

SHOULD WE TEACH YOUNG CHILDREN TO READ?

Why are there so many children who never learn to read well? After all, every promising new reading technique, system, and innovation has been implemented in schools over time—phonics, sight reading, choral reading, word attack skills, Systematic Reading Instruction, and more. Despite all these efforts, too many children continue to experience problems in learning to read at school. I believe that we are looking in the wrong place for the answers, and that failure to teach children to read is due to three taboos.

The first taboo

... is that of teaching academic subjects to children during their early childhood years.

How else can we explain why we have failed to make the connection that *learning to speak and learning to read are both language skills and should occur simultaneously*, despite brain and developmental research findings that there is a 'window of opportunity' for language acquisition up to age four?

We know from research that toddlers can understand many more words than they can speak. Anyone with experience with toddlers can verify this fact and relate stories about how toddlers enjoy fetching their teddy or some other object upon request long before they can pronounce the name of the object. At this stage of their development, and especially around two years of age, children learn to speak any language at a breakneck speed. This is due to a process known as *fast mapping*, when toddlers learn new words after only one encounter with the concept (Weiten, 1998). During this time, then, learning Braille or learning to read would also be more easily acquired, because the



brain does not differentiate between various languages or a *type* of language that is being learnt. It has always seemed incongruous to me that we teach children to read after this sensitive period, when they go to school.

The second taboo

... is a professional taboo: the maintenance of the differentiation between preschool/long day care and school.

There has always been an uneasy truce between early childhood educators and schoolteachers, an unsaid but well-understood sanction by schools that preschool was for play only, and serious teaching should be left to the real teachers. This, in turn, has suited early childhood teachers, because they could then have a distinctly separate role, and survive as a profession. So we have left the teaching of reading to schools, and saved schoolteachers the trouble of revising their teaching notes—a major task, should children come to school able to read!

Instead we have politely offered pre-reading activities ad nauseam for decades. Of course, pre-reading activities are better than no action on reading at all, and they are certainly offered with the best of intentions,

although some such activities may be ineffectual. For instance, we have been led to believe that environmental print helps children to learn to read eventually, just like one would imagine that hearing a foreign language would help a child learn the language.

However, my four children did not learn their second languages (Danish and Hungarian) at home because, although the languages were spoken

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around them, no one actually addressed them *directly*, or engaged them in conversation. In the same way, having print around in the environment seems like a good idea. But if words are not taught or brought to children's attention, they disregard them, just like they disregard other stimuli in order to focus on what is at hand. It is therefore my argument that having print around in the environment is not enough. We actually have to *read* the words to the children, explain their significance, and deliberately introduce words to ensure that children take notice.

Recent research into literacy practices in early childhood centres suggests that such practices have not always been practised seriously (McNaught, 1999). Certainly, judging by the reading problems experienced by children at school, pre-reading activities have had little impact. Besides, pre-reading activities seem a little wasted, like showing a child who wants to learn to ride a bike a picture

of a bicycle, instead of putting the child on a bicycle and telling him or her how to peddle. No child has ever learned to ride a bike by looking at a picture, and few children would learn to read from vague pre-reading exercises. Children learn to read by practising reading.

The third taboo

... is that of parents teaching their children to read.

First, it has always been implied, and still is, that teaching children to read is a mysterious process too complicated for the average mum and dad, or even an average teacher (Armitage, 1999). This is, of course, untrue. If parents are capable of teaching their children to speak, they are equally capable of teaching them to read, provided they themselves can read. And second, there has been an unspoken injunction on parents not to teach children too early lest the children get bored at school. (As a parent, I have always found this injunction particularly galling.)

Is it hot-housing?

Teaching young children anything 'schooley' has nasty terms attached to it, terms such as 'hot-housing'. Children should play, so the rhetoric goes. But children of all cultures enjoy practising what adults do, including hunting and gathering (Fleer, 1999). In our culture, one important adult activity is reading. Personally, I am a proponent of play, being a passionate early childhood educator. But that has not stopped me from teaching an interested child to read, or providing individual children with information when they have had a special interest. I believe in giving children what they want and what they are ready for individually. I believe that by teaching young children to read we empower them, rather than rob them of their childhoods.

Besides, young children do not always play. We know only too well that they watch an average of two or three hours of television each day. They also play computer and video games. But even

watching television is seen by the early childhood hierarchy as a more acceptable pastime than teaching children reading, so long as children watch *quality* programs. I am yet to be convinced that these activities are somehow more beneficial than learning to read for five minutes each day—which is all it would take to teach a young child to read (Doman, 1994).

We know that toddlers can understand many more words than they can speak

So, as more than half of all children under five years of age are now in outside care in Australia, I believe it is time to come out of the cupboard and re-examine our teaching responsibilities in the area of reading. It may mean more work for schoolteachers, and even a blurring of the lines between preschool and school. But at least the children would not have to wait to start the reading process until they go to school—and until, for many, it is too late.

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A pilot reading program

Last year, Dorrigo Preschool ran a pilot reading program, with the parent committee's approval, by teaching children their favourite word.

Rationale

1. Dorrigo is a rural preschool, and it can be difficult to find jobs in the country.
2. Recent research has shown that it is more difficult for people with reading problems to secure jobs.
3. General alarm over high level of reading problems in schools, as well as problems caused by adult illiteracy.
4. Young children can learn to read easily and quickly.

The program

Twenty-four four-year-olds participated in the program. The setting was group time, and teaching averaged five minutes each day. We started off with one child's favourite word, adding new words until all children had a word. Words were written on flashcards in large red lettering, which we read out together. Flashcards were shuffled often, to avoid rote learning. Sometimes words were compared for length and letter content, e.g. 'Tom's word is fish, and Anna's word is frog—can you see how they are similar/different?' No child ever moaned 'not that again', as they do when it is rest time.

Results

At the end of the pilot, ability ranged from one child who did not recognise any words, to the top reader with 21 words. Children who attended one day per week hardly made gains beyond the first weeks, with an average of three words, whereas two-day children averaged 13 words by the end of the program. Lack of adequate repetition and time lapse between exposure seemed to be factors here. Interestingly, children did not necessarily learn their own words first, with popular children's words taking precedent, although by the end of the pilot most knew their own words. They took great interest in the ownership of words, making reading a very social experience. For instance, when they failed to recognise a word, they often remembered it if I reminded them whose word it was. One cannot help wondering how many words these four-year-old children would have learned if they could have read every day of the week.