

---

October 1972

## I Wish I Could Read!

Wilma H. Miller

Carol A. Evans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

---

### Recommended Citation

Miller, Wilma H. and Evans, Carol A. (1972) "I Wish I Could Read!," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol6/iss3/2>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

# I WISH I COULD READ!

By Wilma H. Miller and  
Carol A. Evans

Since the era when Sputnik was launched by USSR, all school learning in the United States has been begun much earlier. Today particular attention is being paid to the teaching of reading to the child before he enters school. At the present time more and more parents are wondering if their preschool child should be taught to read in either a formal or an informal way.

This article briefly summarizes the research on the teaching of reading to preschool children, and discusses the potential values of teaching reading to very young children in both formal and informal ways. The article illustrates some of the formal methods and materials which recently have been put on the market for teaching preschool children to read. A proposed way for teaching very young children to read also is found in the article.

## What Does Research Show About the Formal Teaching of Reading?

One of the earliest examples of a mother who taught her very young child to read at home was reported in 1914. The little girl was named Winifred, and a book entitled *Natural Education* explained how she was taught to read. Winifred's mother said: (as reported in Glen Dorman's book *How to Teach Your Baby to Read*)

When my baby was six months old, I placed a border of white cardboard four feet in height around the walls of her nursery. On one side of the wall I placed the letters of the alphabet, which I had cut from red glazed paper. On another wall I formed from the same red letters simple words arranged in

rows, as "bat," "cat," "pat," "mat" . . . After Winifred had learned all her letters, I began to teach her the words on the wall by spelling them out and making rhymes about them.

Winifred's mother said that her little girl learned to read when she was just sixteen months old.<sup>(5)</sup>

In 1918 Lewis Terman wrote about Martha (sometimes called Millie) who was taught to read by her father, an attorney, when she was nineteen months old. He used large red block letters to form words. Martha could read simple sentences at twenty-one months, and she could read from primers and first readers at twenty-five months. At the age of twenty-six and a half months, she had a reading vocabulary of more than seven hundred words.<sup>(16)</sup>

In 1931 Helen Davidson conducted a study with thirteen children each of whom had a chronological age from three to five years and a mental age of four years. Each of her subjects received ten minutes of daily formal reading instruction for a period of four and a half months. All of the children in the study learned to recognize some words. The most successful child could identify 269 words while the least successful child could recognize twenty words.<sup>(4)</sup>

During the last fifteen years there has been an increased emphasis on teaching very young children to read. Some of this emphasis may stem from Jerome Bruner's statement: "Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any state of development."<sup>(2)</sup>

Recently Mayme Cohan taught Cindy, a two and a half-year-old child to read. Cindy herself chose the words that she wanted to learn to recognize, and the words were printed for her in manuscript handwriting on index cards. During a short period of time Cindy learned to recognize more than twenty words.<sup>(3)</sup>

Glenn Doman of the Institute for the Achievement of Human Potential in Philadelphia probably has been the best known in this area since he wrote a book entitled *How to Teach Your Baby to Read*. Doman said that the first words the very young child is going to learn to recognize should be printed in red lower-case letters on white cardboard cards. Words should be chosen that are within the child's immediate experiences, and they are presented as sight words. The words "Mommy" and "Daddy" should be the first words presented as sight words. The words "Mommy" and "Daddy" should be the first words presented when the child is about two years old. However, these words can be presented when the child is only ten months old if he is bright enough.<sup>(5)</sup>

Another recent development has been the use of the auto-responsive environment or "talking typewriter" which has been researched by O. K. Moore. The talking typewriter has been evaluated in several studies with young children, and the studies discovered that evidently the "talking typewriter" is a promising way to teach preschool children to read.<sup>(13)</sup>

### What Does Research Show About the Informal Teaching of Reading?

Several early studies discovered that certain informal home prereading experiences apparently enabled preschool children both to develop reading readiness and to profit from

beginning reading instruction. Examples of such home prereading experiences apparently enabled preschool children both to develop reading readiness and to profit from beginning reading instruction. Examples of such home prereading experiences were reading to the preschool child, the number of books in the home, and the parents' interest in reading. Such studies were conducted by Millie Almy, Esther Milner, and William Sheldon and Lawrence Carrillo. (1, 12, 14)

Another well-known study was reported by William Fowler who conducted nursery-school type classes in his home for two-and three-year-old children. His daughter Josephine was in the group of six children. The reading instruction was play-oriented, and three bright children in the group learned to read fluently in two months.<sup>(7, 8)</sup>

Possibly the most widely-known research studies in this area were conducted by Dolores Durkin. She interviewed mothers of early readers in California and New York. The early readers typically had learned to read in their home in an informal way. Their early reading activities were similar to reading readiness activities and consisted of a parent's or older brother's or sister's reading aloud to them, having questions answered which they asked about letters and words and writing words in which they were interested. The children in the studies were more responsive to help with reading when it was an outgrowth of their own questions rather than when a parent made a real effort to teach them how to read.<sup>(6)</sup>

Other recent studies were conducted by Marjorie Hunt Sutton and Wilma H. Miller. In both of these studies home prereading activities such as reading to the child, the development of a background of experiences,

and the use of manipulative materials seemed to be related to success in first-grade reading achievement.<sup>(15, 11)</sup> A very recent study was conducted by E. Robert LaCrosse, Jr., in which he reported certain mothers' child-rearing practices. LaCrosse studied mothers of one-to three-year-old children in their homes, and at the end of the period he called the mothers of the highly competent children "supermothers." A "supermother" was likely to elaborate on statements which her child made and usually asked mind-stretching questions. For example, instead of asking: "What color is the ball?" the "supermother" would ask: "What is Jack going to hit when he falls to the bottom of the hill?"<sup>(9)</sup>

Television instruction has been used as a way of helping mothers learn how to teach their preschool children beginning reading skills. Television station WENH-TV in Denver showed mothers how to present beginning reading skills in their homes to their preschool child if he had a mental age of about four and a half year.<sup>(10)</sup>

#### **Commercially Available Materials for Teaching Preschool Children to Read**

Today there are many materials available which both researchers and parents can use to teach young children to read. Some of these materials also can be used in school as well as in the home. Many of the materials require a one-to-one relationship between the instructor and the child.

The "talking typewriter" can be used for teaching reading skills to young children, but it cannot be used in the home or even in the ordinary nursery school because of its very high cost. It can be rented for \$1000 a month or purchased for about \$40,000.

**Getting Ready to Read** is a reading program which is an outgrowth of the

Denver Early Reading Experiment. It usually is used in kindergarten or early first grade, but it also could be used in the home. This program stresses reading for meaning, the use of the initial consonant and context clues, and reading to the child. It has many colorful workbooks and game-like activities such as picture and key word cards, "animated key cards," bingo-like games, records, and filmstrips.

The **A, B, C Dictation Skills Program** is a published program for teaching kindergarten children to read which was written by William C. McMahon. Its aim is to prevent subsequent reading failure by introducing one skill at a time. In this program the child learns to recognize and write the alphabet letters, and the method for learning the letters is one of tracing. There is an alphabet book, two consonant books, and a vowel book in the program. No picture clues are used, and each step is to be thoroughly mastered before the child goes on to the next step.

The **Read Along With Me Program** is a linguistic reading approach which originally was designed for parents to use in teaching reading to their preschool child. The authors Robert H. Allen and his wife Virginia F. Allen actually used this program to teach their own preschool son to read. The program contains word books, rhyming cards, and an instructor's manual. The parent reads the story and pauses for the child to read the words which are printed in larger bold-faced type.

Another program for teaching preschool children to read is **Play 'N Talk Phonics** by Marie A. Le Doux and consists of recordings and handbooks illustrated by a Walt Disney artist. The child follows along in each book while the record does the teaching of reading. The program presents initial consonants, vowels, and word families and contains bingo-type games, riddles

and rhymes, a phonic slide rule, and a Ring 'N Key typewriter technique. **Play 'N Talk Phonics** mainly has been used by parents with their preschool children, but also has been used in some classrooms.

The material found in Glenn Doman's book **How to Teach Your Baby to Read** has been adapted to a program for parents and nursery schools. This program is quite similar to the methods and materials which are described in Doman's book. The kit is marketed under the name **Reading A**.

Another program for teaching young children to read is **Listen and Learn With Phonics** by Dorothy Taft Watson and is composed of four non-consumable books and accompanying records. This program presents consonant sounds, vowel sounds, blends, and digraphs. The books are cleverly illustrated, and word and letter games accompany the teaching kit.

The **Wenkart Phonic Readers** and an accompanying record were developed by Heni Wenkart Epstein. She wrote the first books for her son Jonny who was four years old at the time. She stated that he learned to read by this approach. The program presents consonant sounds along with the vowel sounds which follow them.

#### **How Should Preschool Children Be Taught to Read?**

After analyzing the research which has been done in this area and examining the commercially available materials which have been developed for teaching preschool children to read, some conclusions and recommendations can be made. It is not surprising that many parents today do not know if they should teach their preschool child to read. If they do decide to teach reading to their young

child, they then must decide whether to do this in an informal way or in a formal way using a commercially available program.

Much of the research indicated that a few preschool children really are ready for reading instruction and therefore will enjoy and profit from such instruction. However, normally these are the rare children with superior linguistic aptitude and a high level of intelligence. Such children also have an interest in reading-related activities. Reading prior to school entrance just cannot be recommended for the majority of young children since there are so many potential problems which may result from such instruction. For example, if a parent forces a young child to participate in reading instruction when he is not ready for it, he may develop negative feelings toward all reading activities. These negative feelings can carry over into beginning reading activities in school.

However, if a parent is sure that the child is ready for reading at the age of three or four, the informal, interesting teaching of reading can be highly recommended. Such an informal program can consist of much reading to the child of interesting material, conscientiously answering his questions about letters and words, and teaching him the letter names and possibly the sounds of the letters. The young child should be taught how to print his own name and all of the words which he has learned to recognize in correct manuscript letters. The preschool child can be encouraged to use manipulative materials such as crayons, paints, clay, scissors, and construction paper.

Most young children should not be taught reading by any kind of formal program. Such programs seem to be too structured and unnatural for the vast majority of preschool children

and could result in their developing a dislike for most reading activities.

To summarize, it can be very beneficial for a few preschool children to learn to read since it may well give

them an advantage in the elementary school. However, such reading instruction should be informal, and only those children who are ready and truly interested in it should be exposed to it.

#### Bibliography

1. Almy, Millie. "Children's Experiences Prior to First Grade and Success in Beginning Reading," *Teachers College Record*, Volume 51 (March, 1950), pp. 392-393.
2. Bruner, Jerome S. *The Process of Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960.
3. Cohan, Mayne. "Two and a Half and Reading," *Elementary English*, Volume 38, (November, 1961), pp. 506-508+ 517.
4. Davidson, Helen. "An Experimental Study of Bright, Average and Dull Children at the Four-Year Mental Level," *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, Volume 9 (1931), pp. 119-289.
5. Doman, Glenn. *How to Teach Your Baby to Read*. New York: Random House, 1964.
6. Durkin, Dolores. *Children Who Read Early*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1966.
7. Fowler, William. "A Study of Process and Method in Three-Year-Old Twins and Triplets Learning to Read," *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, Volume 72 (1965), pp. 3-89.
8. Fowler, William. "Teaching a Two-Year-Old to Read: An Experiment in Early Childhood Learning," *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, Volume 66. (1962), pp. 181-283.
9. LaCrosse, E. Robert, Jr. "Reading Readiness in the Preschool Years: A Total Preparation by the Environment," *Thirty-Fifth Yearbook of the Claremont Reading Conference*, Claremont Graduate School, 1971, pp. 27-33.
10. McManus, Anastasia. "The Denver Prereading Project Conducted by WENH-TV," *The Reading Teacher*, Volume 18 (October, 1964) pp. 22-26.
11. Miller, Wilma H. "Relationship Between Mother's Style of Communication and Her Control System to the Child's Reading Readiness and Subsequent Reading Achievement in First Grade." Doctoral dissertation completed at the University of Arizona, 1967.
12. Milner, Esther. "A Study of the Relationship Between Reading Readiness in Grade One Children and Patterns of Parent-Child Interaction," *Child Development Abstracts*, Volume 25 (1951), p. 189.
13. Moore, Omar Khayyam and Alan Ross Anderson. "The Responsive Environments Project," *Early Education: Current Theory, Research and Action*. Edited by Robert D. Hess and Roberta M. Bear. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1968.
14. Sheldon, William and Lawrence Carrillo. "Relation of Parents, Home, and Certain Developmental Characteristics to Children's Reading Ability," *Elementary School Journal*, Volume 52 (January, 1952), pp. 262-270.
15. Sutton, Marjorie Hunt. "Readiness for Reading at the Kindergarten Level," *The Reading Teacher*, Volume 17, (January, 1964), pp. 234-239.
16. Terman, Lewis. *Genetic Studies of Genius and Mental and Physical Traits of a Thousand Gifted Children*. Pala Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1925.

## **Beginning Reading Materials**

### **A, B, C, Dictation Skills Program**

Educators Publishing Service  
301 Vassar Street  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

### **Auto-responsive Environment**

Responsive Environments Foundation, Inc.  
20 Augur Street  
Hamden, Connecticut 06517

### **Getting Ready to Read**

Houghton Mifflin Company  
110 Tremont Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02107

### **Listen and Learn with Phonics**

Americana Interstate Corporation  
501 East Lange Street  
Mundelein, Illinois 60060

### **Play 'N Talk**

P.O. Box 18804  
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73118

### **Read Along with Me**

Teachers College Press  
Teachers College, Columbia University  
New York, New York 10027

### **Reading A**

Systems for Education, Inc.  
612 North Michigan Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois 60611

### **Wenkart Phonic Readers**

Wenkart Publishing Company  
4 Shady Hill Square  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

**(Wilma Miller is Professor of Education and Carol Evans is a Graduate Student at Illinois State University.)**