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Preparing Your Child for the Three R's

By Susan du Plessis

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by: **Susan du Plessis**

There is little doubt that reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic are crucial elements in the education of any child. A child's ability to later cope in the adult world, to have a career, to take charge of his financial affairs and to live independently depends to a large extent on his mastery of these skills.

Unfortunately many children are deprived of the privilege of an abundant adult life. The \$14 million National Literacy Survey of 1993 found that even though most adults in this survey had finished high school, 96% of them could not read, write and figure well enough to go to college. Even more to the point, 25% "were plainly unable to read," period.

Surely this is unacceptable. Imagine doing a survey on the building industry and finding that the walls of 96% of all homes are severely cracked, and that in 25% of the houses the walls are so weak that they collapse. Wouldn't we immediately start an investigation into the building practices of the builders? Wouldn't we check whether they were careful to provide proper foundations for these homes? We all know that before building a house, one needs to lay a foundation. Unless there is a strong and solid foundation, cracks will soon appear in the walls, and if there are no foundations, the walls will collapse.

In the same way one needs to lay a proper foundation before it becomes possible for a child to benefit from a course in reading, writing and arithmetic. If this foundation is shaky, learning "cracks" will soon appear. The right time to start laying this foundation is the day a child is born.

Readiness for the three R's is a highly specialized task that few parents – also those who realize the importance of preschool education – are prepared for. A tragic defect of our society is the fact that we are not allowed to take upon ourselves the responsibility of doing the work of a policeman, or of a teacher, or of an attorney, or of any other work without having undergone prior training. No training, however, is provided on how to raise children. We become parents without realizing that, for the sake of our children, we should make an in-depth study of the issues that concern their intellectual development.

CLIMBING THE LEARNING LADDER

It is important to note that learning is a stratified process, in which one skill has to be acquired FIRST, BEFORE it becomes possible to acquire subsequent skills. It is like climbing a ladder, if you miss one of the rungs you will fall off.

Di dunia kini kita, tiap orang harus dapat membaca.... Unless one has FIRST learned to speak Bahasa Indonesia, there is no way that one would be able to read the above Indonesian sentence.

This shows that language is at the very bottom of the learning ladder. Its role in the acquisition of the three R's can be compared to the role of running in the game of soccer or ice-skating in the game of ice hockey. One cannot play soccer if one cannot run, and one cannot play ice hockey if one cannot

skate. One cannot read a book in a language – and least of all write – unless one knows the particular language.

If a child's knowledge of English is poor, then his reading will also be poor. Evidence that links reading problems and language problems has been extensively presented in the literature. Research has, for example, shown that about 60% of dyslexics were late talkers. In order to prevent later reading problems, parents must therefore ensure that a child is exposed to sufficient opportunities to learn language.

THE SECOND RUNG IS NON-VERBAL SKILLS

While verbal skills comprise the first rung of the learning ladder, non-verbal skills comprise the second. There is a whole conglomeration of non-verbal skills that are foundational to learning. Skills of importance include concentration, visual discrimination, accurate observation and memorizing, skills of association and auditory memory. These are functions that should be taught at preschool level to form the foundation of good reading, writing and arithmetic.

One visual discriminatory skill that plays a very important role in reading is the ability to distinguish between left and right. Like all the other non-verbal skills, this ability is not innate. It must be taught. In fact, knowledge of left and right must be drilled in to such an extent that it becomes automatic.

The human body consists of two halves, a left side and a right side. The human brain also has two halves, which are connected by the corpus callosum. A person will therefore interpret everything he encounters in terms of his own sidedness. A child, however, who has not adequately internalized his own sidedness, will be prone to incorrect interpretations in terms of sidedness. One such a situation, where sidedness plays a particularly important role, is when a person is expected to distinguish between a "b" and a "d." It is clear that the only difference between the two letters is the position of the straight line – it is either left or right.

It is important to note that a person who is confused about left and right cannot use mnemonics or memory aids while reading, as is often advised by experts. One recommendation is that children should remember that "left" is the side on which they wear their watch. Another is that one should put

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nail polish on the little finger of the student's left hand in order to teach him that reading and writing start on the left–hand side of the paper. These tricks never work to improve reading ability. This is just like going to China with a Chinese dictionary and then hoping to be able to speak Chinese. One has to LEARN to speak Chinese. In the same way one has to LEARN to correctly interpret sidedness.

Only when a child has climbed the first and second rung, will he be prepared for the third rung, i.e. the three R's. Remember that every journey starts with a first step. Unless you help your child to make the first step, he will not successfully complete the learning journey.

Susan du Plessis is the co–author of "The Right to Read: Beating Dyslexia and other Learning Disabilities" and the author or co–author of four other books on learning and learning disabilities. She has been involved in helping children reach their full potential for 15 years. She holds BD and BA Hons (psychology). Visit her website at

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How Reading Makes A Child Smart

By Jessica Davis

Reading makes you go to places. It allows you to turn back the hands of time. It will not limit you to write and express your thoughts. It will lead you to higher levels. And it is one of the best skills you could teach your child to develop. Reading is very important for it polishes a child's mind and makes him or her think in–depth.

As you teach a child to read now, it will be a way of preparing the child for a brighter future. It will surely enhance your child's language skills. It does not mean that if your child is not yet reading or speaking, you will not accept the idea of teaching reading. Though he or she is not reading any words, the child observes how you pronounce words and according to Bernice Cullinan, Professor of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at New York University children who learned reading have longer attention to give to listeners.

In addition, it is a way of preparing your child for some more complex words in the future. The English words that the child must learn should those be which are of his level. As they listen to you, make sure to make the words clear and point out the pictures on the book. This will allow them to recognize speech sounds and figures as well. Books about the things that are daily around them and activities they do are good examples

On the other hand, the reading of books will not just keep them educated but it is also one of the best forms of getting them entertained. Nursery rhymes and other books are very entertaining for your child. They would be realizing the fact that reading is not boring at all.

Reading will enhance your child's listening skill first. After absorbing all that you have read, the child would then develop speech skills. One of the most valuable things a child could develop from reading

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books is the skill of imagination.

This is also one way of showing your child that you really care. Moreover, reading time may serve as your bonding time together. A parent must always see to it that he is keeping track of his or her child's development and guide the child for the better.

Introduce reading to your child and you will introduce being smart for life...For it is in reading that he will discover a world of awe and wonder ahead.

Jessica Davis is a freelance writer for the Baby Times. She writes a regular column which is published every Thursday. Her latest 'favorite pick' is

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