Launching young readers!

Reading Rockets

Blogs About Reading

Shanahan on Literacy

Timothy Shanahan

Literacy expert Timothy Shanahan shares best practices for teaching reading and writing. Dr. Shanahan is an internationally recognized professor of urban education and reading researcher who has extensive experience with children in inner-city schools and children with special needs. All posts are reprinted with permission from Shanahan on Literacy.

11 Ways Parents Can Help Their Children Read

September 9, 2015

Parents often ask how they can help their children learn to read; and it's no wonder that they're interested in this essential skill. Reading plays an important role in later school success. One study even demonstrates that how well 7-year-olds read predicts their income 35 years later!

Here are 11 practical recommendations for helping preschoolers and school-age students learn to read.

1. Teaching reading will only help.

Sometimes, parents are told early teaching is harmful, but it isn't true. You simply can't introduce literacy too early. I started reading to my own children on the days they were each born! The "dangers of early teaching" has been a topic of study for more than 100 years, and no one has ever found any convincing evidence of harm. Moreover, there are hundreds of studies showing the benefits of reading to your children when they are young.

2. Teaching literacy isn't different than teaching other skills.

You don't need a Ph.D. to raise a happy, healthy, smart child. Parents have been doing it for thousands of years. Mothers and fathers successfully teach their kids to eat with a spoon, use a potty, keep their fingers out of their noses, and say "please." These things can be taught pleasantly, or they can be made into a painful chore. Being unpleasant (e.g. yelling, punishing, pressuring) doesn't work, and it can be frustrating for everyone. This notion applies to teaching literacy, too. If you show your 18-month-old a book and she shows no interest, then put it away and come back to it later. If your child tries to write her name and ends up with a backwards "D," no problem. No pressure. No hassle. You should enjoy the journey, and so should your child.

3. Talk to your kids (a lot).

Last year, I spent lots of time with our brand new granddaughter, Emily. I drowned her in language. Although "just a baby," I talked — and sang — to her about everything. I talked about her eyes, nose, ears, mouth, and fingers. I told her all about her family — her mom, dad, and older brother. I talked to her about whatever she did (yawning, sleeping, eating, burping). I talked to her so much that her parents thought I was nuts; she couldn't possibly understand me yet. But reading is a language activity, and if you want to learn language, you'd better hear it, and

eventually, speak it. Too many moms and dads feel a bit dopey talking to a baby or young child, but studies have shown that exposing your child to a variety of words helps in her development of literacy skills.

4. Read to your kids.

I know everyone says this, but it really is a good idea — at least with preschoolers. One of my colleagues refers to this advice as the "chicken soup" of reading education. We prescribe it for everything. (Does it help? It couldn't hurt.) If a parent or caregiver can't read or can't read English, there are alternatives, such as using audiobooks; but for those who can, reading a book or story to a child is a great, easy way to advance literacy skills. Research shows benefits for kids as young as 9-months-old, and it could be effective even earlier than that. Reading to kids exposes them to richer vocabulary than they usually hear from the adults who speak to them, and can have positive impacts on their language, intelligence, and later literacy achievement. What should you read to them? There are so many wonderful children's books. Visit your local library, and you can get an armful of adventure. You can find recommendations from kids at the Children's Book Council website or at the International Literacy Association Children's Choices site, as well as free books online at other websites like Search Lit or Unite for Literacy.

5. Have them tell you a "story."

One great way to introduce kids to literacy is to take their dictation. Have them recount an experience or make up a story. We're not talking "Moby Dick" here. A typical first story may be something like, "I like fish. I like my sister. I like grandpa." Write it as it is being told, and then read it aloud. Point at the words when you read them, or point at them when your child is trying to read the story. Over time, with lots of rereading, don't be surprised if your child starts to recognize words such as "I" or "like." (As children learn some of the words, you can write them on cards and keep them in a "word bank" for your child, using them to review later.)

6. Teach phonemic awareness.

Young children don't hear the sounds within words. Thus, they hear "dog," but not the "duh"-"aw"- "guh." To become readers, they have to learn to hear these sounds (or phonemes). Play language games with your child. For instance, say a word, perhaps her name, and then change it by one phoneme: Jen-Pen, Jen-Hen, Jen-Men. Or, just break a word apart: chair… ch-ch-ch-air. Follow this link to learn more about language development milestones in children.

7. Teach phonics (letter names and their sounds).

You can't sound out words or write them without knowing the letter sounds. Most kindergartens teach the letters, and parents can teach them, too. I just checked a toy store website and found 282 products based on letter names and another 88 on letter sounds, including ABC books, charts, cards, blocks, magnet letters, floor mats, puzzles, lampshades, bed sheets, and programs for tablets and computers. You don't need all of that (a pencil and paper are sufficient), but there is lots of support out there for parents to help kids learn these skills. Keep the lessons brief and fun, no more than 5–10 minutes for young'uns. Understanding the different developmental stages of reading and writing skills will help to guide your lessons and expectations.

8. Listen to your child read.

When your child starts bringing books home from school, have her read to you. If it doesn't sound good (mistakes, choppy reading), have her read it again. Or read it to her, and then have her try to read it herself. Studies show that this kind of repeated oral reading makes students better readers, even when it is done at home.

9. Promote writing.

Literacy involves reading and writing. Having books and magazines available for your child is a good idea, but it's also helpful to have pencils, crayons, markers, and paper. Encourage your child to write. One way to do this is to write notes or short letters to her. It won't be long before she is trying to write back to you.

10. Ask questions.

When your child reads, get her to retell the story or information. If it's a story, ask who it was about and what happened. If it's an informational text, have your child explain what it was about and how it worked, or what its parts were. Reading involves not just sounding out words, but thinking about and remembering ideas and events. Improving reading comprehension skills early will prepare her for subsequent success in more difficult texts.

11. Make reading a regular activity in your home.

Make reading a part of your daily life, and kids will learn to love it. When I was nine years old, my mom made me stay in for a half-hour after lunch to read. She took me to the library to get books to kick off this new part of my life. It made me a lifelong reader. Set aside some time when everyone turns off the TV and the web and does nothing but read. Make it fun, too. When my children finished reading a book that had been made into a film, we'd make popcorn and watch the movie together. The point is to make reading a regular enjoyable part of your family routine.

Happy reading!

Sources:

Ritchie, S.J., & Bates, T.C. (2013). Enduring links from childhood mathematics and reading achievement to adult socioeconomic status. *Psychological Science*, 24, 1301-1308.

Karass J., & Braungart-Rieker J. (2005). Effects of shared parent-infant reading on early language acquisition. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 26, 133-148.

<< Previous Post
Next Post >>

TAGS:

"Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read." — Groucho Marx