

“Preparing for reading”

by Willemien Krüger © September 2012

Teaching your child to read is just a step in the process of teaching lots of things. And before you actually get to that step, there is a lot parents can do to help prepare their children for learning to read. This article will categorise some practical things you can do according to the child's age before 7 years old in order to prepare him/her for reading. The one thing to remember though is that the age of 7 years at which most children must attend school compulsory and then learn to read – is just the average age between as young as 4 years and as old as 11 years old at which children can start to read. There is also the Institute for the Achievement of Human Potential (www.iahp.org) which encourages parents to develop the skill of reading from even younger ages than 4 years. Based on this quote from Ruth Strang

“Reading is more than seeing words clearly, more than pronouncing printed words correctly, more than recognising the meaning of isolated word. Reading requires you to think, feel and imagine.” – I will personally recommend parents to remember that you are parenting a whole child – to mature not only intellectually, but socially, emotionally and spiritually as well. There are so many other knowledge and skills that children develop in the early years, and you will know when you have a child who is visually inclined and want to learn to read early. I do however believe that the skill of reading is of the utmost importance for the younger generation who will be flooded with information from media, internet, books etc. where not only the ability to read but also to distinguish and analyse what you read will be necessary for growth. But let's just focus first on the things you can do to create the environment for stimulating reading :

Age 0 – 2years : This phase's most important objective in preparing to read is to **build a child's communication skills by talking to him/her about the world around him/her.**

- Encourage communication – TALK, LISTEN, ASK questions and have conversations with your child about everything – every outing, activity, people and happenings in his/her world. (don't talk babytalk, use proper vocabulary)
- Read to him/her – variety of books, picture or no pictures, use good books.
- Sing songs and learn some poems.
- Stimulate eye co-ordination by encouraging observation and attentiveness to sounds, colors and shapes all around.
- Stimulate eye-hand co-ordination by playing – with balls, outside and with variety of things.
- Encourage getting to know his/her body and how he/she relates to his/her environment (relation to space around).

Age 2 – 4 years : This phase's most important objective is to **develop self-confidence in communication** by talking, listening, helping with vocabulary and answering all those crazy questions.

- Similar to above – still encourage communication – TALK, LISTEN, ASK questions and have conversations with your child about everything – every outing, activity, people and happenings in his/her world. (don't talk babytalk, use proper vocabulary)
- Keep on reading aloud to your children (with your child snuggled up on your lap to be able to see the pictures and words) - DISCUSS the book, ASK questions, ask him/her to NARRATE what has been read, stop at a point in the story and ask what does he/she think will happen next etc. When you are reading, show with your finger where you read, allow the child to help turn the pages, discuss the pictures and allow discussion or questions from the child.
- Now is the time to allow the child to get his/her own library card and visit the library often. Assist the child in selecting books for him/herself.
- LISTEN well to your child telling you a story or asking for things, or sharing about his/her life, and correct his vocabulary in a gentle manner.
- Help a child become aware of the world of words and its richness by yourself using a wide vocabulary and expressing yourself properly when talking about life, emotions and situations.
- Let child see difference between the pictures and the words, and look at detail in pictures.
- Encourage inquisitiveness – in books, in nature, in the garden, in animals and the sky and weather and toys, how things work etc. and discuss/describe with words all the variety of sounds, shapes and colors in our environment.
- Be attentive and read all sorts of things you encounter – advertisements, product details, newspapers, magazines etc, so that child sense that 'stuff to read' is everywhere.
- Have a 3D environment (wide open space for running around, trees to climb in, climbing frame to explore, hang in, move up and down on) available outside where child's gross motor skills can develop.
- Play with your child and encourage playing with balls – catching, throwing, rolling, kicking etc.

- Give instructions for him/her to follow with specific detail eg. go and fetch all the blue balls in a bag, or walk 5 steps, then turn left and walk another 5, then turn around and come back here.
- Since reading involves memory, attention to detail, understanding logic and sequence, the ability to contextualise and predict, it is useful to play memory, category, pattern and logical sequence games including building puzzles.
- Encourage creative work by coloring, painting, making things from boxes, straws or any other building material, playing with homemade (or storebought) modelling clay, or mud and water work just the same.
- Have materials and stuff available for him/her to build with eg. blocks, wood, Lego, Fischertechnik etc.
- Listen to music, songs and stories.

Age 4 – 6 years : This phase's most important objective is to provide **emotional security and a strong foundation** as the child starts exploring reading.

- All of the above should still continue, and will do if a natural home environment is available to enjoy. Important though is to note that a home environment will only be enjoyed if one is at home enough of the time....'long free days at home' is important when children are young. To grow up in the backseat of a car is not the ideal.
- Being at home also implies that you are available for your children – on an emotional, social and intellectual level
- Reading aloud to your child is still very important, and especially reading a wide range of vocabulary – not only short story books. In fact, choosing high quality input books is important, as there is a lot of 'twaddle' in the marketplace.

At this age some parents will experience that their children show an interest in wanting to learn to read, especially girls. Remember that this age is still very young and if your child (especially boys do not show an interest yet, do not panic, he is 'normal' and may require just another few years before the importance or interest of reading develops)

Some indicators of a child ready to read are (apart from verbally expressing that he/she wants to learn to read) :

1. Is child able and *enthusiastic* about 'play read' ? (can (s)he hold a book, turn the pages, look at pictures, talk about it)
2. Can child express himself verbally (talk) with a fairly wide vocabulary and listen to instructions and follow it ?
3. Does child enjoy stories, songs and rhymes and can (s)he remember things ?
4. Can child look and describe detail in pictures and do sorting and classifying of objects?
5. Can child narrate story back in right sequence ?
6. Can child make a story of pictures ?
7. Can child copy sound, letters and pictures you make ?
8. Can child recognize similarities and differences ?
9. Can child sound or maybe write out his/her own name ?
10. Can child see and hear well and distinguish between different sounds, colors and objects ?
11. Is child's hand-eye co-ordination well developed ?
12. Can child concentrate for the duration of a story ?

If child is ready to learn to read, investigate reading programs. In the market there are plenty of reading programs, and they will differ in whether it suits your taste or not. The important thing to know is that it should be something you are comfortable with and it should be something you can understand and execute. Remember that the curriculum can be adapted, added to and even changes to better suit your style.

Teaching reading can however be very natural if you know the sounds in the particular language you want to teach. Then as you read to a child, you can simply start to 'sound out' each sound the word consists of eg. 'c-a-t' and then say 'cat'. A language usually consists of only a certain number of sounds or sound combinations. Therefore to learn to read is really about memorizing these sound related 'pictures'. I have personally benefitted most by Ruth Beechick's book called 'A home start in reading' where the steps to teach a child to read is explained in detail. In this way one can understand the logic behind the process, and therefore adapt it as well. Included in the books are a vowel and consonant chart for the english language. When I had taught my own children I had only to search for the vowel and consonant charts for the afrikaans language which was our home first language I taught to my own children.

The two main groups of reading strategies include the 'phonics' method vs the 'look-and-say words' method. In the phonics method the sounds of letters are taught so that any word can be read by sounding out the different sounds or soundpairs. The other method focus on teaching words to remember as a whole and therefore the child eventually build up a vocabulary of words to remember to read. Most methods will encourage using both methods, as one must know the sounds to read any word, but eventually recognize some words anyway enabling quicker reading.

Even when using a program, follow the pace the child sets. Little and often is best (5-10 minutes per day) - 'every day a little bit' works better than trying to do a lot one day and other days nothing. Also remember that review of every new sound learnt is very

important. Do not hurry to learn all the sounds as quick as possible and be prepared for a long phase of learning to read fluently. Don't worry of the child's reading attempts are not perfect, this will improve over time.

It is usually also more proficient to learn to read and write together. Writing is a technical manual skill, and a child's fine motor skills should be ready before attempting too early to learn to write.

Age 7 - 9 years : This phase's most important objective is to **patiently encourage your child's reading efforts** as you read, listen and talk about it daily in the process to become a fluent reader.

- This age is where most children of school age really start to read and develop their fluency in reading. Many boys express an interest in reading only at this age, and this is quite normal. If it is only now that you feel ready to start teaching reading, then it is right for you.
- One thing that I have found to be very valuable to reading is to expand my childrens' vocabulary by letting us read non-fiction books about a variety of topics. The main purpose in these Foundation phase years, was therefore not to learn all the facts but to expand vocabulary by hearing different words. Reading complex words was therefore never an issue, as the children would have just 'sounded out' the letters because they have heard enough vocabulary to be able to guess the sounds. We took turns in reading paragraphs, depending on their skill and mood of the day.
- Putting in effort to choose 'good books' for their own reading, as well as reading to me, has also been worthwhile. This meant that we did not just read anything for the sake of reading, the choice of books is still important for us.
- There is a saying 'to learn to read one must read' – so keep on reading to your child. Don't quit when they start reading well by themselves, because the brain needs two to three hours per day of hearing *sophisticated linguistic patterns* to develop a good basis for using those language patterns either verbally or in written form.
- Memorize lots of poetry and/or Scripture. The more a brain memorize, the more neural connections are formed. It doesn't even really matter what you have memorized.

Remember that your example and lifestyle will also influence how eager a child wants to learn to read. If reading is a hobby with both parents and a way of relaxing, then children will want to 'be together' doing the reading-thing. But do not compare and do not panic about this basic skill. I once heard a mom talking to us about her boy who didn't want to learn to read, as he was more interested in making and building things and keeping himself busy with his hands. After much agony she finally 'gave up' and stopped the whole effort. At age 12, this boy had taken apart some electronic equipment and he wanted to re assemble it in a different form, but he had to read the instructions ! As a result of this 'urgent need' he then taught himself to read in 2 weeks ! This may be a good story and most of us will probably not have the guts to let it go, but may this be inspiration to remember not to stress more than necessary.