

17 IDEAS FOR CREATING A LITERATE HOME ENVIRONMENT

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Read to children. This is the single most important activity for developing reading readiness. Reading to children teaches them what reading is, provides them with positive attitudes and confidence, and increases their background knowledge and vocabulary. In early reading development, the parent structures storybook reading so that the child knows what it feels like to read a book with comprehension long before the child can perform the task alone. Being read to at home is positively correlated with language development, vocabulary development, children's eagerness to read, and success in beginning reading at school. Other studies have emphasized the importance of verbal interaction during the story, relating the elements of the story to the child's background, asking questions, pointing to words and pictures, and discussing the story afterwards.

Read favorite stories over and over. Repetition of the same story read to a child has many values. Children can enjoy the comfort of a familiar text. As children become more familiar with a story, they can focus their attention on different aspects of the text including print/spelling features, language patterns, vocabulary, plot, setting, characters, content, and theme.

Assisted reading is an intuitive technique I call the bicycle approach. When teaching a child to ride a bicycle, the parent initially does all of the balancing, steering, pushing, stopping, etc. Eventually, the child begins to gradually take over responsibility until he/she can do it alone. In assisted reading, the parent first reads a story to the child, maybe several times. Then parent and child read it together aloud, maybe several times. Finally, the child begins trying to read portions of the book alone. Assisted reading allows the child to experience the feeling and enjoyment of real reading.

Imitative reading is a technique where children "read a book" while listening to the words on a tape recorder or record player. Like assisted reading, this process allows children to imitate real reading by sitting down with a book, looking at and turning the pages, and getting meaning and enjoyment. Using a tape recorder, parents can record their children's favorite stories for imitative reading.

Read poetry to children. Reading a poem can be an event in which the listener and reader draw on images, feelings, and ideas stirred up by the words of the text. Poetry introduces children to the gamelike qualities of language. Nursery rhymes are an excellent vehicle for leading children to experience aesthetic qualities of print.

Talk with children. This is essential for building children's background knowledge, vocabulary, and ability to use language. Answering children's questions and explaining things to them increases their reliance on and use of language as a means of learning about the world.

Ask children questions. Simple everyday questions such as "What did you do in school today?" or "How did you like your trip downtown?" give children the opportunity to develop and practice their verbal ability while building background knowledge. Probing children's answers with follow-up questions gives them even more opportunity to think deeper and be more descriptive and expressive.

Provide children with a variety of real-life experiences. Children's comprehension of print depends largely on their comprehension of the world in general. Real-life experiences are the best way to build important background knowledge. Suppose a young child was reading a story about a cheetah but had never been to the zoo to see a cheetah or had never seen a picture of a cheetah. Even though that child might be able to "sound out" or pronounce the word cheetah, there would be little or no meaning attached to that word. We must bear in mind that only a small part of the information necessary for reading comes from the printed page.

Let children write real letters to real people. As parents write out their children's dictated letters to Grandma, those children learn that (a) what can be said can be written down (and vice versa), (b) that reading and writing are for communication, and (c) the left to right and top to bottom conventions of print. Children can also participate in real reading as their parents read the letters aloud. This approach helps the child to recognize the connection between the squiggles on the page, the sound of the words in the ear, and the actual personal, private experience. The words are now understood to 'stand for' that personal experience.

Let children help with following printed directions. Activities such as following a recipe during cooking, reading the "easy-to-follow directions for assembly" on a birthday present, or generating and using a grocery list are perfect real-life examples of reading to find out or accomplish something.

Take children for a reading walk downtown. Storefronts are generally full of eye-catching advertisements or logos. Such strolls can provide another perspective of what reading is and what reading is for. Because many logos are easy to learn as sight words, children can enjoy much success and satisfaction from recognizing such words.

Give young children paper, pencils, rulers, scissors, tape, etc. and let them experiment and play with the "tools of the trade."

Provide young children with manipulatives such as alphabet blocks and magnetic numbers and letters. Similar to providing paper and pencils, manipulatives can make children more familiar and comfortable with the symbols they'll be using to read. Manipulatives can also help reinforce the concept of non-reversability of letters.

Let children type on a computer or typewriter. This is a fun way for children to become familiar with letters and numbers, and it is also an effective means of teaching left-to-right and top-to-bottom orientation.

Take children to the library. Research shows that trips to the library are strongly related to children who are early readers. While you're there, check out some books for yourself.

Provide children with an appropriate reading role model. As children watch adults read, they not only learn what reading is and what reading is for, but they're also shown that reading is a wonderful source of relaxation and enjoyment. Numerous studies have echoed the importance of providing children with a proper reading role model and demonstrating indeed that reading is a thing of value and importance.

Praise, don't critique, children's first attempts at reading and writing. Learning to read and write is much like learning to talk. Parents intuitively praise rather than criticize their children's first attempts to pronounce "mama" or "dada." Just as we praise an infant's first attempts at speech, we should praise a young child's early attempts at reading and writing. An undue emphasis on accuracy can stifle an early reader's confidence and joy in reading.