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A WILL BEFORE THERE'S A WAY:
PRESCHOOLERS AND BOOKS

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Failing SAT scores and lawsuits by illiterate high school graduates against the school systems that failed to educate them have become hallmarks of "A Nation at Risk." President Reagan has reacted to his commissioned report on education by suggesting the American panacea of more, better, faster. In this case, more required courses, longer school days, and more computers. Whether or not these solutions will provide us with a generation of readers remains to be seen; there is certainly no dispute that reading remains the key to all learning, the basic skill that must be mastered from the very beginning.

Where that beginning is, however, has become a basis for dispute. Some children seem locked out from the start, those who wear the label "disadvantaged." In recent years there has been a deluge of programs to help children learn to read. The federal government has provided funding for research, tutorial programs, preschool programs, and television programs. Piles of data are available on how children learn to read and what factors account for reading readiness. The government has even acknowledged that reading readiness may well start in the womb, and supports a nutritional program for pregnant and nursing mothers.

But it's not just the disadvantaged children that are coming to school educationally at risk--it appears to be a growing problem in all segments of our society. Whether it's a symptom of the modern age of television, divorce, and music videos, the reality is that more and more children are coming to school unprepared to learn.

Thus, 'Reading Readiness' has become a specialty in itself, complete with tests, programs, workbooks, supporters,

and critics. Kindergarten assessment programs aim for early identification of children lacking reading readiness, and a substantial part of most kindergarten programs is directly aimed at developing reading readiness skills. Given the amount of research done and the emphasis placed on reading readiness and the teaching of reading, one would expect that all children would become fluent readers. Why is this not true? One factor may well be that the emphasis of traditional reading readiness programs neglects perhaps the most important prerequisite of all--motivation. From the child's perspective, one must ask, "why should a child want to learn to read?"

Many children already possess a strong desire to master the written word. What is the key to their eagerness? What factors exist in the home and/or cultural environment that directs a child's natural curiosity of the world around him/her into the arduous task of tearing apart and rebuilding language to allow written as well as vocal communication?



For many children, their first contact with school is in a preschool, and even at this early stage, it quickly becomes obvious that some children love books, and other children have no interest in them. In an attempt to identify

some factors that may account for early motivation toward reading, we conducted the study that follows. We believed that preschoolers demonstrating a spontaneous and natural interest in books come from homes where parents engage in positive reading behaviors.

A review of the research on preschoolers' interest in books found that no studies have specifically addressed the issue of early motivation in learning to read. Previous studies on reading motivation have primarily dealt with instilling motivation after the child has failed, or analyzing the motivation after the child has succeeded. Many, however, did recognize the importance of books in the home before children encountered books at school.

"When books have always been a part of the child's natural environment to manipulate, to share, to experience, and to cherish, the child has ample opportunities to develop concepts of what a book can be. Children know there is wonder in the art of illustration and magic in the printed word" (Engel, 897).

Since research does support the idea that motivation is an important factor, programs aimed at rousing children's interest in literature are abundant, from "Reading Rainbow" to "Reading is Fundamental" to "Scholastic Book Fairs." In the classroom, an abundance of resource material on making stories come alive for children through literature extensions is available. Creative dramatics and art projects help to enliven the written word and spark a hunger for reading in many previously turned-off children. Making reading interesting and fun is certainly a valid motivating factor for many children who saw it only as a task before. But what of the child who has not yet experienced failure, what about the preschooler? A great deal of materials is available on reading readiness techniques for preschoolers, little has been written specifically on motivation--instilling in the young child the desire to read. Because it's difficult to evaluate motivational factors in children who haven't yet failed or succeeded in a future task (reading), a body of research has been directed toward "early readers," those children who "spontaneously" taught themselves to read at a preschool age. Durkin (1966) conducted comprehensive parental interviews and child studies of two groups of early readers and concluded "...early readers are not

some unique species capable of being identified and sorted by tests. Rather, it would seem their preschool achievement in reading is the combined expression of themselves, their parents, and the kinds of environment provided" (p. 110). In an earlier study, Durkin (1966) compiled a list of sources identified by the parents as those factors which motivated their children's interest in reading. The three most frequently cited from a list of ten were: being read to at home; eagerness to keep up with older siblings; and availability of reading material in the home. These factors reflect the children's realization that reading was a natural part of their daily lives - something that they wanted for themselves. How a few such children can somehow decode the secret of letters is still a mystery, but their motivation is not exclusive; thousands of children come to school thirsting for that same knowledge. And thousands more start school with no interest in books whatsoever. It's not a matter of material possessions or social class, it's a matter of environmentally instilled motivation. Durkin concluded:

"...research findings show no simple connection between early reading and the socioeconomic status of a family. What is much more important, the research data indicated, is the presence of parents who spend time with their children; who read to them; who answer their questions and their requests for help; and who demonstrate in their own lives that reading is a rich source of relaxation, information, and contentment" (p. 136).

Clark (1976), in a similar study of early readers in Glasgow, supported the idea that early parental involvement with children and literature is a key factor in the child's later motivation. An exhaustive report on reading in the British school system, conducted by Sir Allan Bullock (1975) at Her Majesty's request, took three years to complete and repeatedly emphasized that the further extension of language into reading is something that must not wait until school is ready to teach it. Reading is not a discrete skill, but a part of a child's general language development and dependent on meeting appropriate experiences.

"The best way to prepare the very young child for reading is to hold him on your lap and read aloud

to him stories he likes--over and over again...
The printed page, the physical comfort and security,
the reassuring voice, the fascination of the story--
all these combine in the child's mind to identify
books as something which holds great pleasure"
(Bullock, 1975, p. 897)

Butler and Clay (1979) cited a study by Norris which
"...showed again, beyond all doubt, (withal) the dedication
of teachers and the use of modern methods, books, and
equipment, the vast majority of good readers were made
before the children started school...before teachers start
their work at all" (p. 8).

McKenzie (1977) also contended that language and
reading cannot be separated from home experience. She
believes that children need to listen to stories, talk about
stories, and retell stories. The retelling of stories or "pre-
tending" to read is a behavioral trait that Holdaway (1979)
feels is a natural and necessary step in learning to read.
He has studied reading-like behavior in children and has
found it to be highly motivated, self-correcting, syntactically
complex and self-satisfying for the child. Holdaway also
supports the idea that children with a background of book
experience since early infancy have developed what he
calls a literacy set, a host of prereading skills (listening
ability, recognition of the use of symbols, understanding of
direction and sequencing, etc.) that serves them well all
through their school years and beyond.

While the preceding studies have discussed all children,
boys are frequently referred to with the term "biological
unreadiness;" in light of the studies discussed, is it possible
that home/cultural implications are being ignored? Are
fathers reading to sons? Are fathers reading? Are fathers
smiling approval when they see their sons looking at picture
books? Downing and Thackery (1976) pointed out that--

"if a preschool girl spends a lot of time looking at
books, that behavior would be very acceptable
socially. But if an American father sees his son
with his nose in books to the same extent, he is
more likely to think that his son ought to be
doing something 'more boyish,' like running after
a ball outside the house...This socially determined

discrimination against boys could well be sufficient to explain why American boys are less ready to learn to read than American girls" (p. 20).

Entwisle (1971) pointed out that mother-child interactions are studied more frequently than father-child interactions and that actions of fathers may be more important in reading. Rubin (1972) found that boys and girls not only differ in language and readiness skills before kindergarten entrance, but also that kindergarten programs have a differential impact on the growth of these skills in the two groups. Although girls were more advanced before kindergarten, boys derived greater benefits from kindergarten. Perhaps boys derived greater benefit from kindergarten because they found cultural experiences (approval for looking at books, arts and crafts activities, singing, etc.) that had not been as abundant for them in the home as they had been for their sisters.

These reviewed studies of reading behavior in young children recognize that the home serves as a source for attitudes and that the child with a rich experiential background of involvement with words and books is more likely to develop the desire to read for him/herself.

Study

The present study was conducted in response to the issues of early reading motivation and the nature of the home environment. The hypothesis to be examined was that a strong literary environment in the home (i.e., a variety of books constantly accessible, parents reading for themselves and for their children, constant encouragement of literature based behavior, etc.) would be indicative of a child who had a natural interest in books, and could thus be assumed to have a high motivation toward learning to read. Since the sex of both children and parents would be taken into account, it was also hoped that any sex differences in children's reading motivation would become evident.

Subjects

The subjects of the study were 23 children (and their parents) who attended a preschool in a small midwestern community. Six children were dropped from the sample due to absences or failure of parents to return the survey.

The final sample included 11 males and 6 females, who ranged in age from 39 months to 70 months, with a mean age of 60 months. All the children were white, middle class, and lived with both parents.

Procedures

To determine which children possessed a 'literacy set,' an observation check list was used to record instances of book related interaction and behavior while in the pre-school setting. The subjects were observed in a free play situation and at story time over a three week period (pre-school was in session three mornings a week). Their two regular female teachers alternated each session in recording observations of the children's book related behavior. The observation list included ten areas: chooses books at free play time, looks at books front to back and turns pages correctly, pretends to read, looks at books with a group of friends, looks at books alone, plays with books (ramps, houses, etc.), obviously attentive during story hour, makes spontaneous remarks about books being read during story time, responds appropriately during teacher directed story discussion, reflects either story line or visual images in later play or art.

The observer placed a check each time the child demonstrated one of the above behaviors any time during the one hour free play or half hour story time. The length of time a child spent engaged in an observed activity was not recorded, but if a child left such an activity for more than five minutes and then returned to it, another check mark was noted. Those children who received the most check marks were considered to be the ones most involved with books, and thus the ones with 'literacy set.'

School Environment

The books available to the children were on display in a three tiered magazine rack so that the book covers were clearly visible, and the books were easily accessible at all times. Because the preschool program was literature based theme teaching, the 20 to 30 books were changed weekly to reflect the current topic. The three or four books read aloud each day were chosen from this selection, both by the teacher and at the suggestions of the children. Both free play and story time took place in the same room, a

large open area playroom, with tables and window seats where a child might sit alone or in a group.

Home Environment

To form an indication of each child's home literary environment, a questionnaire was developed and distributed to both mothers and fathers. The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine if parents were frequent readers themselves, if reading materials were available in the home for different age groups, if parents took their children to the library, if parents ever gave their children books as gifts, and if parents read to their children. The format of the questionnaire was multiple choice with some yes/no questions. While there was a total of 20 questions, not all were directly relevant to the purpose and were taken into final tabulation; thus, 17 was the highest score possible for any one parent.

Table 1
Correlations (r) of subjects' scores,
mothers' scores, and fathers' scores

	Mother	Father
Subject	.507*	.466*
Mother	--	.781**

* $p < .05$

** $p < .001$

Results

Pearson product-moment correlations were computed to determine the relationships among the subjects' observation score and the scores of the subjects' mother and father on the parent questionnaire.

As the table indicates, significant correlations were found between subject-mother, subject-father, and mother-father. In addition, when correlations were computed for boys and girls separately, significant correlations were found between the scores of boys' mothers and fathers ($r = .692$, $p < .01$) and the scores of girls' mothers and fathers ($r = .805$, $p < .05$).

To determine whether boys or girls demonstrated more reading behavior, a t test was computed between the mean score for boys (13) and the mean score for girls (20.5). The results indicated a significant difference, $t(15) = 2.67$, $p < .02$ with girls demonstrating more reading behavior than boys.

Discussion

The results of this study clearly support the hypothesis and the findings of Durkin, Clark, Norris, and the Bullock report regarding the importance of home influences in early reading behavior. This study revealed a significant positive correlation between the literary environment of the home and the 'literacy set' of the child in a preschool setting. While a direct causal relationship cannot be concluded from the results, it seems reasonable to assume that the parentally directed home literary environment accounts for one factor in the young child's motivation to read. If the child is read to, sees others reading and has frequent access to books, he/she will "naturally" consider books as part of the world the child wants to learn about. A child can only draw from his own realm of experience. What he sees at home becomes the basis for building self, and learning to read.

In terms of sex differences, a positive correlation was found between the scores of the mother and the father in response to the questionnaire. This finding lends further support to the recent research which has investigated the important role of the father in child rearing. An examination of the children's scores shows support for the work of others regarding sex differences in early reading behavior. The preschool girls in this study showed significantly more reading behaviors than their male counterparts when observed in a natural environment.

Implications

Motivation must be considered a key element in the reading process. Traditional reading readiness programs that address only the issues of auditory and visual perception, dexterity, and discrimination, and are not sufficient. Assessment programs that contain no box on the score sheet for motivation are inadequate. We need to ask "Does this child want to learn to read? Has experiential back-

ground in the home instilled within the child the desire to understand those familiar yet secret written symbols?"

If the answer is no, then the teacher must realize that school alone cannot provide the motivation; teachers must work with parents to help them understand the importance of the home literary environment. Teachers must provide support for parents to enable them to recognize that parents are the first teachers of their children, and are always powerful role models. Teachers can encourage parents to read aloud to their children, suggest appropriate titles and literature related activities that children and parents can do together. The first school for the child is the home--there s/he sees what is important for him/her to know, and reading should be one of the most important of all.

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