

Learning to Read

Good teaching involves being sensitive to the needs of every individual child: children should not be pushed into doing things that they do not want to do but should be helped when they do want to do something.

When this principle is followed with young children very few of them experience any difficulty in learning to read. In practical terms it means doing something along the lines of the following:

- Read to a child every day.
- Never try to make a child read to you.
- When a child does want to read to you, make sure that you are available. Enjoy the experience of being read to. Do not make constant corrections.
- Make sure that you have lots of well-illustrated, interesting books around that children can look at whenever they want.
- Read books yourself.

When is the best time to learn to read?

This varies from person to person. In simple terms, the best time to learn to read is when you want to learn to read. Failure to acknowledge this fact has caused more problems in the education system than any other single factor.

Some children have an overwhelming desire to learn to read when they are only three or four years old; they want to read all the books on their parents' bookshelves and can easily become frustrated if they are made to spend time on 'learning to read' books at school.

Other children have absolutely no interest in reading until they are perhaps, nine, ten, eleven or twelve years old. To make them sit down and to force them to try to make sense of letters on the page is an act of cruelty. When it is backed up by emotional and psychological pressure, telling them that their whole life will be blighted because they have not yet learnt to read, then the consequences can be catastrophic for everyone involved: the child grows up thinking that they have something wrong with them and parents and teachers know in their hearts that they have done something very wrong.

All these problems can be avoided by waiting for a child to express an interest in reading, and then having the patience to help them.

The importance of play

In the long term, the child who learns to read later may be better off than the one who learns to read sooner. In recent years, we have all become so worried about education, that we have lost sight of the larger picture and of what children need in order to develop properly. In particular, we do not understand the importance of play.

Talking to people who were home educated when they were young, helps to put playing into its proper perspective: they will tell you that when they didn't have to go to school, they

played and they played and they played. Play does not stop when you are three or four or five years old, it is something that you should be allowed to do for as long as you want – into your teens. Playing is the way in which human beings learn about their environment. To stop a child playing is to stop them learning. Time spent sitting at a desk, or reading a book, is time lost, as far as real learning is concerned.

No one knows how much time any individual child can afford to lose before suffering a detrimental effect, and therefore children should be allowed to come to things in their own time and in their own way: they should be allowed to play.

Reading Difficulties

Reading difficulties only arise when a child is made to read when they do not want to (other children may not be able to read, but they will not have reading difficulties). Parents and teachers show a remarkable lack of imagination when dealing with children who have reading difficulties. Everyone knows what it feels like to be made to do something that they do not want to do – the more pressure that is applied, the more impossible it becomes. This is much worse for children than it is for adults.

The correct response to someone who is experiencing difficulties in learning to read is to remove them completely from the situation in which they are being made to read, or in which they think that someone might make them read; let them play as much as they want and for as long as they want; as a parent, make sure you are available to spend time with them; read to them every day; never allow yourself to think that you are waiting for them to learn to read.

Sooner or later they will teach themselves to read.

What happens if someone doesn't learn to read?

If you knew for sure that no matter how much time and money was spent on teaching your child to read, they still wouldn't learn, then you would not subject them to any reading lessons.

The method described above – reading to them, having books in your home, applying no pressure – *is* the best way of teaching reading. If it doesn't work then no other method would have worked either. In addition, it has extra advantages: instead of spending hours on reading lessons that are destined to yield no returns, your child will have developed skills in those things in which they *are* interested and, instead of disliking books, they will love them, thanks to all the books that you have read to them.

Rudolf Steiner

Rudolf Steiner, the driving force behind the Waldorf school movement, was well aware of the problems that could arise when children were forced to learn to read. He constantly urged the teachers in his school not to make children read and reminded them that Goethe had not learnt to read until he was nine and a half. He asked them to consider what would have been the consequences for German culture if it had been deprived of its greatest figure by over-zealous teachers labelling the young Goethe as a person with educational difficulties.

What about young children who enjoy reading?

Benjamin Franklin

In his autobiography Benjamin Franklin states that he cannot remember a time when he could not read. He was taught his letters by his father and mother and started a life-long love affair with books by reading his father's copy of "Plutarch's Lives".

He considered himself fortunate in only having to endure two years of formal school. He started work at the age of 11, left home when he was 17, set up his own printing firm when he was 23, and made enough money to retire at the age of 42.

He became one of the foremost scholars of his time, enjoying an unrivalled reputation on both sides of the Atlantic as a scientist, philosopher, writer, linguist, inventor, diplomat, philanthropist and social reformer.

Some young children are very eager to learn to read. They learn to read before they go to school. Here the problem is that schools can put them off reading by making them read things that don't interest them and by linking reading – which is something that they enjoy – to activities that they find tedious, boring and repetitive.

Some children learn to read when they are young but, left to their own devices, do not then have a great desire to spend a lot of time looking at books – they have more important things to do, such as playing: just because a child has learnt to read does not mean that you should make them read and study books from a young age, they should be able to decide for themselves if this is what they want to do or not.

The importance of reading.

Reading has become an obsession: instead of seeing it as only one amongst a myriad of useful skills and qualities, people judge children solely on the basis of how well they can read.

This is not balanced, there are other things at least as important as reading: understanding nature, making

things, cooking, etc. Being able to read does not constitute a complete education on its own, it only becomes a really useful skill when it is in association with other things, such as a lively interest in life and an enquiring mind.

To make matters worse, in the effort to make everyone read, people lose sight of the pleasure that reading can provide. Instead of instilling a love of reading, schools are more likely to create a reading phobia. Even people who do well at school often don't acquire a taste for good books.

The solution is for parents to take more responsibility for their children's education:

- Keep your children at home, at least until you are sure that they want to learn to read.
- Monitor their experience of school. If they are unhappy, take them out.
- Don't allow school to impinge upon the home. Maintain a rhythm of reading to your children and doing things with them, even when they go to school.

Many parents have forgotten that they have the duty to ensure that their children receive a good education. If this cannot be provided by local schools, then parents have the right to educate their children themselves, for as long as they see fit.

next issue: Learning to Write

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