dogs, small books sized for small hands;
- for *younger toddlers* (12-24 months): sturdy board books they can handle and carry, books that show children doing familiar things – sleeping, eating, playing, goodnight books for bedtime, books about saying goodbye and hello, books with only a few words on the page, books with simple rhymes or predictable text;
- for *older toddlers* (24-36 months): books with pictures and names of many different things, books with board pages – but also books with paper pages, silly books and funny books, books with rhyme and rhythm, and repeated text they can learn by heart, books about children and families, books about food, animals, trucks, and other favorite objects;
- for *preschoolers* (3-5 years): books that tell stories, books about kids who look like and live like them – and also books about different places and different ways of living, books about going to school or daycare, books about making friends, books with simple text they can memorize, counting books, alphabet books, search and find books.

The books that parents pick to read with the child are very important. If they are not sure of what books are right for the child, they should ask a librarian to help to choose the titles. Parents may introduce books to the child when he or she is a baby, and let them hold and play with books made just for babies: board books with sturdy cardboard covers and thick pages; cloth books that are soft and washable, touch-and-feel books, or lift-the-flap books that contain surprises for the baby to discover. Parents may choose books with covers that have big, simple pictures of things that the baby sees every day, and they should not be upset if at first the child chews or throws a book. Cuddling with the child as parents point to and talk with great excitement about the book's pictures will soon capture their interest. When the baby becomes a toddler, he or she will enjoy helping to choose books to read to them.

Young children most often enjoy books about people, places, and things that are like those they know. The books can be about where they live or about parts of their

¹⁰ M.K. Berardi, *Parental Participation in Non-formal Education Activities*. Pennsylvania State University. The Graduate School. College of Agricultural Sciences 2009.

culture, such as religion, holidays, or the way that people dress. If the child has special interests, such as dinosaurs or ballerinas, it is useful to look for books on those topics.

From the child's toddler years through early first grade, parents also should look for books of poems and rhymes that are an extension of that language skill. By hearing and saying rhymes, along with repeated words and phrases, a child learns about spoken sounds and about words. Rhymes also spark the child's excitement about what comes next, which adds fun and adventure to reading.

Parents should remember that children are fascinated by how books look and feel. They see how easily parents handle and read books, and they want to do the same. When the toddler watches you handle books, he or she begins to learn that a book is for reading, not tearing or tossing around. Before the age of 3, they may even pick one up and pretend to read, an important sign that she is beginning to know what a book is for. As the child becomes a preschooler, they are learning that: a book has a front cover, a book has a beginning and an end, a book has pages, a page in a book has a top and a bottom, a parent turns pages one at a time to follow the story, a parent reads a story from left to right of a page.

As parents read with a 4- or 5-year-old, they should begin to remind them about these things: to read the title on the cover, to talk about the picture on the cover, to point to the place where the story starts and, later, where it ends, to let the child help turn the pages. When they start a new page, they may point to where the words of the story continue and keep following the words by moving a finger beneath them. It takes time for the child to learn these things, but when the child does learn them, he or she has solved some of reading's mysteries.

Conclusion

Apart from helping children to grow up healthy and happy, the most important thing that parents can do for them is to help them develop their reading skills. How well children learn to read affects directly not only how successful they are at school, but how well they do throughout their lives. When children learn to read, they have the key that opens the door to all the knowledge of the world.

Learning how to read is a complex process, difficult for some and easy for others. The foundation for learning to read is in place long before children enter school and begin formal reading instruction. Parents and the family help to create this foundation by talking, listening, and reading to children every day and by showing them that parents value, use, and enjoy reading in their lives.

Reading for pleasure and information develops reading interests and offers children the opportunity to practice their reading skills in meaningful ways. If parents

want to do a lot to foster improving their child's progress in reading and understanding print, they should: talk with their preschoolers about signs in their environment and let their children know they enjoy reading themselves; provide reading materials at home that arouse curiosity or extend their child's natural interest in the world around them; encourage and model leisure-time reading in the house, etc. These are the most important steps in fostering the child's reading development. It is crucial for parents to understand what children like in books and what kinds of books are the most suitable for children at different ages.

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