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Optimum time to teach beginning reading

Lisa A. Ludwig

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to review and analyze the literature concerning the optimum time to begin teaching reading. Four questions were answered, addressing the optimum time to begin teaching reading; advantages of early reading; problems with early reading; and guidelines for developing an effective reading program.

Early readers were found to have better grades, a higher self-esteem, and continued to be better readers throughout the secondary school years. However, some early readers also experienced difficulties because of the pressure and high expectations put on them at an early age.

It was concluded that there is no magical age to begin teaching reading. There are advantages and disadvantages to early reading instruction. More research needs to be conducted concerning which methods and materials are most effective and to determine the longitudinal effects of early reading instruction.

OPTIMUM TIME TO TEACH BEGINNING READING

A Research Paper

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Lisa A. Ludwig

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Charles R. May

Aug. 14, 2001
Date Approved

Graduate Faculty Reader *J*

Judith M. Finkelstein

August 24, 2001
Date Approved

Graduate Faculty Reader

Rick Traw

August 27, 2001
Date Approved

Head, Department of
Curriculum and Instruction

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to review and analyze the literature concerning the optimum time to begin teaching reading. Four questions addressing the optimum time to begin teaching reading, advantages of early reading, problems with early reading, and guidelines for developing an effective reading program were answered.

The optimum time to begin teaching reading is dependent on the curriculum, the child's ability, and the child's stage of development. Early readers were found to have better grades, a higher self-esteem, and continued to be better readers throughout the secondary school years. However, some early readers also experienced difficulties because of the pressure and high expectations put on them at an early age. These children became reluctant readers who were anxious, had poor reading skills, and had a low self-esteem. Parents and teachers need to provide children with a wide variety of developmentally appropriate literacy activities that consider individual differences and help children experience success with reading.

It was concluded that there is no magical age to begin teaching reading. There are several factors that need to be considered, and there are advantages and disadvantages to early reading instruction. Parents and teachers play an important role in developing early reading skills and there are many guidelines that need to be followed. However, more research needs to be conducted concerning which methods and materials are most effective and to determine the longitudinal effects of early reading instruction.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Teaching children to read has been the primary educational goal of parents and teachers throughout history. Reading provides individuals with a vehicle for communicating with others and is a valued and necessary skill in our society. Because the ability to read is so valued, parents and teachers have made learning to read well a priority. Over the years, reading instruction has been conducted through a variety of methods and with a wide range of materials. It began in kitchens, moved to one room schoolhouses, and eventually was located in buildings which were organized by grade levels. While these changes were occurring, issues over how reading instruction should be carried out were also being debated. Beginning reading instruction especially has prompted more controversy than any other aspect of reading (Durkin, 1993). One issue in particular continues to be pondered by educators and parents. When is the optimum time for reading instruction to begin?

To understand this controversial issue and its roots, some historical background is necessary. Throughout the history of American schools, there has been a close association between starting school and starting to read. Likewise, most children start school when they turn six, so six and learning to read were also linked together. Edmund Huey, a well known scholar, objected to the idea that entering school automatically meant the start of reading; he believed, as did John Dewey, that the age of eight was the appropriate time to begin reading (Durkin, 1982).

In addition to objecting to the timing of beginning reading instruction, Huey and Dewey believed that schools were approaching reading instruction in the wrong manner and using the wrong methods. Dewey believed that reading instruction was too mechanical and passive, and Huey complained that schools taught reading in a way that was *unnatural* for the children (Huey, 1908). Huey observed that children learn to read best through natural every day activities such as asking for the names of things and noticing signs, as well as other environmental print.

Although these two scholars spoke out against initiating reading instruction at the start of first grade, the years from 1900 to 1920 were relatively quiet about when reading instruction should begin. Soon afterward, however, books and journals became filled with questions and answers about the best time to begin reading instruction (Durkin, 1982). This was because the testing movement was gaining momentum. During this time, educators became interested in scientific measurements of a child's behavior and achievements. Many tests were developed and administered. The results showed that large numbers of children were failing first grade because of poor achievement in reading. This poor achievement was attributed not to poor teaching methods or materials as might be expected, but to the fact that children were not ready for reading when instruction began (Durkin, 1982).

As a result of the testing movement of this period, educators started to look more closely at early childhood years as a *period of preparation*. This *period of preparation* soon came to be known as reading readiness, and researchers began looking

for factors that enabled children to be prepared mentally for reading (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). This endeavor led to a division among educators. Some educators were convinced that reading readiness was a result of maturation, while others believed readiness was the product of appropriate experience.

From the 1920's to the 1950's, the maturationist viewpoints of beginning reading instruction were dominant. Leading the way for the maturationists was the work of Arnold Gesell and his associates. Gesell (Durkin, 1982) believed that development was controlled by maturation and that it proceeded through a series of stages. Changes in a child's thinking were related to a child's motor development and had nothing to do with the environment. This led to kindergartens where reading instruction was based on the simple idea of: "If a child is not yet ready, wait" (Teale, 1995, p.101).

Because of the interest in exact measurement during the testing movement, society was not content with the maturationist concept of readiness and its relationship to a stage in a child's life. In 1931, Mabel Morphett and Carleton Washburne published the results of a study they had conducted in the Winnetka, Illinois schools. Using the Stanford-Binet and the Detroit First Grade Intelligence tests, Morphett and Washburne calculated the mental ages of the first grade students at the beginning of the academic year. Morphett and Washburne also tested the children's reading achievement in February and June of 1929. The results of this study showed, according to Morphett and Washburne, that children who had a mental age of at least six years, six months

when they began school performed better in reading than those who had a mental age less than six years, six months when they began school. This led Morphett and Washburne (1931) to conclude that "it pays to postpone beginning reading until a child has attained a mental age of six years, six months" (p. 501). This study was quickly accepted by the educational community for two reasons. Number one, society considered the maturationalist viewpoint to be a humane and sensible interpretation of learning, and number two, the conclusions were statistical in nature (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Although the quality and the applicability of this research was questionable, the maturational view and the mental age concept maintained their popularity for decades.

Not long after the Morphett and Washburne study a second study was conducted by Arthur I. Gates and Gary L. Bond (1936). The results of this study showed that children as young as five could be taught to read if the instructional methods met the needs of each individual child. According to Gates (1936):

The study emphasizes the importance of recognizing and adjusting to individual limitations and needs. . . rather than merely changing the time of beginning. It appears that readiness for reading is something to develop rather than merely to wait for. (p. 684)

In a second study conducted by Gates (1937), a similar conclusion was reached. In this study, different methods of teaching beginning reading and achievement were examined. Results showed that the relationship between mental age and achievement was highest in the classes where the best instruction was done

and lowest in the classes where the poorest instruction was provided. Gates observed:

Reading is begun by very different materials, methods, and general procedures, some of which a pupil can master at the mental age of five with reasonable ease, others of which would give him difficulty at the mental age of seven.
(p.508)

Gates concluded that the optimum time to begin reading is not entirely dependent on the mental age of the child. Instead, educators must realize that a child's environment and the nature of instruction will play major roles in when a child is ready for reading instruction. Gates's conclusion seemed to be: "Improve your instruction and watch the children read" (Durkin, 1982, p.54).

Obviously, the findings by Gates contradicted the results of the Morphett & Washburne studies. However, society continued to accept the Morphett & Washburne study because its findings, implying the need to postpone beginning reading instruction, were a natural for the 1930's (Durkin, 1966).

The debate over the optimum time to teach reading has continued throughout the last several decades. The literature suggests that there are advantages and disadvantages to early reading instruction, and that the optimum time to teach reading is affected by more variables than a child's mental age. Early reading can be accomplished if children are provided appropriate instruction and opportunities.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to review and analyze the literature concerning the optimum time to begin teaching reading. The following questions will be addressed in this study:

1. When is the optimum time to teach reading?
2. What are the advantages of early reading?
3. What are the problems associated with early reading?
4. What are the guidelines for developing a reading program that would help a child to learn to read most effectively?

Need for the Study

The question of when and how reading instruction should occur has been an issue with supervisors, administrators, teachers, and parents for years. Over the years, a rich and varied history of reading instruction has developed. Much of this history has focused on children around the age of six, which is the time that has generally been selected by our society for reading instruction to begin. Recently, however, there has been much attention given to the reading development of children from birth through age five. Those who are against formal instruction for children under the age of six, argue that the primary responsibility of early childhood programs is to develop social, physical, conceptual, and language abilities. The advocates point out that many children are ready to learn to read and, given the right circumstances, should be provided the opportunity to do so. Because of this ongoing debate, it's important for early

childhood educators to know what has been said and tried so that we can build on successes and rectify the mistakes of the past. Educators need to be aware of current research regarding this issue. If all children's needs are to be met, appropriate methods must be employed in the correct manner and at the appropriate time.

Limitations of the Study

The following issues are limitations of this study:

1. Research was only obtained from one college library.
2. Current research in this area is limited.

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be defined in this study so that there is no confusion about their use.

Reading readiness - A concept of reading that is grounded in the assumption that prerequisite skills for beginning reading instruction emerge through maturation.

Emergent literacy - A concept of reading that is concerned with the period between birth and the time when children read and write. This perspective emphasizes the child's ongoing development.

Learning to read - The acquisition of a system of rules and strategies for getting meaning from written language. It is associated with a conceptual understanding of the relationship between print and speech.

Formal reading instruction - Direct instruction that involves basals and workbooks, as well as decoding, comprehension, and vocabulary lessons.

Literacy - The ability to communicate through reading and writing.

Readiness for reading - Matching the child with the instructional task at hand. It depends on what is taught and how it is presented (Vaca, Vaca, & Gove, 1987).

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

The ability to read well has been, and continues to be, a highly valued skill in our society. Given a choice, more and more parents are choosing to enroll their children in programs with a strong beginning reading emphasis. Such attitudes towards reading have caused beginning reading instruction to become a larger part of the preschool and kindergarten curriculum. This infusion has raised many questions about the appropriateness of reading instruction during the early childhood years. Parents, teachers, and administrators continue to ask when reading instruction should begin and whether or not children will be damaged physically or psychologically if reading instruction is begun too soon.

Optimum Time To Teach Reading

Many answers have been given to the question of when reading instruction should begin. The traditional concept of the right age for learning to read was that children under age 6 cannot, and should not, learn to read. A review of the early literature reveals that the right time for children to start reading could be established using readiness tests. In addition, only readiness activities should be present in preschools, and entrance into first grade should be regulated.

However, recent research reveals that learning to read does not depend solely on a test score or a child's mental age. Joseph Berzeinski (1967) attempted to answer the questions surrounding beginning reading in a study conducted in the fall of

1960. Assisted by Paul McKee and Lucile Harrison, Berzeinski began a longitudinal study to determine the effectiveness of beginning reading instruction in kindergarten. Students in the project were studied through the fifth grade, had a wide range of abilities, and came from a variety of backgrounds. The study indicated that a preschool child as young as 4 years, 6 months, could be taught beginning reading skills. Results also showed that the gains made by the early readers were maintained beyond second grade if, and only if, the kindergarten program was followed with appropriate teaching programs in the following grades.

Teaching your baby to read also seems to be a possibility. Doman and Delacotta (1963) have done research with infants and have found success in teaching them how to read.

Kenneth and Yetta Goodman (1979) have also searched for answers to the question of when beginning reading instruction should occur. They concluded that reading begins when children respond to meaningful printed symbols in a context which is familiar to them. Goodman & Goodman suggest that the exact time children begin to read goes unnoticed, and that children develop some kind of print awareness at a very early age without formal instruction.

According to Rachel Cohen (1985), the optimum time to teach reading is determined by (a) a child's internal processes, and (b) the exercises and quality of instruction the child is given. Cohen concludes:

In reality, the rightness of the time is the result of a relationship between an individual's capacity and the demands placed on him or her by the task of the learning. The task itself can only be considered in its context: method adopted, attitude of the teacher, relations between pupils, etc. (p. 43)

The concept of emergent literacy has also made an impact on when beginning reading should occur. Curriculum planning from an emergent literacy perspective emphasizes a child's ongoing development of skills in reading and writing (Strickland & Morrow, 1988). Emergent literacy involves activities that are meaningful and functional for all children involved. This approach to reading tells us that most children will come to school knowing something about our written language. Teale and Sulzby (1986) have stated that children are doing critical cognitive work in literacy development from birth to age 6.

O.K. Moore of Yale University has found success in teaching children as young as two and a half to read. He has accomplished this by giving the children individual attention and materials appropriate to their level of perception (Stevens & Orem, 1968).

Maria Montessori was one of the first persons to recognize the importance of fully utilizing a young child's *sensitive period* for language learning. By exposing children to an appropriate environment, she was able to teach 4 year olds to write and 5 year olds to read and write (Stevens & Orem, 1968).

Researchers from other countries have also investigated the question of when children should be taught to read. Children in Sweden begin reading instruction at the age of 7 (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 1987). In France, however, research has shown that

children as young as 4 can be exposed to beginning reading instruction if appropriate methods are used (Cohen, 1985).

Advantages of Early Reading

Obviously, young children can be taught to read. However, parents, administrators, and teachers continue to ask if young children should be taught to read. There is evidence that early reading can have a positive, measurable, and continuing effect (Sutton, 1964; Lesiak, 1978; Hayes & Cangelosi, 1985). Immediate benefits include joy, innate satisfaction and pleasure in learning to read, as well as the early use of reading as a valuable tool for learning (Berzeinski, Harrison, & McKee, 1967).

Hayes & Cangelosi (1985) have completed studies which indicate that children who are taught to read in kindergarten maintain the *lead* they gain in reading throughout the elementary grades. In addition, Hanson and Farrell (1995) report a study investigating the effects of learning to read in kindergarten on high school seniors and found "...clear consistent and positive differences were associated with reading instruction in kindergarten" (p. 909). This study showed a positive effect on such school related factors such as grades, attendance, and the need for remedial instruction. This study also indicated a clear and consistent pattern of increased reading competency for high school seniors as a result of receiving reading instruction in kindergarten. Other advantages of early reading instruction noted by Hanson and Farrell include a positive long term impact for

at-risk groups and the self-confidence associated with having early reading skills.

Other researchers have found similar advantages for children who are exposed to early reading instruction. Many studies indicate that children who have an early start in reading achieve more in subsequent grades than do their later starting peers (Durkin, 1974; Sutton, 1969). Also, early reading seems to have no effect on visual acuity, school adjustment, or attitudes toward reading (Berzeinski et. al., 1967), and children with lower IQ's benefited measurably by having reading introduced to them at an early age (Sutton, 1964).

Disadvantages of Early Reading

According to some researchers, however, there are also disadvantages to introducing reading too early. In spite of this, more and more parents are encouraging their children to read at an early age so they will have a better chance at success in school. As a result, these well intentioned parents are pushing their children into reading before they are emotionally ready (Bringing Up Superbaby, 1983).

Child development expert, David Elkind (1981), believes that the push for reading instruction in kindergarten has been more to meet the needs of parents than of children. Elkind uses the phrase *hurried child* to describe a child who is forced to grow up too fast, too soon. Anxiety and depression can be the negative results of forced early reading. Likewise, Elkind believes early

reading instruction results in young children who face inappropriate pressure to learn to read.

Other researchers have also completed studies which indicate there may be some disadvantages to early reading instruction. According to Patricia Holden Werner and JoAnn Strother (1987), pressure to read and perform at a very early age can sometimes lead children to be cautious and afraid to make mistakes. Parents and teachers are seen as people who have expectations which are beyond the child's ability to achieve. These perceptions often cause the child to develop negative attitudes toward learning and the school atmosphere.

In addition, when a child is attempting to live up to the high standards of a parent or teacher, their socialization skills and emotional well being are affected (Werner & Strother, 1987). These children spend a lot of time trying to be the star and read for feedback and for validation rather than for enjoyment or peer approval. Because the child is focusing on learning to read and write, other important developmental tasks, such as play, are neglected and the child may experience difficulty *fitting in* upon entering preschool or kindergarten.

A child's learning style is also affected by early reading instruction. Early readers often demonstrate a strong need to be the *best* and to be *right*. This may create readers who are rigid and are afraid to risk being wrong which can affect their comprehension skills when they move on to the upper grades (Rosenberg, 1968). Making inferences, drawing conclusions, predicting outcomes, and making critical judgments about what

they read may also be very difficult for them (Gentile & MacMillan, 1987).

Researchers have also completed studies on how early reading instruction affects a child's attitude toward reading. Many early readers do not appear to value reading except as a means for receiving praise and attention. Elkind (1981) observed this type of behavior among first graders who had received formal reading instruction in kindergarten. He stated, "It almost seemed that reading had been forced upon them, at great cost in time and effort, without their having any real understanding of the value of what they were learning" (p.35).

Goodman and Goodman (1979) also emphasize the importance of young children learning to read naturally through spontaneous interaction with their environment rather than through early formal reading instruction which can mask the usefulness of reading. When children are pressured into reading too early, they fail to realize the intrinsic value of reading as a tool for learning or for pleasure. Instead, they learn to use reading as a way to gain attention and praise.

CHAPTER III

Guidelines

Guidelines for Teachers

In order to foster the development of early reading skills in young children, teachers must understand that young children come to school with a wide variety of differences in their knowledge about literacy. A teacher's role, then, is to nurture and respond to these differences using developmentally appropriate activities. Teachers should provide children time to talk, listen, read, and write. They should facilitate children's natural curiosity, interests, and desire to learn, and they also need to be positive role models for the children. The following guidelines should be considered by early childhood educators interested in responding to individual differences in children's knowledge about literacy.

1. Provide a literate environment where written language is meaningful and useful. The environment should include the following:

- *children's names
- *daily calendar activities
- *classroom libraries
- *labels (organization, identification)
- *lots and lots of books
- *communications
- *lists (record, summary, reference)
- *directions (rules, recipes, etc.)
- *writing materials

*morning message

2. Read to children daily using the following guidelines:
 - *make it enjoyable
 - *use prereading activities to build prior knowledge
 - *use postreading activities to help with recall skills
3. Provide experiences that promote print awareness and an understanding of metalanguage by including:
 - *big books
 - *enlarged text
 - *language experience materials
4. Teach words in meaningful settings. These include the following:
 - *names
 - *days of the week
 - *months of the year
 - *colors
 - *weather words
 - *nursery rhymes
 - *songs
5. Teach letter names and sounds in the context of words. The following factors need to be considered when teaching letter names and sounds:
 - *interest
 - *frequency
 - *confusability

- *familiarity

- *initial sounds are easiest to perceive

6. Encourage children to compose by doing the following:

- *accept and praise all attempts

- *share samples of other children's writing

- *provide writing materials

- *allow children to share their writing

Guidelines for Parents

Many parents recognize the value and enjoyment of reading to young children, but perhaps are not clear about how they can help their children become better readers. Because reading is so important to a child's success in school, parents can and should help their children become interested in reading and encourage growth in their reading skills. Young children develop a more positive attitude toward reading if they experience warm and close contact with their parents while reading. The most important thing for parents to remember is that reading should be an enjoyable experience. The following guidelines can help parents stimulate their child's interest in reading.

1. Talk, sing, and play with your young infant before he learns to read. This can be done in the following ways:

- *use short simple sentences

- *discuss daily activities, his environment, sizes of objects, shapes of signs, etc.

- *expand on what the child says

2. Read to and with your child at least 30 minutes each day by doing the following:
 - *have a regular reading time
 - *let your child pick a story
 - *read and reread
3. Sing songs and recite poems and rhymes that have repetitive sounds. This can be done by using the following:
 - *nursery rhymes
 - *finger plays
 - *Mother Goose books
 - *books with repetitive text
 - *predictable books
4. Make sure your child's daycare providers and teachers expose your child to a wide variety of literature. This can be done by the following:
 - *read aloud daily
 - *make books available for children to look at
5. Model good reading habits for the children by doing the following:
 - *read maps, books, recipes, directions, etc.
 - *choose reading as a free time activity
6. Visit your local library and do the following:
 - *involve your child in deciding what to bring home
 - *look for books related to what's happening in your child's life

7. Foster your child's awareness of print and how it is used through the following activities:
 - *print your child's name on her belongings while she watches
 - *talk about everyday print (labels, signs, etc.)
 - *point out letters and words and encourage your child to find them in the environment
 - *provide magnetic or plastic letter tiles for play
8. Provide a variety of writing tools and materials such as the following:
 - *markers, crayons, pencils
 - *lined and unlined paper
 - *note pads
 - *envelopes
 - *stencils

Guidelines for the Environment

The best kind of environment for young children is child centered and considers the education of the whole child, including the child's physical, cognitive, and social development. The process of learning is emphasized, and the following guidelines should be considered.

1. The classroom should be print rich. It should include the following:
 - *labels
 - *lists
 - *signs

- *charts
- *posters
- *books

2. Learning centers should be clearly defined, differentiated, and arranged to facilitate activity and movement by including the following centers:

- *blocks
- *writing
- *math
- *housekeeping/drama
- *listening
- *sensory table
- *music
- *art

3. Materials should be displayed in a manner that facilitates learning. Materials should be inviting, accessible, and changed as children develop. This can be done by using the following:

- *graded books
- *activities that become more complex as children grow and develop

4. The reading center or library corner should be inviting and filled with an assortment of reading materials such as the following:

- *familiar books
- *predictable books
- *big books

- *magazines
- *newspapers
- *cozy chair, pillows, and rugs
- *felt boards
- *puppet theaters

5. Arrange the room so it caters to different teaching methods, organizational strategies, and grouping procedures such as the following:

- *whole group
- *small group
- *individual
- *seat work
- *hands-on activities

Guidelines For Materials

To promote literacy for young children, specific materials are necessary. The following guidelines will help support children as readers and writers.

1. Writing and reading materials should be abundant as well as easily accessible and visible. These materials include the following:

- *unlined paper
- *pencils, pens, markers, crayons
- *plastic letters
- *stencils
- *chalkboards and chalk
- *flannel board

- *puppets

2. A large collection of children's books including all types of books such as:

- *poetry

- *picture books

- *nonfiction

- *folktales

- *predictable books

- *big books

- *wordless picture books

- *encyclopedias

3. Printed alphabets and alphabet manipulatives in upper and lower case letters should be easily visible and accessible to children. This can be done in the following ways:

- *one or two sets displayed on walls

- *letter strips taped to desks

- *laminated letter strips that are moveable

- *magnetic letters

- *tactile letters made of sand paper

- *alphabet games and puzzles

- *alphabet books and songs

4. Use language experience materials to nurture emergent literacy. These include the following:

- *pocket charts

- *class trips

- *large sheets of chart paper

- *dark markers
- *sentence strips
- *construction paper
- *word walls

5. Provide language arts manipulatives such as:

- *puzzles
- *pegboards
- *sewing cards
- *beads and string
- *construction toys
- *materials for sorting
- *games (Bingo, Candyland, Memory, card games)
- *materials that lace, button, or snap

6. When using published materials, select them carefully and consider the following:

- *quality of content
- *use only in developmentally appropriate ways
- *use only as a supplement to other literacy activities

CHAPTER IV

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary

Teaching children to read has been and continues to be the primary educational goal of teachers and parents. Reading is a valued and necessary skill in our society, therefore, parents and teachers have made learning to read well a priority. The optimum time to begin teaching reading, however is an issue that has been pondered by educators and parents throughout history. The purpose of this study was to review and analyze the literature concerning the optimum time to begin teaching reading. The traditional concept of *the right age* for learning to read assumed that children under six cannot and should not learn to read. This view of beginning reading, however, is no longer viable. Because young children begin to learn about written language with their first contact with language at birth, children of any age are ready to be introduced to reading at some level. Therefore, the focus should no longer be on the magic age to begin teaching reading, but rather on the curriculum and how it matches each individual's ability and stage of development.

As might be expected, there is research available indicating that early reading can have a positive impact on a child's success in school. Of the available research data, it has been shown that children who are early readers, continue to be better readers throughout the primary and

secondary school years (Hayes & Cangelosi, 1985; Hanson & Farrel, 1995). In addition, there is a positive effect on school related factors such as grades, attendance, and the need for remedial instruction. Other benefits include joy, innate satisfaction, self confidence, and realizing that reading is a valuable tool for further learning (Berzeinski et. al., 1967).

There are some disadvantages that have been pointed out by researchers as well. Early readers tend to be put under a lot of pressure to succeed by their parents. This leads to the *hurried child* syndrome which may result in children who are rigid, anxious, and depressed (Elkind, 1981).

Werner and Strother (1987) have completed studies showing that pressure to read at an early age can lead to difficulties with comprehension, making inferences, and predicting outcomes. A child's sense of self-worth, socialization skills, and learning style also may be directly related to their early reading performance

Because children will continue to have varied abilities, experiential backgrounds, and interests, teachers and parents must provide age appropriate activities and materials that consider individual differences and promote learning to read in a relaxed atmosphere. The home and classroom should be filled with oral language, books, reading and writing materials, and adults to answer questions about written language. Parents and teachers need to talk, sing, play with, and listen to children as well as

read to them as often as possible. Modeling good reading habits, frequent trips to the library, and providing children with writing materials will facilitate children's natural curiosity, interests, and desire to learn.

A child's environment also plays a role in how early reading can be developed. Classrooms and homes need to be print rich and contain developmentally appropriate literacy materials. The print must be meaningful, children's books should be displayed, and an inviting reading center filled with a variety of reading materials should be available.

Conclusions

All parents want their child to succeed in school, especially in the area of reading. Teachers, too, strive to make learning to read an enjoyable and rewarding experience. When to begin teaching reading has been the focus of many studies for a very long time. As a result of these studies, researchers have learned that there is no magical age for when reading instruction should begin. Learning about our written language begins at birth and continues throughout a child's life. The right time for learning to read is determined not only by a child's ability, but also by the exercises and the quality of instruction that the child is given. For children who are ready, there is strong support in the literature for an easy, relaxed, introduction to reading skills (Durkin, 1966; Berzeinski et. al., 1967; Goodman & Goodman, 1979). Parents and teachers need to keep

this research in mind when developing and planning for early reading instruction. Early readers can be successful and have an advantage over other readers if they learn to read using appropriate methods and don't experience pressure to succeed. For children who are forced to read before they are ready, however, the pressure and high expectations can lead to difficulties such as anxiety, poor reading skills, and a low self-esteem. Talking, reading, and listening to children are the responsibilities of parents and teachers. These activities need to begin at birth, they need to be an important part of each child's day, and they need to occur at a level appropriate to the child's development. This type of reading instruction is not dependent on a magical age, but considers individual differences and will help more children experience success with reading at an age when they are ready to learn.

Recommendations

The research does indicate that children can and do learn to read at an early age. However, there is little agreement on which methods and materials should be used and when, which children benefit most, or how long initial gains will continue. Obviously, there is a need for more research beyond the optimum time to begin teaching reading. The research needs to clarify and clearly define formal reading instruction versus the current practices occurring in emergent literacy programs. More research is also needed to determine the longitudinal effects of reading instruction,

both cognitive and affective. Finally, the research needs to closely attend to individual differences rather than group scores, and it needs to define which children benefit most from which type of instruction.

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