



Equity Studies
Research Center

QUEENS COLLEGE, CUNY

Partnership:

No.101

A Guide for Parents

What We Know About Reading and Writing

by
Carole Rhodes, PhD
Literacy Education Professor,
Queens College/CUNY

There is a great deal of research on reading and writing and how best to help children. There are many debates about the teaching of reading. Some favor strict phonetic approaches; others a more general approach. No matter how your child is being taught in school, the most significant thing you can do to help your child become a good reader, writer and learner is to talk and engage your child in language activities.

Speaking and Listening

Talking comes before reading and writing. Without an understanding of language, it is difficult for young readers to comprehend and produce print. By talking and listening, your child will gain valuable insight into how to understand things. When we speak, we use facial expressions to help communicate, but in reading and writing there are no clues. Generally, speakers and listeners have a fairly easy time of understanding each other if they have some things in common. Think about the last time someone spoke to you about a topic with which you had no familiarity. A farmer would easily understand and talk about crop rotation, bio-engineered food, and product distribution, but the average listener might find these terms unfamiliar. Conversation on these topics would be difficult to understand.

It is very important to help build your child's knowledge about things. Children gain new understanding and knowledge when they share information, and parents and caregivers need to keep in mind the two-way nature of a conversation. When adults converse with children, they should try to build on what the children know and should work to expand that knowledge. Parents are always observing their children and know the quizzical looks, blank expressions, and raised eyebrows that can indicate difficulty in understanding.

Things for You to Think about as You and Your Child Have a Conversation

- 🌀 What does my child already know about this topic?
- 🌀 What new information does my child want or need?
- 🌀 How can I add new information as part of the conversation?
- 🌀 How can I find out whether my child understands the new information?

As they grow, children listen and speak about many things with adults and other children. These experiences with listening and speaking help children learn about their world, and so the interactions need to be varied, frequent, and meaningful. Reading and writing build on the knowledge gained through listening and speaking.

Reading and Writing: Things You Can Do to Help

Reading and writing are ways of communicating, but they are obviously different from listening and speaking. The more the reader knows about the topic that is being written about, the easier it is for the reader to understand the written word. Readers -- whether children or adults -- bring both their interests and their background experiences to their reading.

It is important to use books not just to build on children's existing interests and knowledge, but also to expose them to things that are somewhat removed from their experiences. Exposure to new things and ideas enables intellectual and emotional growth. The following are some tips on what you can do to help your child:

- Read a book together. Look at and discuss the cover of the book and the title on the front page. Turn the pages together. Point to the words as you read. Point out repeated or key words in the story. Look at the pictures and discuss them.
- Write notes to and with your child. If you pack a lunch for your child, your note might just include a word or two with a simple picture.
- When your child receives a gift, write a thank you note together.
- Keep a memo board handy. As your child watches, mark down special dates and events. When your child is ready, encourage him to note things on the board.

Reading becomes even more important as children progress through school. While much of the work in the early grades involves learning to read and write, as children go through the grades, reading impacts on their learning of subject area materials such as math, science or social studies.

Activities for You and Your Child

- Put things in categories—start by using concrete household things such as cereals or magazines, then progress to more abstract things such as TV shows, lists of healthy foods, or charts of activities.
- Use letter tiles from any game to scramble up letters and make words. Use words that your child knows and then each of you takes turns using the word in a sentence. Also use letter tiles to develop groupings of words that all begin with the same letter.
- Ask your child to describe events in their life. Talking about experiences will help children think about them. Giving detailed descriptions and telling complete stories will also help children learn about how stories are written and what the stories they read mean.
- Ask your child to help you write the list of chores to do and then organize them according to location or time frames.
- Compare the news on television with what you read in the newspaper.
- Listen for biases in TV news reporting.
- Talk about reporting versus reviewing.
- Check the weather forecast in the newspaper and compare it to what the TV weatherperson reports. You can also chart the accuracy of the weather predictors.
- Tally the number of times a particular commercial on television is repeated.
- Make note of the use of descriptive language in commercials, e.g. superior, gorgeous, fastest, biggest.
- Listen to find a new vocabulary word and try to use it throughout the day
- While riding in the car, bus or train play rhyming games, "twenty questions," the "Ghost" spelling game, "Geography," "What would happen If," look for "buzzwords," or tell family stories.

Reading, writing, listening and speaking go hand in hand. No matter what age your child is, you can play a very significant role in his/her progress. Build on the known, expand the unknown and provide a supportive educative environment where children will thrive. Above all, please, remember that all children are different, even when they are the same age they will progress at different a pace. Given time, patience and support, they will all learn and thrive.