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# EXPOSURE TO READING AT HOME--HOW DOES THIS AFFECT THE YOUNG READER?

Debra A. Johnson

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September is upon you and 25 scared, bright-eyed faces are staring at their new first grade teacher. In the noise and confusion, one brave six-year-old inches up to you, looks you right in the eye and says, "I've been reading since I was three."

This is music to your ears but you need to know more. You immediately pull out your preprimer to test this enthusiastic volunteer. He not only can read it, but also looks at you as though you had to be kidding. You seek out the first basal and test him, with similar results. This continues through a third-level basal. You are not sure whether to kiss him or promote him, but one thing is certain. This child is a reader and has been for some time.

Many children enter school already knowing how to read, although not so dramatically as the child described above. Trying to isolate all of the causes for the early reading phenomenon would be like writing a conclusive definition for reading itself. One factor which is thought to be contributory to a young reader's abilities is exposure to reading in the home. Teachers often tell parents to read to their children at home--that this in turn will help their reading at school. Certainly such a suggestion must have some value. But the value of home exposure to reading goes beyond simply helping a child keep up. By taking a careful look at the available research, you can arrive at some specific recommendations for home reading that will allow a parent to facilitate her preschooler's reading skills and attitudes.

## RESEARCH ON HOME READING

Research on the effects of home reading is anything but conclusive. However, existing studies tend to support the idea that involvement in reading in the home has a positive effect on the prereader. Generally, the views run the gamut from a highly structured, instruction-oriented approach to an unstructured orientation. Most often cited as the proponent for a structured home reading program is *How to Teach Your Baby to Read* (Aukerman, 1971). This is a parent-directed series of published books and materials developed to provide preschool instruction in reading. It is obviously quite structured in nature, as it depends upon a sequence of skills and a set of materials not ordinarily found in the home.

The unstructured viewpoints tend to seek explanations for early reading and from them define general early reading characteristics. Smethurst cites three fundamental concepts that lead a child to read (Smethurst, 1975). First, what is spoken can be written and vice versa. Second, print stands for speech. Third, the unraveling of print is useful and pleasant. Through close contact with reading, a child places some value on obtaining the skill of unraveling the message of the written word. Frank Smith, a psycholinguist, supports and clarifies the idea of the importance of reading relevance (Smith, 1978). He feels that a child must have a reason to attend to print. The

words on the cereal box or cartoons on Saturday morning are not arbitrary scribblings, but are meaningful and consistent with the child's environment. Thus, the child learns to question and resolve these clues to his surroundings.

Children, then, realize a value in reading through their environment. The preschool child's prime environmental models are the parents, so it is assumed that the parents' treatment of reading in the home will greatly influence the child's view of reading. Parent-interview data obtained by Dolores Durkin which reveal some common characteristics of early readers would tend generally to support this assumption (Durkin, 1959). These children were read to extensively before entering school. They had their own books, ranging in number from 5 to 200. The children were curious about books and had someone willing to satisfy their curiosity. A similar survey supports these findings, but adds that the "someone" who eagerly satisfies the child's curiosity is an important model who values reading very highly (Aukerman, 1972). Finally, Smethurst would add that the child, while being read to, sat close to the reader, in clear view of the pictures and print (Smethurst, 1975).

These general findings tend to stress the importance of the home environment to the development of early readers and are verified by more specific research. Rosenquist assessed 90 first graders to determine the effect on reading achievement scores of school

recommended, home reading activities (Rosenquist, 1972). Through tests of word reading and paragraph meaning and a teacher rating scale, the children who shared in positive reading experiences at home scored 3 to 4 months higher in grade equivalents than those who did not. A study by Koppenhaver yielded similar results (Koppenhaver, 1971). Every fifth grader in a California school district was carefully screened. It was revealed that high achievers in reading came from homes that were intellectually stimulating and provided opportunities for verbal development.

A final study of interest to this issue was done by Plessas, who attempted to pin down certain preschool experiences relating to the reading development of selected early readers (Plessas, 1964). Twenty high achievers were identified in the first grade and their parents were administered a questionnaire concerning home reading activities. The questionnaire revealed that all of the children were read to extensively at home by mothers, fathers, and siblings. Parents mentioned reading most often with respect to the child's playthings, home play, and relations with adults. All of the children had a personal interest in reading, and 16 out of 20 received instruction at home and watched television daily.

To summarize, the research tends to support the assumption that reading in the home has a positive effect on children as potential readers. The act of reading to the child frequently appears to be beneficial in developing early reading skills. Availability of all types of materials provides a source for exploration and a reason to want to learn to read, i.e., to know more about their surroundings. The attitudes and actions of important family members, ranging from inadvertent reinforcement to the use of formal, instructional techniques, tend to affect the child's attitudes toward reading and thus, his or early reading capabilities. Finally, early readers seem to understand that the written word has

meaning within the environment and, as a result, view reading as positive and rewarding.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

Keeping the research in mind, it is time to return to your new classroom. Your initial experience made you curious. Are there others who are reading and why are they so skillful? You put two and two together and decide that parent conferences right about now could be very revealing. And how right you are!

Matt and his mother never miss a bedtime story. With Matt being an only child, the evening is quiet, relaxed, and unhurried. Dad turns the T.V. off about 8:00 and settles in to work on that new bestseller. Matt and Mom sit close, share a hug, and read the book that Matt chose from the library that day.

Dana, on the other hand, has five big brothers making bedtime a mad scramble and not the perfect time to show Mom her new book. Dana's mother learned after her second child that lunchtime offered the best time for story hour. With the other children at school and the phone off the hook, she and Dana energetically pursue gingerbread men and tricky foxes. Dana giggles, "You sound just like the little old woman, Mother!" As they end the story, the mail arrives with Dana's latest book from her book club. The whole family goes to the library occasionally, but that is not as exciting as an especially delivered book with Dana's name on it.

Jason's mother works part of the week, so she always takes Jason to run errands. As she pulls up to the corner, she reads, "STOP!" Glancing at Jason, she admits, "I'm sure glad we saw that sign! That could have been trouble!" When they get to the shopping center, they look at the signs and decide that groceries are what they are after. With shelves of labels to choose from, they decide to shop carefully and read each item before putting it in the cart, the perfect job for Jason. As

they are checking out, Jason notices a new Golden Book on the newsstand. Mom says okay, so Jason adds a new book to his home library.

Three different approaches are apparently successful, as Matt, Dana and Jason all came to first grade reading. From analyzing these conference, data and recounting research findings, four recommendations to parents can be made. One, read to your child on a regular basis. The "classic" bedtime story works beautifully if it fits into your family's schedule. If it does not suit your life style, a flexible attitude may result in a fresh approach, such as the one used by Jason's mother, or at least a more practical one, as in Dana's case. But the emphasis is on regularity. Reading encounters once a month will not foster growth or interest in your child. They must occur often and on a regular basis.

Two, provide your child with something to read. The young child must have visual and nonvisual exposure to the written word. Without this exposure, words have no meaning or familiarity. Libraries, book clubs, grocery shelves, or anywhere your child encounters print are all sources of reading materials that are easily accessible and provide a wide range of subject matter.

Three, make reading meaningful and important for your child. A child sees that reading can save him from accidents or help him select food, as Jason did. He will want to know what those words mean. Children are active explorers of their environment, always searching for new ways to cope with the world. If reading is so important that Mom takes the phone off the hook and Dad turns off the television during storytime, then those words must be worth some attention.

Four, make reading fun. Matt sits close to someone loving. Dana laughs as a reader uses a story character's voice. Jason's mother makes a vacation out of a trip to the store. All three of the children can associate reading with pleasant surroundings, close contact, and

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humor. With such a positive view of reading, these children will want to repeat the reading experience over and over again.

Those new first graders, old hands at reading, did not just wake up one morning deciding to read. They had interest, which carried over to school later, and developed it somehow. It seems more than speculation at this point that exposure must have had something to do with their remarkable skill. And where would three-year-olds encounter reading with such consistency and impact as to allow for self-instruction if not in their own home.

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The Michigan Reading Association has established a fund to help assist researchers (teachers, administrators, educators) who are interested in investigating issues that focus upon statewide concerns. MRA believes that too often research has been parochial in nature with only minimal concern for how it may affect the profession on a statewide basis. For this reason, a new committee on continuing research has been established. For further information regarding available funds, guidelines for funding, eligibility, etc., please contact: Dr. Charles W. Peters, Oakland Schools, 2100 Pontiac Lake Road, Pontiac, Michigan 48054 or call him at 313-858-1946.

1. Student File (anonymous) - Contains available information from the Michigan Department of Education regarding performance on every student in the state 1973-1979 (by school and district).

2. Student File (non-anonymous) Same as above but needs signed approval from each school district requested.

3. School Summary File - Performance by building (proportions data and by performance objective)

4. District Summary File - Performance by district (as for schools)

5. Frequency Distributions (used to compute proportions data for schools and districts)

6. Sample/5000 Tape - Randomly sampled, 5000 4th and 7th graders, 1973-1979

7. District and School Summary on Microfilm

8. Statistical Analysis of Regular and Experimental Tests and Items

9. Four Year Proportions Report for every school and district - By district alphabetically and by district and school

10. Lists high, moderate, and low need schools - improving, declining buildings.

11. Comparison of performance on original and revised versions of the

4th, 7th, and 10th grade tests

12. List of Districts - Mailing Labels

13. List of Buildings - Mailing Labels

14. Classification of Districts by Community Type (Geographic, SES Distributions)

15. Fourth Friday Count data (Human and financial resources data)

16. Stratified lists of school buildings for sampling purposes (4th, 7th, 10th)

For more information regarding the above, please contact Dr. Edward Roeber, Supervisor, Michigan Educational Assessment Program, Lansing, Michigan 48909.