

What the Experts Say

"Infants can see and hear at birth, and seem genetically programmed to prefer to look at faces and listen to human voices. Infants perceive the world through all of their senses, and transfer information from one sense to another. Children learn predominantly by association. If books are part of loving parent-child interactions from an early age, children will associate the presence of books with all of the positive feelings of being held and loved. Undoubtedly, these associations are encoded in a profound way in the child's developing brain.

Picture books provide an ideal context for parent-child interactions that are loving and stimulating.

Read to Your Bunny

When parents look at picture books with young children, they provide stimuli in multiple sensory modes - visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic (the sense of movement). Parents use more complex language when looking at books, and also language that is more attuned to the child's cues. Books also invite active participation. Active learning involves more brain areas; things learned actively are more likely to persist in memory and to facilitate other knowledge acquisition." - Dr. Robert Needleman, Division of Behavioral Pediatrics and Psychology, Rainbow Babies' and Children's Hospital, Cleveland, Ohio

"Pediatricians are trained to think in terms of prevention. Growing up without books is growing up deprived and with a deprivation that puts one at risk for failure. Just like many of the other risks and deprivations that children face in poverty, growing up without books is a sad loss in itself, but also a risk factor for larger, sadder losses. Double jeopardy. If we want our children to grow up reading, we have to do everything possible, and we have to do it as early as possible. Children either start school liking books and understanding what they are, or they start school way behind, set up for failure." - Dr. Perri Klass, Boston Medical Center, Co-Founder of "Reach Out and Read"

"My goal is that by the year 2000 giving information about reading to children will be as routine in pediatric practice as giving immunizations. Both are critically important to promoting children's health and

well-being." - Dr. Barry Zuckerman, Boston Medical Center, Co-Founder of "Reach Out and Read"

"If you want to raise readers, you must provide them with books as soon as humanly possible. This is a parental obligation on par with vaccinations." - Deirdre Donahue, children's book reviewer, USA Today

"We're luckier than the researchers who want to cure cancer and AIDS. We have the cure." - Rosemary Wells

OUTLINE OF BASIC FACTS ABOUT READING ALOUD TO CHILDREN, THE PRESCRIPTION FOR READING PARTNERSHIP, AND READ TO YOUR BUNNY BY ROSEMARY WELLS

Overview

* Our children are our future. They need to be highly literate and have critical thinking skills in order to compete in the 21st century. Children can't wait - they need to be armed with these skills now, or they will fail to thrive.

* Many things in our society threaten this. For example, children spend many hours per day watching TV, more time overall than they spend in school. TV teaches them to be passive receivers and consumers.

* Children's brains are not fully developed at birth. Recent pediatric research has pinpointed the importance of early experiences including touching, talking, smiling and reading in the physical growth of a child's brain in the first few years of life. This exposure creates neural circuits and connections in the brain that are the basis for language and learning.

* Books are a wonderful vehicle for this.

1) Unlike TV, books stimulate a child to form their own pictures in their mind, stimulating imagination.

2) They are a shared experience between parent and child, leading to better bonding and caregiving.

3) They invite an active response and communication.

4) They invite the child to repeat and practice language. Unlike a TV program which is ephemeral, books are permanent objects that can be enjoyed repeatedly.

5) When parents share books with young children, they cause children to associate books, reading, and language with a loving and nurturing environment.

6) Books instill cultural values and experiences beyond mass culture; they continue the age-old human need for storytelling. They furnish a child's mind with permanent ideas and images. Why pediatricians?

* Pediatricians are the first professionals trained in child development that most parents come in contact with, and the most influential source of advice and information concerning their children. Parents have repeated contact with their pediatrician and often built a trusting relationship with them. It's therefore beneficial that prescribing reading become embedded within the standard practice of pediatrics. The need is apparent because at present, fewer than half of parents in America read regularly to their child.

* Many pediatricians recognize this need and now recommend that reading to children be prescribed as part of routine "well child" pediatric care, right along with good nutrition, immunizations, advice about safety (e.g. car seats), regular check-ups, etc.

* There's already a model - the "Reach Out and Read" program started by a group of Boston pediatricians, early childhood specialists, and educators, now with more than 150 pediatric offices and clinics nationwide where books are distributed. The program includes volunteers reading aloud in the waiting room, advice about reading from the pediatrician, and books given out every six months.

The Prescription for Reading Partnership

* The Clinton administration - with its "America Reads Challenge" - has set the goal of every child reading by the end of third grade.

* As part of this, they've seen the opportunity to give national impetus to more "Reach Out and Read" - type programs involving pediatric prescription of reading.

* In April 1997, on the eve of a White House conference on Early Learning and the Brain, Hillary Clinton launched the "Prescription for Reading Partnership". The American Academy of Pediatrics will now work to officially incorporate the prescription for reading into standard practice of pediatric care. At the same time, people are invited to form partnerships to provide funding and specific resources to make books available.

Read to Your Bunny

* This book simply but powerfully conveys the reading message to parents. It's based on the campaign launched by the Association of Booksellers for Children (ABC) several years to encourage everyone to read to their child for twenty minutes a day.

* Scholastic published this book in retail in March, 1998. The book has also been offered in Scholastic's school book clubs and Scholastic's School Book Fairs. A paperback edition will be published in the retail market in August 1999.

* In Fall, 1997, Scholastic partnered with the American Booksellers Association (ABA) and the Association of Booksellers for Children (ABC) to create the first concrete example of a "Prescription for Reading" partnership in action. Scholastic provided more than 200,000 copies of a paperback edition at low cost to the ABA, which distributed them to 1,500 booksellers around the country along with prescription coupons. The bookseller got local pediatricians to use these coupons to "prescribe" to parents a free copy of this book, redeemable at the bookstore. The coupon listed other books for babies/toddlers available in bookstores. It also recommended visiting the library.

* Scholastic is interested in other future partnerships with any organization capable of underwriting print runs of 100,000 books or more. Currently we are discussing large-scale distributions of the book in Ohio, Florida, Georgia, Texas, and California.

* There are many exciting and creative ways this book could be used to reach people with the vital message of the importance of reading to your child.

Rosemary Wells
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