

TOP

Tips on parenting



Helping Your Child on the Journey Toward Literacy

by Deborah Larson

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As a parent you are your child's first teacher. Think for a moment about all your children learned or will learn in the first three years of life. They learn to walk, to talk, to make simple decisions and follow simple directions, among many other things. It is hard to say when literacy development begins, but the American Pediatrics Association in 1999 told us that by age three the brain has reached 90% of its full potential. Since you want to make the most of these early years, there are some simple, but important ways you can help in your child's literacy development. All are fairly simple, and the biggest investment is your time. There are four areas where you, as a parent, can be your child's first teacher. These areas include: developing oral language, reading aloud, noticing print, and writing.

Oral Language

Children's language development is critical to future learning. When babies play peek-a-boo with an adult, they are learning about language features and structure by listening to the tones and rhythms of the adult speaking to them. When a child says, "Drink" and the adult responds, "Do you want a glass of milk?" language is developed. Conversations with adults are a natural way children learn how language works. It is important to ask your child questions daily about the environment such as, "What is the weather like outside?" or make statements like, "I like your red shirt." Statements such as these help your child develop concepts about the weather and about colors. Be sure to ask questions that require more than a yes or no answer. Simple daily conversations like this model for children how to interact with language. Since children need daily practice to develop this skill, it is important to talk to them as we go about our everyday tasks. Playing games and singing simple songs are other ways to encourage correct speech patterns. At all times let children know that you are listening to what they have to say and that you value what they have to say. Be sure to praise children or let them know when they are using language correctly. When you praise and

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reinforce language, those skills will rapidly grow and develop.

Simple fingerplays are yet another way to interact with children and language. They love the sounds and movements and become actively involved in the rhyme. Fingerpainting and stringing beads help develop eye coordination. Playing with alphabet blocks increases both motor skills and knowledge of letters. All these activities promote and enhance literacy development.

Reading with Your Child

The language in books will help to increase your child's vocabulary. Experts tell us that one important prediction of reading success in school is the number of stories that children have had read to them before they enter school. Younger children especially enjoy simple books with bright pictures that help tell the story. Simple, predictable stories help children understand and recognize language patterns. Books such as

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question corner

"My son is in kindergarten. He has a great vocabulary, knows his letters and the sounds of each, and he reads several words. However, his teacher wants to keep him in kindergarten because he is behind in handwriting and she fears he won't be able to meet the expectation in first grade. He can't write all of his letters and when he does write, it is not very legible. We really do not want to hold him back. He is very social and we think he needs to go on with his friends. What should we do?"



~ Sheri in Montana

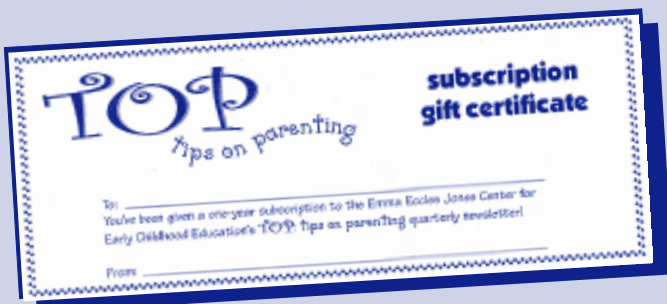
Educational scholars advise that retention should be a last resort. Several years of research suggest that retention is ineffective because small academic gains disappear by third grade and retained children are more likely to have behavior problems in school later. In addition, given your son's other skills, I don't think poor handwriting is cause for alarm.

I would suggest that you talk with the kindergarten and first grade teachers together. You can indicate that you don't feel retention is a wise choice but perhaps, together, you can make a plan to assist him with his fine motor development. For example, some things you can do at home include providing him with many manipulative toys (e.g., beads to string, legos, etc.) and opportunities to paint, draw and work with clay. You can also make a writing area for him, complete with paper, pencils, markers, envelopes, stickers, etc. and encourage him to make cards for friends or family members. Invite him to help you write the shopping list or assist with other tasks that involve writing. (Do this even if he is the only one who can read his text.)

Young children sometimes develop "spurts" so a delay of this nature is not unusual. If you and his teachers address this weakness in developmentally appropriate ways, he will probably be just fine.

~Dr. Martha Dever, Associate Professor, Department of Elementary Education at Utah State University

question corner features questions posed by parents to early childhood experts who provide brief responses in this newsletter. If you have any questions you would like answered, please send email to eejcenter@coe.usu.edu or mail to EEJ Center for Early Childhood Education • Utah State University • 6515 Old Main Hill • Logan UT 84322-6515.



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activity corner

Sponge Chalk

MATERIALS

Large, flat, wet sponge
Colored Chalk
Paper

ART PROCESS

1. Draw freely on the wet sponge with chalk.
2. Press the sponge onto paper to transfer a print of the sponge design to the paper.



VARIATIONS

Grind, crush or grate chalk into a dish. Dip pieces of wet sponge into the chalk and dab them on the paper.

Hint: Chalk breaks often which is perfectly chalk-like. Just use small pieces until they are too small to hold. Save the tiny pieces to grind or crush into powder for other art projects.

From *PRESCHOOL ART It's the Process, Not the Product* copyright 1994 by MaryAnn Kohl. Price \$19.95/\$3.00 Shipping. Available from Gryphon House, Box 207, Beltsville, MD 20704-0207, 1-800-638-0928. <http://www.ghbooks.com>.

Tongue Depressor Puppets

Let your child decorate one end of a large tongue depressor stick with markers, paper, cloth, etc., to make a puppet. Leave room on the bottom of the stick for holding the puppet.



Homemade Peanut Butter

INGREDIENTS

Large bag of peanuts in shells
1 T. peanut oil

PROCESS

Let your child help you shell the peanuts. Put a cupful of peanuts into the blender. Add the peanut oil. Blend butter to the desired consistency.



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Over in the Meadow adapted by E. J. Keats involve children with repeated phrases and a predictable flow of sounds. Rhyming books, such as nursery rhymes or Dr. Seuss, delight children with the sounds of the words. Poetry is another way for children to experience the sounds of language. There are many books of poetry for young children such as Read-Aloud Rhymes for the Very Young selected by Jack Prelutsky. Your public or school librarian can guide you to simple and wonderful books for young listeners. Also Jim Trelease's The New Read Aloud Handbook has lists of books for young children.

Many times children will have a favorite book they want read over and over. Actually this is a critical step in learning. The rereading of the text helps the child become familiar with how stories are structured and how our language works. They develop the concepts of top to bottom and left to right. They begin to see patterns in books and understand that fairy tales almost always start, "Once upon a time." Children like to "read" the story to you also. After several readings they can tell the story by looking at the pictures. This is helping them to organize their thoughts and tell a story in logical order.

When you read with your child be sure you are both comfortable and that the child can see the pages of the book as you read. This enables the child to make the connection between the spoken word and the printed

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word. Call attention to the pictures in the book so the child can also see how the words and pictures work together. Look together for details in the pictures that help explain the story. Reading should always be a pleasurable time for both of you. Remember, young children have a short attention span. Several short periods with books are much better usually than one long session. Let your child's interest be your guide. Just 15 minutes a day with your child and books can pay great dividends in their literacy development.

Print Awareness

Remember also that reading is not just books. Words and letters are all around us on signs and billboards, bumper stickers, and newspapers, everywhere you look. Helping your child become aware of how print works is one of the first steps in getting ready to read. Point out signs and letters as you take a walk with your child or drive down the street. Children learn early about the "M" for McDonalds or the red stop sign. Pointing to letters on cereal boxes, in the newspaper, wherever there is print, strengthens that spoken and printed word connection. Have magnetic letters on the front of your refrigerator so children can move the letters to make words. Involve your children as you read directions or recipes. When you make a list for the grocery store, ask your child to make a "list" also. Print a few items on an index card that they can find in the store. Have them match the labels on the index card to the product in the store. This helps to reinforce that one purpose for reading. Writing your child simple messages using their name is another way for children to gain insights into how written language works.

Writing with Your Child

At some point children will want to write. At first they seem to be exploring the empty space with crayons and pencils. They seem interested in where this marking will go. Later, these will represent meaning for the child. Ask children to read what they have written. When they draw a picture, have them dictate a sentence that you write to go with the picture. Children like to label items in the house with words, such as door, bed, desk, and more. The scribbling of a three year old drawing a picture is vastly different from the scribbling of that same child as

he makes marks for his name. This is yet another way they are becoming aware of the relationship between words and reading. Reading and writing develop together, so provide as many experiences with producing print as possible.

Young children are active learners who are always trying to construct meaning. Adults can help by sharing how literacy works. Literacy grows out of a wide variety of experiences. Experiment and find which activities work best for you and your child. By spending time with your child you will be making an investment in his or her future. You will also be instilling in your child a love of books, language, and learning. Mem Fox, a children's author, once said, "if we did not know chocolate was so delicious we'd never crave it." So it can be with you and your child and literacy.

Books of Interest to Parents

Burns, M., Griffin, Peg and Snow, Catherine (Eds.) (1999). Starting out Right: A Guide for Promoting Children's Reading Success. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Fox, Mem. (1993). Radical Reflections: Passionate Opinions on Teaching, Learning, and Living. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company.

Neuman, Susan B., Cople, Carol, and Bredekamp, Sue. (2000). Learning to Read and Write. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Strickland, Dorothy, and Morrow, Leslie Mandell. (1989). Emerging Literacy: Young Children Learn to Read and Write. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Children's Books

Keats, E. J. (1971). Over in the Meadow. New York: Scholastic.

Pretlusky, Jack, Ed. (1986). Read-Aloud Rhymes for the Very Young. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

~Deborah Larson is currently a reading specialist at Berryton Elementary School in Berryton, Kan. She has been teaching for 19 years and is currently working towards her doctorate at Kansas State University.

What does Quality Child Care Look/Sound/Feel Like?

a three-part series by Mary Sciaraffa

Just what does quality child care FEEL like?

Environments send powerful messages by the way they make people feel. Often parents will say, “That place did not feel right for my child.” So what have professionals in the field of early childhood education and child development identified as the “feeling” pieces of an ideal program for young children? Here is a list to compare your child’s early childhood program to the ideal.

Does your child spend his/her day in a place that has...

- a comfortable temperature in the building--not too hot or too cold?
- rooms with windows that open to let in fresh air daily?
- indoor areas with soft places such as pillows, cushions, or bean bag chairs?



- indoor areas with hard areas like wooden shelves?
- outdoor areas with soft areas such as wood chips under climbers, slides, or swings?
- caregivers who
 - pat children on the back?
 - rock the child when he wants comfort?
 - hold children in their laps?
 - give children hugs?
- both soft and hard surfaced toys such as
 - stuffed animals?
 - sand?
 - water?
 - blocks?
 - wood working bench?

- a soft, cozy space for a child when she wants to be away from the group by herself?
- caregiver and children who have relaxed, pleasant voices, and frequent smiles?
- children’s names in the cubbies and pictures of the child and his family on the wall to let the child know he belongs here?



- pictures of various cultures displayed on the wall or in books to let children know that all people are important?

The feeling of a safe and trusting environment is an important component of a good early childhood program. The child and parent should also have a feeling of being welcome and a part of the program. The look, sound, and feeling from an early childhood program are essential for parents who have young children who spend either some or all of their day being cared for by someone other than their parents. For additional information on quality early childhood programs, please contact the National Child Care Information Center at (800) 616-2242.

~Mary Sciaraffa is a former infant/toddler teacher, child care director, and Early Childhood Education Instructor. Currently, she is pursuing a doctorate degree at Louisiana State University.

science corner: SCIENCE IN THE SUMMER

by Rebecca Monhardt, Ph.D.

Have a Backyard Bubble Party

Blowing bubbles is a wonderful science activity that is not only engaging for young children but also has the potential to encourage experimentation and develop problem-solving skills. Bubble blowing is definitely an outdoor activity and warm summer days are the perfect time to mix up some bubble solution, gather a collection of household objects that have potential as bubble makers and invite a few of your child's friends and their parents over to make bubbles.

Although bubble making certainly can be done alone, it is an activity that is well suited to social interaction. Children will enjoy showing others what they have found out about making bubbles and will be interested in seeing what their peers have done as well. As children experiment using different kinds of bubble blowers, they will naturally engage in conversation with their peers and with adults. Adults can engage children in conversation as they encourage them to tell what they did, ask what they found out, and challenge them to try various ways of making bubbles. Not only does this activity encourage the sharing of ideas, but it also provides a good opportunity for young children to develop their own "rules" for sharing equipment with their peers. Children and parents alike can discover all the different objects that can make bubbles. Opportunities for using problem-solving skills naturally arise as children try to find out which bubble blower makes the biggest bubble or the most bubbles at one time and a seemingly endless number of other questions.

BUBBLE SOLUTIONS

For a group bubble blowing activity, a substantial amount of bubble blowing solution is needed as well as a way that all involved can easily access the solution. Bubble solutions can be mixed in containers like plastic dishpans or metal washtubs. But for a large backyard bubble blowing group, the ideal container is a small plastic swimming pool. The larger the container, the larger the bubble-making device that can be accommodated.

Homemade bubble solution is relatively simple and

inexpensive to make. The general rule of thumb is 2/3 cup of dishwashing soap per gallon of water. Professor Bubble, the well-known bubble expert suggests 1 part of dishwashing liquid to 15 parts of water. Dawn and Joy are the brands of dishwashing soap that work the best. Many bubble recipes call for glycerin which is available at most pharmacies. However, glycerin is expensive and is an optional ingredient. If you do choose to add glycerin, add about a tablespoons per gallon of water.

The tap water in your location may have an effect on the quality of your bubble solution. Soft water without a high iron content works much better for blowing bubbles than water with a high mineral content. If you are *really* serious about your bubble solution, distilled water is the best choice. Bubble solution gets better with age and some bubble experts say that the best bubble solution has been aged for at least five days. My personal experience is that it works just fine almost instantly. You may need to experiment a bit to find the ideal bubble-making solution for your area because conditions do vary from place to place.

BUBBLE MAKERS

After making the bubble solution, provide numerous bubble makers for children to test. A variety of common household objects can be used to blow bubbles. Some items that work well are small cans with both ends cut out, mason jar lids, funnels, kitchen strainers, slotted spoons, pieces of string, wire coat hangers bent into various shapes and even hula hoops. The possibilities for bubble makers are limited only by your imagination!

After dipping the objects in bubble solution, children can simply move them through the air rather than actually using their own breath to blow on them. Some care should be taken when selecting bubble makers. Items like straws are **not** recommended for blowing bubbles because a child taking a big breath could easily ingest the bubble solution.

However, straws can be used to construct a bubble device



that uses only the surrounding air. Thread about a yard of string through two straws and knot the ends of the string together. Hold one straw in each hand and dip the apparatus in the bubble making solution. Pull the frame upward to make a bubble and then bring the straws together to release the bubble. The size of this design can be adjusted by varying the length of the straws and the string.

One of the keys to success with any bubble making activity is to provide children with many different kinds of objects to test as bubble makers. The more things they try, the better. Older children are intrigued with this activity as much as younger ones and will enjoy creating their own more complex bubble-making machines. Creating bubbles and watching them float off in the air creates a sense of wonder in children of all ages!

BUBBLE MAKING WEB SITES:

<http://www.bubbles.org/html/professor/act.htm>

<http://www.exploratorium.edu/ronh/bubbles/bubbles.html>

HISTORY OF BUBBLE MAKING

How long has blowing bubbles been a favorite childhood pastime? Paintings by 17th century Flemish artists depict children blowing bubbles with clay pipes. Children in the 18th and 19th centuries amused themselves with blowing bubbles using leftover washing soap from their mothers. While street vendors in the early 20th century were among the first to sell bubbles as a toy, it was not until the 1940s that bubble solution became commercially available. The sale of bubble-making solution revolutionized the toy making industry and the Tootsie Toy Company is credited with putting bubble solution in to full retail distribution by the late 1940s. Today, bubble solution is the best-selling toy in the world.

(Information taken from <http://bubbles.org/html/history/toyhistory.htm>)

BUBBLE BLOWING TIPS

- Work in a shady area.
- Wind can be a factor in causing bubbles to pop. A day with little wind or only a slight breeze is the best.
- Keep bubble tools wet with bubble solution. The most common reason that bubbles pop is dryness.
- When free floating bubbles stabilize they always form spheres. This means that they always hold the gas inside of them with the least possible surface area. The geometric form with the least surface area for any given volume is always a sphere.

THINGS TO TRY:

- Can you poke an object through a bubble without making it pop? (Hint: Try wetting the object in bubble solution first)
- Can you blow bubbles using only your hands as a bubble maker? (Touch index fingers and thumbs with a hole in the middle. Dip in bubble solution and blow!)
- Can you make a free floating bubble that is not a sphere? Try a coat hanger bent in the shape of a square. Does this make a square bubble? No? Try another shape and another. What did you find out?

~Rebecca Mohnhardt is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Elementary Education at Utah State University.



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