

Five Questions Parents Frequently Ask

By: Lucy Levine

Success in school and success in society depends so much on a child's ability to read. In today's global society so very much depends on the written word that is sent around the world through the Internet, e-mail and almost instantaneous business transactions. More than ever we have an ethical responsibility to send students out into the world from our elementary, middle and high schools empowered by literacy. However, teaching a child to read is not the job of the school alone. It is a shared responsibility between the teacher in school and the parent at home. Research by Dr. Marilyn Adams, a noted expert on early literacy, shows us that, "the likelihood that a child will succeed in first grade depends on how much she or he has already learned about reading before getting there."

#1 How can I prepare my child for reading instruction at home?

As a parent, you can cultivate readiness for reading in many ways. The most obvious activity is reading aloud to your child. While listening to you read, your child learns that stories are enjoyable, that a book is read from left to right, from front to back, and that the letters on the page are symbols of words we have in our speaking vocabularies. From the stories, your child will also gain crucial background knowledge about the world. This is the knowledge that will give him or her confidence to speak up in class to share ideas or the imagination from which their own stories can be written. If you start reading to your child for fifteen minutes a night when he/she is 6 months old, your child will have 500 hours of reading by the time he/she is 6 years old. That is more reading time than a whole year of classroom instruction. Remember, you as the parent are your child's first teacher.

#2 What can I do to create a reading environment at home?

If you want your child to be a reader, fill your house with lots of children's books. Establish good reading habits by making time for reading. Some families have a reading half-hour every day when the TV is shut off and everyone reads, even the parents. Nothing is as powerful as your example as a reader, showing your child that you enjoy a good book. Help children choose books that will be of interest to them and that are appropriate to their reading level. Use the five-finger rule. If a child picks up a book and stumbles over five words on one page or in a paragraph, that book is probably

too difficult and should choose an easier one for now that he/she can really enjoy.



#3 How can I help my child expand his/her vocabulary?

On average, children learn 3,000 to 4,000 words a year but only 300 to 400 words are taught directly by the teacher in the classroom. The rest of the words are learned mainly from reading books at his/her reading level. Therefore, to build vocabulary, students must read, read, read! Students who score in the 90th percentile on state tests read about a million new words a year. Students who score in the lowest percentiles read only 1,000 to 3,000 words a year and often only once, so they don't retain their meaning.

#4 How can I get my child to read and expand his/her vocabulary if my child hates to read?

If your child dislikes reading, it is probably because he/she is not good at it. Remember that reading is primarily a language activity and not a function of rote memory or visual skill. Children who have trouble learning to read English usually have a basic problem recognizing printed words accurately and fluently. They do not have a well-developed sense of the speech sounds that the letters represent in our writing system. Doing some "repair" work on phonics and decoding is usually called for. With the guidance of your child's teacher, you can help your child practice recognizing the 43 sounds made by the different combinations of letters in our alphabet.

#5 How do I get my child to think and comprehend at a higher level while reading?

Conversations that you have with your children can lead them to think deeply about the stories they are reading if you ask the right questions. Don't ask for one word literal answers. Ask "Why?" "What do you think?" The way parents talk to their children about an experience will determine the knowledge they get from that experience. Ask open-ended questions or questions that might have more than one answer. Instead of "What do you see on the window pane after a storm?" ask "Why do you think the window is always dirty after a shower? Where did the dirt come from?" In a story, you might ask, "Why do you think the character made that decision?" This will cause your children to think more deeply about the words they just read and they will talk to you about it.

To read five more frequently asked questions parents ask, visit the 2004 Parent guide on the Reading by 9 Web page at www.latimes.com/readinby9.

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