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## Educating baby: Preparing children for future school success

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## Educating baby: Preparing children for future school success

### Abstract

Parents generally are their children's first teachers. Children learn more in their first five years than at any other five year time period in their life. Ninety percent of all requisite intellectual skills are learned by children before they enter school (Disibio, 1984). "Some researchers suggest that maternal socialization, and teaching patterns in particular, are strong predictors of later intellectual and cognitive performances" (Moreno, 1991, p. 395). Therefore, parents play extremely important parts in the education of their children.

**EDUCATING BABY: PREPARING  
CHILDREN FOR FUTURE SCHOOL SUCCESS**

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
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by

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## **EDUCATING BABY: PREPARING CHILDREN FOR FUTURE SCHOOL SUCCESS**

Parents generally are their children's first teachers. Children learn more in their first five years than at any other five year time period in their life. Ninety percent of all requisite intellectual skills are learned by children before they enter school (Disibio, 1984). "Some researchers suggest that maternal socialization, and teaching patterns in particular, are strong predictors of later intellectual and cognitive performances" (Moreno, 1991, p.395). Therefore, parents play extremely important parts in the education of their children.

Children enter school with varied backgrounds of experience. Some children seem eager and developmentally ready to begin school. Some students may already be reading and understanding basic math concepts. Yet, there are other children who seem unprepared for the challenges of formal education; often they have narrower backgrounds of experience and show little interest in school. The purpose of this paper is to answer the question: How can parents prepare their young children for formal education?

There is an abundance of research and literature on helping the very young prepare for formal education. Among the resources examined in the development of this paper, few contradictory ideas were found. Considerable congruence was found in the

basic suggestions for developing skills in children offered by the various authors.

This paper reviews the literature related to the promotion of learning and skill development in young children to assimilate the findings of the research and the suggestions offered into a single informative document. The focus of the paper is concentrated within the areas of reading and math, along with the related areas of physical development, speech, listening skills, visual skills, and social development.

With this information consolidated in one paper, it will be more useful to parents or for teachers to use as a source of suggestions for parents at parent-teacher conferences and other times when there is a need for advising parents. Parents often question teachers about what specific things they can do at home with their children to help their educational development. This paper is intended to serve as a convenient resource for providing a variety of information that addresses these concerns.

### Parental Involvement in Educating Children

It is important for parents to understand the great impact the time they spend with their children will have on their children's futures. Parents are children's first models for learning.

Moore (1985) summarizes the studies of Urie Bronfenbrenner, a professor at Cornell University. According to Moore, Bronfenbrenner's 1970 study suggests that, at least until grade 5 or 6, children who spend more time with their peers than with their parents become peer-dependent. "To the extent that children younger than 10 rely on age-mates for their values, they lose their sense of self-worth, their optimism, their respect for parents, and even their trust in peers" (Moore, 1985, p. 64).

In order to maximize their effectiveness, parents must be aware of the characteristics of children. According to DiSibio (1984) "A child is:

- egocentric,
- imaginative and interpretive of the environs,
- curious about that which moves,
- investigative, using words such as how, what, and why as part of their daily vocabulary,
- energetic, as in doing rather than listening,
- persistent, solving tasks that are of personal importance, and
- social, wanting to plan and carry out activities together" (p. 296).

Once parents understand the characteristics of children, it is easier to find activities and games that are appropriate for their own children. These activities should be enjoyable and able to hold a child's interest; at the same time, they should be stimulating and promote learning on the part of the child.

In a survey of kindergarten teachers, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1991) found that 42 percent of the teachers felt that fewer of their students were ready for school than was the case five years before. Thirty-three percent of the teachers felt their students were at about the same levels as five years previously, and only 25 percent found their students to be more ready for school than their students five years before.

In a study by Harris and Lindauer (1988), parents were asked what they could do to prepare their children for kindergarten. The domains mentioned most frequently by mothers were receptive language (52%), social development (40%), and cognitive-prereading activities (36%). When kindergarten teachers were asked what parents could do to prepare their children, the domains that were most frequently mentioned by the teachers were receptive language (66%), cognitive

attention/problem solving (51%) and small muscle development (43%).

Henry (1990) offers a number of suggestions for parental involvement in the shaping of children's early developmental activities in the areas of responsiveness, control and child involvement. She emphasizes the establishment of warm affective relationships and demonstrating high regard for the child in order to promote responsiveness. In the area of control, emphases are placed on consistency and the utilization of explanatory rather than arbitrary regulatory strategies. And finally, she suggests that involvement can best be promoted by encouraging independence and achievement by holding high expectations, frequently engaging children in conversation, assisting them with school work, and encouraging them to explore and manipulate their environments.

Additionally, Henry (1990) suggests three behaviors common to parents who are most helpful to their children's functioning. According to the author parents should: " a) nurture and value their children and respond to their cues; b) guide their children's behavior, while encouraging independence; c) be actively involved with their children in stimulating ways" (p. 36).

Moreno (1991) compiled the findings of several studies in an effort to define "ideal" maternal instruction:

...the ideal mother, when instructing her preschool-age child, is one who uses a large amount of verbal instruction, asks many questions, and utilizes abstract words and concepts in her instruction. She uses many positive and reinforcing statements and rarely makes negative, corrective, or punitive statements. The ideal maternal teacher has little use for demonstration, modeling, or nonverbal instructional techniques, and she carefully invests time in "setting-up" tasks. She gives clear and specific instructions, yet does not stifle her child's decision-making ability. As a result, the ideal maternal teacher fosters a stimulating and enriching instructional environment for her child, and her teaching behavior is optimal for teaching abstract and complex tasks. (p. 397)

### The First Year

"Intellectual stimulation in the child's first year of life greatly influences that child's behavior and intelligence as an adult" (International Reading Association [B], 1991, p. 1). Learning takes place through the senses (touching, tasting, smelling, seeing, and hearing). Babies often seem to use as

many of their senses as possible in each new situation they encounter. Parents should do what they can to encourage their babies to use multiple senses as they experiment and learn.

Parents should begin reading to their children by the time they are three months old. Some parents begin such activity even before the baby is born, sometimes purposefully, and sometimes indirectly while reading to an older sibling. Parents can read books to the newborn baby or hold the child and allow him or her to look at the pictures as they are beginning to see. Even at this young age, a child can learn that reading is a pleasurable experience as he or she will begin to associate reading with being held close by a loving parent, listening as the parent speaks to him or her, and sharing in the enjoyment of reading stories (Eisenberg et al, 1989).

The best time to read to a baby is when he or she seems to be the most attentive and in an agreeable mood. It is best to read to the baby every day and to read a variety of books. A baby will have special "favorites" by the time he or she is one year old. Since it is to be a pleasurable experience, the time spent reading a book should be limited to the amount of time that one can hold a baby's interest and he or she seems to be enjoying the activity. Babies will enjoy books that

have bold illustrations with bright or contrasting colors such as black, white, red and blue (Eisenberg et al, 1989).

Some parents may question reading to infants since they probably are not able to understand the book or participate in the enjoyment of the story. When the child is older, he or she will have the good memories of early experiences and will think of reading as an important and positive part of life. Starting reading experiences while children are young will also help them develop the attention span necessary for listening and reading a story. Hearing the language of the literature will also help young children develop their vocabulary and background experience (International Reading Association [B]).

### Physical Skills

From the time of birth, a child is learning how to use his or her body. Muscles develop at different times, with large muscle development taking place before small muscle control is gained.

A parent can provide activities to encourage the development of both coordination and strength. Large muscle development will be used in school for such things as holding books, manipulating large toys and furniture, and in physical play--both during free-play activities and physical education. Small muscle development and visual motor coordination are needed for

writing, drawing, focusing eyes on pages and chalkboards, and cutting with scissors (DiSibio, 1984).

Choosing toys for children which are challenging, but not frustrating, will help children develop and hone their physical skills. According to the International Reading Association (B), "Toys should be safe, easily cleaned, attractive, and durable. A preschool child needs toys which provide opportunities for squeezing, pulling, pushing, stacking, punching, pounding, lifting, balancing, hanging, throwing, dragging, steering, carrying, climbing, rolling, taking apart, and putting together" (p. 1). Many parents choose toys that are too advanced for their children in hopes that they will help their children develop skills and knowledge precociously, but such attempts often are counterproductive because excessively advanced toys may actually frustrate the children and cause them to be turned off by such toys and activities.

According to Jim Zimmer, an elementary physical education teacher in the Cedar Falls Community School District for the past 30 years, it's best to stay away from competitive sports and activities throughout children's elementary school years.

"Natural, enjoyable activities are best. I encourage parents to have their children play outside, and it's really important for parents to play with their

children. Kids should do a lot of climbing on playground equipment. Use equipment that is appropriate for the child's age. Use different sized balls and different weights of equipment."

Zimmer also suggests that one should not keep score when children are young. The emphasis should be on participation, not winning.

Simmons and Brewer (1985) explain, "When children engage in highly organized sports too soon, a few students will experience success and others, lowered self-esteem" (p. 183). Physical development should be stressed, and one should try to avoid games that make it necessary for children to stand quietly and wait their turns. Children learn by doing, not by watching or occupying their attention with other activities and day-dreaming.

Lessons and classes are available for children of all ages to learn and participate in a variety of sports and physical activities. Activities such as swimming and gymnastics can be taught to children who are very young. Although babies sometimes are enrolled in swimming classes as newborns, it is generally recommended that parents wait until children are older to begin swimming lessons. Babies have an instinctive ability to swim, but it is impossible to instill the judgment and lifesaving

techniques which they would need if they ran into trouble when swimming (Eisenberg et al, 1989). Gymnastics can also help children develop body awareness, strength and coordination.

### Speech and Language Patterns

Words are the tools that children will use to communicate their ideas with others. Parents are the first models of communication for children. There are different views on how children learn communication skills. One view is that children learn by example (Dworkin, 1992). Another view is that it is the need for communication and the use of communication skills that provide the impetus for learning language skills (Brewer and Simmons, 1985). Children generally do not need formal instruction in how to speak; the family and the home environment usually provide the necessary impetus for the acquisition of language.

From birth to six months, babies communicate through cooing, crying and babbling. At one year of age, children typically begin to speak their first words. At this age, they use expressive jargon and imitate words. From one to five years, children begin to speak in sentences and employ rules of grammar. At the age of five years, children have near adult competence in language. According to Boyer (1991), "Language, without question, is the key to learning. Children who fail to develop

adequate speech and language skills in the first year of life are up to six times more likely to experience reading problems in school than those who receive adequate stimulation" (p. 34).

Boyer (1991) suggests "Every child, to be educationally successful, needs a language-rich environment, one in which adults speak well, listen attentively, and read aloud every day" (p. 34). Specific suggestions for parents include talking to their children lovingly from the moment they are born. Parents should be good listeners so children will have plenty of opportunities to practice their communication skills. Children also profit from having stories and poems read to them and having songs sung to them. Simple games such as "peekaboo", "pat-a-cake", and "this little piggy went to market" encourage imitation and listening skills.

In research conducted by Feitelson, Kita and Goldstein (1986), the influence reading to children had on their active use of language was observed. ". . . this effect suggests that hearing stories read aloud acquaints children with literary language and that the impact of this is so strong that it extends beyond children's passive language skills and affects also their active use of language" (p. 355).

One should not expect perfect speech from a preschooler, but neither should one encourage baby talk. Some speech errors

may be corrected effectively with casual attention, but one should be careful to avoid nagging, frequently interrupting or embarrassing the child. To correct speaking errors, one simply can respond to the child by repeating what he or she said using correct speech and grammar. This modeling will teach the child without the embarrassment and frustration that may result from more pointed, direct approaches (Dworkin, 1992).

Stuttering is common in preschool-aged children, but this condition is something the child usually will grow out of on his or her own. Similarly, most children who have difficulty saying the sounds represented by the letters r and s will generally outgrow these traits by second grade. If not, speech testing probably will be suggested by school authorities and, when needed, speech therapy (Eisenberg et al, 1989).

American Baby magazine makes a number of sound recommendations about how to speak to babies and young children.

Use real words, not "baby talk", when you speak to your child. For example, don't use words like "din-din" or "num-nums". Since children are capable of understanding more than they can say, speak to your child at increasingly higher levels. When he begins to use single words, he actually understands phrases and simple sentences. Speaking in simple slow speech

will expose your child to new words, illustrate word combinations, and promote listening skills. (Dworkin, 1992, p. 33)

When parents imitate the babbling and cooing that babies make, it seems to encourage them to try making even more sounds. The book What To Expect The First Year (Eisenberg et al., 1989) offers more ways to help a baby's language development. Among the suggestions offered are the following:

1. verbally labelling objects in the baby's environment (crib, chair, tree, dog, etc.),
2. listening to the baby as he or she babbles and makes sounds and responding with statements of encouragement ("Oh, that is so interesting!") or by asking questions ("What else did you do today?"),
3. concentrating on dichotomous concepts such as hot and cold, up and down, etc.,
4. explaining environmental considerations with cause and effect statements such as: "The sun is bright so we can have light during the day", and,
5. identifying objects when the child makes requests.  
If a child grunts and points to something such as a

toy, ask them, "Do you want your truck?", to model the language he or she can use to get what is wanted.

The book takes a different view on the topic of baby talk. It suggests a parent should first use an adult phrase such as "Now you and I are going on a walk," and then translating it into baby talk "Mommy, baby, go bye-bye". This type of double-speak gives a baby a chance to hear something more than once. "Talking twice as much will help baby understand twice as much" (Eisenberg et. al., 1989, p. 161).

Parents must keep in mind the fact that babies develop language at different rates. If parents are concerned about their child's language development, the baby's pediatrician can be consulted and, in most cases, will reassure the parents that their baby is developing normally (Eisenberg et al. 1989). Sometimes a family's first child may say her first word by eight months of age, and a second child may not attempt to use real words until the age of one and one-half or two years. There is a predictable pattern in language acquisition, but there still is enormous variability in rate of development of language skills.

### Listening Skills

Listening skills are essential for good language development and communication. Many of the suggestions for the development

of desirable speech and language patterns will encourage good listening skills at the same time.

Drawing children's attention to sounds in the environment will help them learn to listen to things happening around them. This includes helping them identify sounds like birds, insects, cars, and airplanes. Parents can provide children with records and tapes of songs, stories and poems; there are tape recorders that are easy to operate and made specially for young children (International Reading Association [B]).

Listening skills can be promoted by having children repeat sounds they hear. Children also can deliver verbal messages from one member of a family to another. This will help children listen carefully to what a person says, memorize it, and then use their speaking skills to repeat it to another person. Babies are encouraged to try and repeat words. As they get older, they can repeat phrases, and then finally short poems or stories.

### Visual Skills

Reading will require highly developed visual skills, and there are many opportunities to help a child develop the ability to remember and differentiate between objects.

Before learning to talk, a baby can distinguish between familiar objects and people. As a child gets older, parents

should explain specific details of objects to help children distinguish between shapes, letters, words. Long before he or she has developed the ability to read, a child will begin to notice letters and words in the surrounding world. Children will notice this "environmental print" on streets, labels, cereal boxes, storybooks. Once a child shows interest in environmental print, he or she should be encouraged to recognize familiar signs and words.

Visual development in a young child is hampered by the fact that young children are normally far-sighted. Distinguishing finer details and undertaking the detailed tasks of cutting and folding can be difficult for a young child because of this (DiSibio, 1984).

### Social Development

A youngster needs to learn to gain control of emotions and behavior in order to work and play effectively with other young children. Babies and toddlers are too young to actually play along with another baby or toddler, but they can begin to develop rudimentary social skills and to learn from their environments and the people around them.

A baby becomes a social being by watching how members of the family interact. By a baby's second or third month, he or she will begin to learn through his or her interactions with

parents and family members. The middle of the first year is a very sociable time for a baby because he or she is able to smile, laugh and communicate without interference from the yet-to-be-learned fear of strangers. A baby at this age can learn simple social graces such as waving bye-bye and blowing kisses (Eisenberg, 1989).

Toys that help babies with social development are stuffed animals, mobiles, and dolls. A baby may not be able to squeeze or hold these objects, but he or she will begin to practice social interaction with them by babbling and cooing.

Toddlers can develop social skills through their worlds of make-believe. Toy dishes and kitchen equipment, toy cars and phones, hats, grown-up's shoes and many other objects can help a child pretend to be an adult and to emulate the social graces and interactions they see going on around them.

A young child can learn social skills through books, make-believe, dress-up play, and other types of role playing. Young children should be provided with opportunities to play and exercise their social skills with other children of similar age. They will learn a lot from these interactions with peers.

DiSibio (1984) emphasizes the importance of helping children learn to control their emotional reactions. "Discourage behavioral extremes and encourage the youngster to solve prob-

lems, learn to reason, and discuss his feelings" (DiSibio, 1984, p. 297). A child needs to develop feelings of security so he or she can adjust to new situations at home and accept leaving the home environment and entering school. Parents should emphasize the importance of improving and doing one's best. Conversely, emphasis on winning and perfection should be avoided. It is important that a child be helped to understand that you can learn from your mistakes, so a mistake can serve to generate positive outcomes. Above all, parents should help children learn to solve problems and accept responsibility.

### Reading Skills

The reading process is the key to future understandings about one's world and academic pursuits in various areas such as social studies, science, language arts and mathematics which form the backbone of formal instruction and schooling.

Many well-intentioned parents have made the mistake of trying to provide formal reading instruction for young children to ensure that they have a head start when they head off to school. On occasion, this may backfire on them when the child gets frustrated and is resistive toward learning to read or plods along below grade level in reading in a school that uses a basal approach. Before formal reading instruction can begin, a child must recognize the need to read, have an interest in reading

and, most importantly, want to read. There are many other better ways to prepare a young child for reading than direct reading instruction or using instructional tools such as flash cards.

The National Center for Education Statistics (1991) Found that 80 percent of parents from different educational backgrounds read to their children. Only 35 percent of parents polled indicated that they told stories to their children. Fifty-five percent indicated that they did teach their children letters words, or numbers.

#### Infants and Pre-readers

When can a parent help begin building the foundation for reading skills in a child? It can begin before a child is even conceived. Parents should be readers themselves. Effective modeling is a key factor in helping a child to read. Adults should read a variety of things, not just for work but also for pleasure, things such as novels, newspapers, magazines, cookbooks, informational books. If parents want children to value reading and learning, then they need to value reading and learning themselves and model it constantly.

There is an abundance of books, articles and brochures to guide parents in helping their children develop into better readers. Much of the literature states that the best way to begin reading development is by reading to the child. There

are many different theories as to when is the best time to begin. Some authorities even suggest reading to the baby while it is still in the womb. Others suggest reading to children from the time they are newborns or a couple of months old (Eisenberg et al, 1989). In no case has a study stated or implied that reading to a baby too early is harmful, so parents should begin reading to a baby as soon as possible without fear of interfering with a child's reading development. And it may even help.

Morrow, O'Connor, and Smith (1990) summarized research done by Teale (1984) stating that reading to children develops:

...(a) their awareness of the functions and uses of written language or what reading is all about and what it feels like, (b) concepts about print, books, and reading, and the form and structure of written language itself, (c) positive attitudes towards reading, and (d) children's self-monitoring and predictive strategies as a result of being read to. (p. 257)

Morrow et al. (1990) found that young children who were involved in a daily program of literature experiences scored significantly better than the control groups on story retellings, attempted reading of favorite stories, comprehension tests, and other measures.

"The most important component of the reading process is learning to love and appreciate books. Recognition of individual words follows--but must never precede--this step" (Simmons and Brewer, 1985, p. 177). Parents can show children that reading is not only for instruction; its other benefits include entertainment, enrichment, and fulfillment. Mother and Father (if there are two parents) should both read to the children frequently, hopefully every day. This type of reading environment produces children who are ready to read even before formal instruction begins, and these children continue to display reading competency throughout their educational careers.

Parents should read in ways that generate interest and excitement in the process. Tone and inflection are important. Babies seem to enjoy hearing exaggerated emphasis where appropriate. One also should take time to describe what is happening in the pictures or point out characters or objects in the illustrations. As a child gets a little older, he or she may be able to fill in last words of rhymes or sentences in favorite books and read along with the parent (International Reading Association [A]). Predictable books, or books that are easy for children to guess what will happen next and tell that word or part of the story, are also favorites among many children. Children should be questioned about books as they

are being read to them. A child may choose a favorite book to be read over and over again. This high interest and repetition will help a child notice things about the words and the stories. Bedtime is often a favorite book reading time for parents and children, but it is important to encourage reading at different times of the day when a child is interested and attentive as well (Eisenberg et al, 1989).

Background experience is important in developing good readers. Although they may not seem directly related, taking children on shopping trips, walks in the neighborhood, and visits to zoos, museums, and plays can actually help children develop prerequisite schema for reading skills. A wide range of background experiences will help children relate to and understand stories. Even simple stories require children to have both common and not-so-common knowledge (International Reading Association [A]).

The National Center for Education Statistics (1991) conducted a survey to determine the frequency with which parents of three to five year-olds take them on cultural outings. Thirty-five percent of parents from all different educational backgrounds reported that they visited a library with their children. Less than 20 percent of parents indicated that they

had visited an art gallery, museum or historical site with their children.

Children should be talked to about their experiences (Brewer and Simmons, 1985). Talking will help children develop their vocabularies and promote understandings about what different words and concepts mean. Talking with children will help them learn from their experiences, and they can use this knowledge to facilitate improved comprehension when they become readers.

### Writing

A study by Durkin (1974) suggests learning to read was a by-product of children's interest in writing. Children became interested in reading when they began asking questions about the spelling of words they were using in their writing. The argument presented by Downing (1979) and others is that children who understand the communicative purposes of writing are more likely to make sense out of details in reading instruction.

Children's transition into the writing process begins at home through writing tasks modeled by parents such as the creation of lists, signs, and labels. Newkirk (1987) reported that children perceive writing to be more than writing on a page. "Children's perception of writing includes a combination of pictures, written text, and oral commentary" (p. 134).

Dyson (1985) observed that children do not organize their writing processes as adults do. "They do not necessarily begin with a planned message; instead, they may first form letters, deciding later, if at all, on a message" (p. 135).

Children seem to feel a sense of power when they engage in writing activities. Smith (1984) explained that "the act of writing must be a particularly powerful device for children because of the power it gives them to construct, manipulate, and even erase entire worlds of experience and ideas which otherwise would never exist for them" (p. 134). Children take ownership in their writing, they choose their own purposes and topics.

Letter writing has been found to be a favorite writing activity for children. Hogan (1980) noted that letter writing affords children opportunities to write and discover their own thoughts in the context of an accepting audience.

A responsive audience builds the confidence of children in their writing. Many children choose their parents to be their first audience for writing activities.

Many children are encouraged to write, draw, and paint at home in a safe environment free from requirements such as spelling, neatness, and grammatical usage. Whether motivated by the love of

writing or its novelty, children are more likely to elicit help from family members than from their teachers." (Marrion, Ollila, Shook, 1989, p. 137)

In a survey of primary students by Marrion et al. (1989), 87 percent of the children surveyed said they wrote at home. Fifty-seven percent indicated that they preferred writing at home to writing in a school setting. The children's favorite audience for their writing was their parents (21%). Ranking second was a combination of parents and teachers which was identified by 12 percent of the students surveyed. It was concluded that children prefer the writing activities that they pursue at home because they are modeled and accepted unconditionally by parents.

Parents should provide their children with a variety of writing materials such as paper, crayons, pencils, pens, and cards. Writing is an excellent way for children to learn about letters and words even before they are able to write actual letters and read (Brewer and Simmons, 1985). If a child is too young to hold a pencil, using magnetic letters is an interesting fun way for kids to play with letters and learn about words. The letters can be stuck to a refrigerator or they may be used on magnetic boards.

### Television

Although children should be encouraged to watch television programs that have educational value, they should not be encouraged or permitted to become couch potatoes who just sit in front of a television when they cannot think of anything to do. It is desirable to sit down as a family and plan a week's television viewing schedule using the television guide.

In a survey on parental involvement in children's television viewing (Taras et al, 1990), 15 percent of the parents reported that they guide their children's selection of programs. Thirty-eight percent of the parents indicated that they frequently discuss programs with their children. Sixty-six percent of the parents reported that they often use TV as entertainment for their children.

Watching programs that teach about reading and language can have positive effects on children's learning. Learning value may be enhanced by visiting with children about what they have watched and by encouraging them to watch the educational programs they enjoy regularly. However, one must be aware of what children are watching and monitor how much time is spent watching TV. Watching quality programs for up to ten hours a week can have a positive effect on a child's achievement. But too much TV can have the opposite effect; most children who watch twenty

hours or more of television per week do not do well in school (The Center for the Study of Reading, University of Illinois, p. 2).

### Choosing Reading Material

There are many factors that influence reading interests. A child's sex, age, exposure to books, the availability of printed materials, identification, and reward all make contributions to the development of reading interests.

According to the International Reading Association (A), children should be permitted to read books that appeal to their natural interests rather than having boys read books that are stereotypical "boy" books, and girls read books that are supposed to be only for girls. There are sex differences in reading interests, but boys and girls should not be forced into preconceived molds when it comes to the availability and selection of reading materials.

Preschoolers generally are interested in rhyming words, repetition, bold and colorful pictures, and books that have interesting things to do and touch. Primary children tend to enjoy stories that are longer and have more involved plots, and they often exhibit interest in stories containing morals. As children experience more things and develop greater awareness of the world around them, they will become fascinated with

stories dealing with justice, humor, peer relationships, animals, sports, physical growth and development (International Reading Association [A]).

The more a child is exposed to fascinating books and other reading materials, the greater the child's interest in reading. Therefore, it is important that a variety of books be read to children and that they be encouraged to browse through books and to look at pictures on their own. Frequent and varied reading experiences will also expose children to proper book handling concepts such as learning that you start reading a book from the front, that you turn the pages from right to left, and that you read left to right and top to bottom.

A child is unlikely to read unless there are plenty of books, magazines, newspapers, and other materials available (International Reading Association [A]). Reading interests also can be fostered by providing children with special places to keep their own books, such as bookshelves in their own rooms. Parents should keep in mind that books are made to be read and enjoyed over and over again, not just displayed to decorate a room. Favorite books are bound to look a little worn after many readings. A parent can also teach children to have respect for books and to take good care of their book collections. Children should be encouraged to wash their hands before reading

books if they've been playing outdoors. In this interest, a parent may also want to teach young children that books are not to be read while one is eating. However, one should keep in mind that having too many rules about books may serve to discourage interest in reading.

Books and other reading material can help children with identification (International Reading Association [A]). This is particularly true if books are provided that are designed to help children understand themselves and their relationships with the world. Children can also learn to solve their own problems by reading books about characters having similar problems. This also helps them understand that what they experience is often normal and they are not alone in their feelings and concerns.

The greatest reward should be the satisfaction a child feels when finishing a story. A parent can help a child to begin to experience this satisfaction by praising him or her after reading. Soon he or she will find self satisfaction through the new knowledge, improved self-awareness, and the emotional release that reading can facilitate (International Reading Association [A]).

Parents can stimulate interest in reading more effectively by knowing their children and their interests. If parents

know what children like to do for fun, what concerns them, and what they like and dislike, parents will be in a better position to help children choose appropriate, stimulating reading materials (International Reading Association [A]).

Children should be encouraged to use a wide range of reading materials. These can include such things as books, magazines, newspapers, comics, poetry, folktales, books with factual information, game instructions, labels, and street signs. Children should learn how to use reading to answer questions. Even young children can learn the purposes for which reference books such as dictionaries and encyclopedias are used. It may be counterproductive to provide children with direct instruction focusing solely on the use of the dictionary but, if a child comes across a word in a story he or she does not understand, one can seize that opportunity to look it up in a dictionary together thereby conveying the message that a dictionary is a valuable tool for understanding (International Reading Association [A]).

### Library

Trips to the library can open up a whole world of excitement for children. Every family member should have a library card which is regularly used to check out books. Parents or a librarian can help guide children toward books that may be of

interest to them but, if children find books on their own that are appropriate for them to read or have read to them, they will relish the freedom to choose some on their own. Parents should take advantage of both public and school libraries whenever possible (International Reading Association [B]).

### The Young Reader

Once a child actually begins to read, he or she should not be forced to read books based on his or her school reading level. School reading levels are based on a child's instructional level, one that generally exceeds the comfort level for leisure reading. An adult would not constantly read materials that challenge his or her reading skills or vocabulary; consequently, one cannot expect any more of a child. However, children can be taught how to scan books to determine whether they may be of interest to them and at appropriate reading levels (International Reading Association [A]).

Parents can share in their children's reading by listening. Children should be encouraged, but not forced, to read aloud to family members. However, the potential benefits of such activity will be seriously impaired if parents fail to subdue the urge to correct every error that is made and to turn it into a reading lesson. But children should be questioned and encouraged to make predictions about the stories they read. Children can

relate the books to experiences they have had in their lives and share their ideas about them with their parents. This will help develop children's oral language as well as their reading abilities (International Reading Association [A]).

### Reading Activities

There are many activities related to reading that can stimulate interest in books and the understanding of stories. Young children who have been exposed to a lot of books may enjoy dictating their own stories to a parent. These stories can be written down or typed and stapled into a book. Once children can hold a pencil, they may like to write their own stories using pictures, scribbles and invented spelling (Brewer and Simmons, 1985). Parents and children can use drama to recreate the story lines they have heard or to make up their own stories to perform as a play or puppet show.

### Comprehension

Children with good comprehension skills can visualize a story that is being told to them or visualize what is happening when reading a story that has no illustrations. Ways to begin to develop visualization skills include telling a story to children and having them shut their eyes and imagine the pictures in their heads. Children also can be encouraged to draw collages

of pictures on paper for stories that are being read to them (International Reading Association [A]).

### Other Resources

Books make excellent gifts for children. Read Aloud Handbook by Jim Trelease (1982) is an excellent reference for parents who are choosing books for their own children or guiding their selection of books as gifts for friends and relatives.

### Math Skills

Just as with reading, parents can help young children begin the development of concepts in math. It is not important that children learn to do paper-and-pencil math at a young age, but it is important that they begin to develop a base of understanding of number concepts and operations.

### Manipulatives

Children learn number concepts from working with real materials that can be manipulated. Through playing with these manipulatives, children can learn many concepts on their own. Examples of objects parents may provide for children include blocks, popsicle sticks, toy links, play dough, measuring utensils. "Working with manipulatives promotes the ability to conceptualize numbers. Students who can relate the numeral five to five objects have a more important skill than those who can count by rote to one hundred" (Kamii, 1982, p.179).

In the beginning, parents should not try to teach concepts with manipulatives to children, but rather let the children play with the materials and develop their own understandings of math concepts. It is difficult to teach children about addition before they understand a need to be able to do such operations. But a young child can learn about putting materials together, taking some away, dividing them into groups, and putting groups together through play. If children have a lot of opportunities to play with manipulatives, they will be ready to learn concepts and operations from the formal instruction they will receive when they reach first or second grade (Brewer and Simmons, 1985). Many schools use similar games and manipulatives to help children develop basic concepts in kindergarten and first grade before any formal lessons in mathematics begin.

Playing with open-ended materials, such as the manipulatives mentioned, also helps children develop problem-solving and social skills. Because there are no right or wrong answers, children feel free to learn without pressure or fear of making mistakes. This freedom helps children achieve a sense of competency and self-worth at the same time they are learning math skills (Brewer and Simmons, 1985).

Children often are compelled to share manipulatives with siblings or friends; this affords them opportunities to practice the social skills needed to join and work effectively in groups. They learn how to share, how to ask for materials in ways that produce desired results, how others perceive their actions, and they may learn how to work together on a problem (Brewer and Simmons, 1985).

### Cooking

According to Brewer and Simmons (1985), children can learn many math concepts while helping parents cook. Some of the concepts children can learn while helping with cooking activities include classification, measurement, and money understandings based on the shopping for recipe ingredients. At the same time children learn math while cooking, they may also be exposed to important learning concepts in the areas of reading, science, and social studies. Having children watch as one bakes or cooks or participate in those procedures that are appropriate for children can do much to stimulate their intellectual development. To maximize learning potential, it is important that parents discuss what is happening as they follow the various steps involved in such procedures.

There are cookbooks for children on the market that make it easy for young children to participate in simple cooking and

baking activities. These books are full of how-to illustrations, and they often include simple text that is easy for young readers to understand.

### Other Math Activities

The following suggestions from Simmons and Brewer (1985) are quick and meaningful activities that can provide practice in the utilization of math concepts for children. Among the suggestions offered are the following:

1. keeping score in family games,
2. setting the table (counting correct number of plates, glasses, silverware),
3. helping to cook (measure ingredients),
4. folding and accounting for laundry,
5. playing "shape-search" around the house,
6. growing flowers and recording vital information about them, and
7. deciding how to apportion materials fairly among family members and peers.

All of these activities and others that imaginative parents invent help the child achieve a real understanding of mathematical concepts without the pressure of memorizing and recording symbolically.

Writing out problems is not necessary for young children to develop math concepts. Young children often do not have the fine motor control necessary for making numbers correctly and will not have this control until after they begin school.

### Summary

Much of the information available on helping young children prepare for school is common knowledge among many elementary school teachers. Most teachers learn about school readiness activities in their undergraduate work and are aware of activities that can promote early learning. On the other hand, many parents do not have backgrounds in education and are unsure about what they should be doing with their children. Others may be practicing teaching techniques with their young children that may cause frustration and discourage interest in learning.

Much of the information on this topic is often categorized by specific areas such as writing, reading aloud, or language development. Therefore, it is difficult for a teacher to find one handy source that contains suggestions for a variety of skills and curriculum areas. The goal of this paper is to compile this information into one source so that teachers can have the research to back their suggestions to parents about preparing children for school success.

Many of the suggestions for parents can help with several areas of development. For instance, talking with a child has been shown to help foster language development, listening skills, speaking skills, and background experience. Reading to children not only shows the child that the parents value reading, it helps develop his or her own interest in reading, vocabulary skills, book handling concepts, and awareness of the world around him or her. Children learn many math concepts while helping parents cook, but they also learn how to follow directions, communication skills, and reading skills while following a recipe.

Children learn more in their pre-school years than they will learn the rest of their lives (DiSibio, 1984). Parents are important models for children and are their children's first teachers. There are many reading and math skills, as well as other concepts, that children can learn before formal instruction begins in school. Children can learn to value reading and learning through the activities in which their parents participate.

Children learn most efficiently through play (Henry, 1990). Parents can learn how to choose toys, books, and activities that can provide opportunities for children to learn concepts without frustration and confusion.

It would be difficult for a parent to provide all of the learning activities suggested for their children each day. The purpose of this paper was to provide specific suggestions for parents. The following list of suggestions is an excellent place to start in developing young children's skills (Compiled from the following sources: International Reading Association (A and B), The Center for the Study of Reading, Brewer and Simmons, and Jim Zimmer).

1. Be a good model.
2. Read to children every day.
3. Help children acquire a wide range of knowledge (through shopping trips, walks in the park, trips to the zoo, library, etc.).
4. Talk and listen to children.
5. Monitor children's television viewing.
6. Play outdoors with children encouraging climbing and playing with various equipment (balls, ropes).
7. Provide appropriate toys for children.
8. Encourage children to play with manipulatives.
9. Encourage children to write using inventive spelling when they are able to use a pencil.
10. Involve children in cooking and games.

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