



Ready to Read

Jennifer Woodruff, November 2008

Research tells us that children typically learn to read independently between 3 and 7 years old, with the majority around age 6. Many parents look at that range and immediately wonder what they can do to help their child read on the early end. This is the article for you! (But not in the way that you might think.)

As a former first grade teacher, I had all of the tools and techniques for teaching a child to read. When Dora, my oldest daughter, turned 4, I got out all of my tricks to see if she was interested. I had sight words, phonics work, and some controlled-vocabulary whole language readers. She was mildly interested (probably because I was paying more attention to her than usual) but I could tell that she was not ready to read independently. The same thing happened the following year, when she was 5 years old. The next summer, when she was almost 6, she developed a keen interest in earning money, so I let her earn money for her reading tasks—one cent per sight word that she completed, ten cents per workbook page, and so on. She was somewhat engaged and could read some very basic books, but she never chose to read by herself and did not seem to “get it” in the way that I have seen so many children do. I have to admit that I was a little disappointed.

Meanwhile, I continued reading to Dora on most days. I looked for a variety of books: nonfiction, fiction, fairy tales, etc. We often stopped to look at the pictures, talk about what would happen next, or explain words that she didn’t know. In contrast to our reading “work,” this was one of the most pleasurable times of day for her and for me.

One day when Dora was 6, I read one chapter of a book and left it upside down on her nightstand so she could go to sleep. About forty-five minutes later she called out, “Mom! I finished the book!” I could hardly believe it, so I asked her a few questions about the story, and it seemed like she really had read the book! She had experienced the reading breakthrough—at a time that was right for her and with a book that she loved.

A few days later I was listening to her read part of a book out loud. She came to the word “discouraged.” I did not think she would be able to read it—she didn’t have the level of phonics to decode the word, and it definitely wasn’t one of her sight words. She came to it, paused slightly, and read “dis . . . couraged.” I realized that since the word was part of her vocabulary—from our reading together—that it was easy for her to figure it out from the context. It made sense in the story and she knew that it sounded right.

Within a few months, Dora was a fluent reader who could read (unfortunately!) those annoying news stories in taxis and scary headlines on newsstand newspapers. And I am a much wiser mother, who actually believes it when I tell preschool parents to stick to reading great books with their children as much as possible, and to know that they are giving their children the best foundation for reading independently—when they are ready.