

# Using Their Words

## Helping children get a good start in reading and learning

By Tess Cox

It's easy for a parent to become overwhelmed with emotions and expectations as a child grows up and gets ready for that first day of school. As the day nears for the beginning of preschool or kindergarten, the anxiety levels can climb, and the inevitable questions arise: Is she ready for this? Will he do well?

We are all concerned that our children do well in the long run and succeed in school. In recent years, parents and professionals have become more aware that early childhood literacy is a key to a success in the classroom, and on into adulthood.

Children introduced to reading early on tend to read earlier and excel in school compared to children who are not exposed to language and books at a young age. The National Institute for Literacy estimates that one out of every five children in the U.S. will experience a reading or writing problem at some point during their school years.

### Understanding Literacy

What is literacy? Simply put, it is our ability to read and write and learn. It's been said that we spend the first few years of our lives learning to read, and the rest of our lives reading to learn. According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASLHA), good literacy skills include being able to read and understand age-appropriate information (comprehension), put letters together

to form words (spelling), and write meaningful phrases and sentences.

As with many other aspects of a child's growth, his literacy level is affected by genetics and environment. The genes a child inherits from her parents determine her brain's basic "wiring," while the home environment she grows up within helps determine how efficiently the "wires" are connected, and how well she adapts to the world around her.

### Inside the Brain

In order to get a better grasp on this, we can look at the brain's basic anatomy. The nervous system begins to operate very early in a developing fetus. Less than a month after conception, the neurological system's basic structure is already established, and brain cells begin to form.

Each brain cell gradually sprouts hundreds of long branches called "dendrites" which connect to other brain cells via junctions called "synapses." The electrical impulses our brain uses to send messages to the rest of the body are carried along these branches along a fatty sheath called "myelin" that covers the branches like bark on a tree. Chemicals called "neurotransmitters" help transfer the electrical pulses across our synapses to other branches.

As an old saying goes, "Cells that fire together, wire together." This "hard-wiring" of our brains continues throughout fetal development as the

*continued on page 29*



**Your child's path to success in school**  
starts long before that first day in a classroom. Here's what  
you can do to help your youngster learn and grow.

*continued from page 22*

number of synapses continues to increase, peaking in the early years of our lives. The process declines by one-third between early childhood and adolescence.

## The Building Blocks of Learning

Many people believe that children learn to read and write in kindergarten or first grade. However, the foundation for literacy skills is laid years before children enter school.

In light of a child's need for early and frequent brain stimulation, there are several important steps parents and caregivers can take to help a child's brain and language skills develop.

Engaging a child's senses is very important right from birth. Singing, rhyming, and talking are very important. Babies develop listening skills and an interest in sounds and words from this activity.

Eventually the baby learns to understand certain patterns of sounds and tries to reproduce them, which marks the beginning of personal expression and two-way communication. Reading books aloud, showing pictures, and letting even infants handle written materials encourages to the child to learn visual recognition and to identify what she hears with what she sees.

"Parents don't always think of giving books to infants," says Jill Fussell, M.D., FAAP, assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. "But even young infants can visually attend to book pages with black-and-white patterns or with bright, contrasting colors for short time periods."

No one expects an infant to read, but simply having a book in her hands can start the process of getting familiar with books and reading materials. "Although a 9- to 12-month-old may chew on a book or bang it on the floor, parents should still encourage children by including books in their repertoire of play objects," says Dr. Fussell. "The same goes for reading to younger infants and toddlers. Parents need to be reminded of the power their voice has, and how their own babies will prefer to attend to their parent's voice, given the opportunity, over other noises — such as a television."

An important and normal part of developing early literacy skills for very young children is repetition. Sure, they may want to read the same storybook or look at the same pictures over and over. But this activity is actually "hard-wiring" their brains and providing consistent stimulation for language development, the cornerstone of literacy.

## The Lap of Literacy

As the ASLHA puts it, "Toddlers are like little scientists." They explore with all their senses, learn trial and error, cause and effect, and their brain growth increases through personal interaction with parents, grandparents, caregivers, and even other children.

Reading aloud, laughing, talking, and exploring books together from an early age significantly improves language development and literacy outcomes for children in the long run.

Literacy begins in the lap of a loving parent or caregiver who takes the time to personally interact with their infant. "Some parents may have reading problems themselves, so that reading out loud to their children may be intimidating," Dr. Fussell says. "In those cases — even if a parent just looks at a book and comments on the pictures with their child, asks the child questions about what's going on in the pictures — that's still 'reading!'"

## Teaching a Love for Books

The most important language stimulation we can provide to our

infants and toddlers is reading to them, says Pamela High, M.D., FAAP. "I think that the most important thing parents do by reading with their infants, toddlers, and preschoolers is to teach them to love books and stories so much that they will be very motivated to learn to read, even when it is a difficult task for them," she says.

That motivation is strengthened even as the bond between a parent and child grows while they share reading time. "The other really important aspect of reading with young children is that this always occurs within the relationship," says Dr. High, who is Chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care. "This activity provides busy parents a reason to slow down and pay total attention to their child and the story. This often becomes a favorite time of the day for both parent and child. When parents read with their children as part of a regular bedtime routine it also promotes healthy sleep habits."

Reading, rhyming, singing, and talking — beginning from birth — profoundly influence literacy and language development, the foundations for all other learning. The results last a lifetime. ●

## Quick Tips for Reading Fun

- Start talking, singing, and reading with your child from the beginning. Even though your child can't read when he's an infant, he'll get the idea that books are fun and reading is a fun activity you share together.
- Repetition is good — it helps a child build important language skills.
- Reading doesn't have to be a huge project. Just a 3-minute story every night before bed will help get your child interested in reading.
- Board books and soft books are good for infants to get used to holding a book in their hands — and enjoying the experience.