

Parents Reading to Children

Parents often want to know what they can do to foster the cognitive, intellectual, and academic development of their children. They want their children to succeed in school and in life and they recognize that it's a competitive world out there and they want to give their children as many advantages as possible. The factors that influence a child's development are varied and include both the influences of nature and nurture but there is one important factor that is under the control of parents. Parents need to read to their children.

Reading is one of the most important skills a child develops during the early childhood years. The advantages that come with being a fluent and confident reader are many and the life challenges that result from difficulties with reading are easy to imagine. The formal reading instruction that is part of the school experience beginning in kindergarten certainly makes significant contributions to a child's literacy development. The foundation for learning to read, however, begins before the child enters school and that foundation is built on parents reading to children.

What happens when a parent sits beside the crib or holds the child in her lap and reads a bedtime story? To begin with, the child is learning that there are symbols and images - letters, words, pictures - between the covers of that book that contain meaning. As you open the book and turn the pages, you, the reader, can understand that meaning and be transported to other worlds, learn new things, and perhaps see your own ideas and feelings reflected on the page.

As the parent reads the words on pages of the book or simply tells a story from the illustrations, the child is hearing the richness of her language and this exposure to oral language will not only foster the development of reading but of spoken language as well. The more language a child hears, the richer the foundation for the development of reading skills.

As the parent reads, she very often will point to the individual words on the page and this helps the child develop the understanding that separate, discrete words comprise the sentences she will someday be reading on her own. This attention to the individual words also shows the child that there is a flow to reading, a movement from left to right, from the top of the page to the bottom, and from one page to the next.

As the parent reads, she will also make comments about parts of the story or particular illustrations and may even ask the child questions, whether the child is old enough to respond or not. These comments and questions draw the child's attention to parts of the story and this focusing of attention helps the child understand that there is meaning on the page and that certain words or images provide clues to that meaning. (This is a skill that will certainly come in handy someday when the child has to study for a test in school.)

And reading to a child is also about relationships. The child who has snuggled in a parent's lap while listening to a story is learning that reading can connect people. This connection may be literally in the here and now but it may also be a connection to people who live somewhere else or in another time, or it may even be a connection to people who never really existed, the children in *The Cat in the Hat* or the children in the world of Harry Potter.

Of course the most important connection being fostered is the one developing between the two people snuggled in the chair with a book on their laps.

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