



On the Hazards of Teaching Reading (Part 2)

Preschool teaching in America is a horrible mess. Most of the products on the market are of the Mickey Mouse variety that view children as brainless idiots who have to be taught by cute little animals who are more intelligent than the children. Their main teaching tool are pictures. The more pictures the better. The bigger and more colorful the pictures the better. No one in preschool or primary education seems to know how children actually learn.



Four-year-olds are dynamos of self-learning. The capacity of their brains is expanding so rapidly that adults can barely keep up with it. They learn to speak their own language grammatically without the help of a certified teacher. Their vocabulary expands daily without any formal education. Their principal method of learning is play, which is why discerning parents buy toys that can feed that appetite for self-learning. Parents can also help by introducing new words and their meanings. They can also expand their child's cultural knowledge by playing good music, reading good poetry and stories, and taking their child to museums and historical sites.

But play is the most vital way children learn, and much of play is imitating what adults do. Much preschool learning is self-induced. An only child will learn to play by himself or herself. For example, my niece has a two-year-old son who knows how to turn on a stereo player and dance to the music all by himself. When I was a four-year-old, my sister and I used to pretend we were radio singers. It was great fun. In other words, children in normal, loving families are never bored. They are constantly entertaining themselves and learning about the world they live in.

Parents can foster creative play by giving their children Lego blocks so that they can build their own miniature skyscrapers and lots of other things; large sketch pads with crayons and colorful markers so that they can draw their own pictures; piano keyboards so that they can make their own music. Learning to play a musical instrument can start quite early as we see by how well child prodigies can play the piano or violin or cello or the flute.

There is also the matter of physical play: outdoor sports, Little League, basketball, baseball. Physically oriented parents will usually introduce their children to the joys of outdoor sports based on their own interests. Children love to go fishing with their fathers. Attending sports events is a great way to get a child interested in sports. Golf and tennis have become popular among children, especially if their parents are into golf and tennis. Swimming is a necessary skill for any child. Games, such as dominos, checkers, and chess can motivate a child to compete and enjoy winning. Of course, much depends on the interests of the parents themselves. A father who loves golf will surely want his son or daughter to excel in the sport. A mother who loves tennis can give her daughter tennis lessons.

In other words, much depends on the kind of parents a child has. We don't choose our parents, and some parents are not very good at being parents. But even loving parents may be culturally impoverished and not able to give their children the spiritual and cultural nourishment they need. Public schools, with their programs for the culturally deprived are supposed to help children



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acquire some cultural knowledge and literacy, but their programs never seem to work.

But I could see that my friends who had asked for my advice on choosing a preschool program were going to be excellent parents, deeply concerned for their child's welfare.

My own view is that we should take full advantage of the fact that a four-year-old is really a dynamo of language learning. That's because God endowed each new human being with the wonderful faculty of language. We are born with that faculty. No other species has that natural ability, even all of the cute little animals who manage to sound like human beings in so many movies. They don't have that faculty, but the popular culture is conveying the idea that they do. It's all very amusing, but I wonder how many children begin to feel that they are also animals, just like those on the screen.

God made human beings different for a reason. He wanted a species that could relate to Him through the instrument of language. And that is why God speaks to Adam in the Garden of Eden and tells Adam what He expects him to do: take dominion over all the other species, give them names, cultivate the earth, and enjoy the fullness of life with his mate, Eve. What tremendous gifts God gave his newly created human beings. And none of it would have been possible without the faculty of language which makes the science of dominion eminently possible.

God's gifts. Each one of us is endowed with those gifts, and we are expected to make the most of them, and to appreciate their source. And that sense of appreciation can be inculcated at the preschool level. Indeed, the Puritans made sure their children knew about God and His commandments. Can you read the Ten Commandments to a preschooler? I don't see why not. There is nothing in the Ten Commandments that is difficult to understand, even for a four-year-old. But none of it has anything to do with Mickey Mouse. The commandments are for human beings.

The Puritans were very serious people when it came to bringing up children. In their *New England Primer*, they taught the letter A with this statement: "In Adam's fall we sinned all." A pretty sober idea to convey to a child. In the 21st century, we don't want to confront children with the reality of man's fallen nature. That's why Mickey Mouse and associated cute little animals are supposed to lead the human child to an understanding that life is a bowl of cherries with no pits, let alone something as old-fashioned and obsolete as "sin."

But while the public schools don't teach about sin, they have their own ways of destroying a child's belief in the benevolent universe. They teach about death and dying, force kids to write their own obituaries, teach them about global warming and dying polar bears, and why they must at times murder some socially worthless people to enable others to survive on little food. At the same time the schools injure the child's brain with teaching methods deliberately created to thwart a child's intellectual growth. What comes out at the end of the process is someone with little confidence that life is worth living.

But thank God for the homeschool movement. It is saving several million children from the grim reaper of public education which denies God's great gifts. So I told my friends that before evaluating the program they were thinking of purchasing, here is what they could do on their own.

First teach the alphabet. Sounds pretty simple, but for a four-year-old, it is not. Suppose you wanted to learn to read Russian, you would have to study the Cyrillic alphabet, learn the names of the letters and then the sounds they stand for in the Russian language. No easy task for an adult. But there are several ways to teach a preschooler our alphabet. First, there is the alphabet song, which can be recited or sung as a poem: a-b-c-d, e-f-g, h-i-j-k, l-m-n-o-p, q-r-s, t-u-v, w, x-y-z. The reason why "w" is on a line by



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itself is that it is comprised of three syllables: dou-ble-u, and therefore should occupy its own line.

Children generally learn to recite the alphabet orally before they are able to identify all the letters by themselves. A good way to teach them to recognize the letters is have cards with the names of everyone in your family printed out, and have the child spell out each name: such as J-a-c-k, or K-a-t-h-y, or M-o-r-t-o-n. In that way they will become acquainted with all the letters. You should at the same time tell the child that there are capital, or upper case letters, and small, or lower case letters, and show him or her both kinds of letters.

The child need not know all of the letters perfectly before learning that the letters stand for sounds. The idea that letters are symbols of sounds should not be all that difficult to convey. After all children use a symbolic system in speaking. Their immaterial words stand for physical objects, feelings, ideas, etc. Spoken words are nothing more than sound symbols. So the idea that printed letters could also be symbols for speech sounds should not be all that difficult to understand.

We then start teaching the child to read by first introducing the short a, as in cat, with several consonants. In *Alpha-Phonics* I chose five consonants that, with the short a, became five one-syllable words: am, an, as, at, ax. I demonstrated the use of those five words so that the child would know that they are words that he himself has used. I then expanded those two-letter words into three-letter words by using all of the same consonants plus the letter h: Sam, man, has, sat, tax. From those few words I was able to create two sentences: Sam sat. Sam has an ax.

With that simple beginning the child was already reading two simple sentences. You can imagine how excited a child can get when he can already read sentences. Their conquest of the written language has just begun, and they are eager to learn more. That is how we motivate a child to learn to read, by showing how easy it can be and providing success at the beginning of the program. In about a year the child will have completed all 118 lessons and become a fluent reader able to enjoy the written word for the rest of his or her life.

As for recommending a homeschooling program for my friends, I decided that it was best for them to examine the variety of programs available and to choose the one they liked best, or to choose components of different programs and create their own tailor-made curriculum. If they needed a guide on teaching the three R's, they could use my book, *How to Tutor*, which deals with the teaching of the three primary subjects in a very straightforward, easy to understand way.

What is most desirable in homeschooling is to develop a strong and affectionate learning bond between parents and their children, a bond that will last a lifetime. When parents give their children over to complete strangers in public or even private schools for "education," they deprive themselves of the great experience of bonding through learning. Of course, parents do a lot of informal teaching just by being parents. But by actually teaching a complex symbolic system, such as the alphabet, or arithmetic, or history and geography children gain greater respect for the knowledge and ability of their parents.

Indeed, the learning bond between parents and children is one of the great benefits of homeschooling. And that's what they should aim for. Learning together is a great family experience, and as we know, many parents learn more than their children by actually doing the teaching.

In addition, my basic learning principles can be a guide to how to teach whatever it is you want your child to learn. First, do not allow the learner to develop a bad habit, because bad habits are difficult to get rid of. Second, do not teach anything that has to be unlearned later on. Third, never yell or show impatience with your child. Do not expect your child to learn faster than he or she can. Therefore,



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patience is the most important and productive ingredient in the teaching process. Remember, you are not running a race. Take all the time you need to convey what has to be learned. The result will be family happiness that lasts long after the time of formal education has ended, and it will be a model for teaching your grandchildren.

In short, the education process, of course, never ends. In fact, it is after formal learning that real education takes place, the learning that comes with pursuing a career. But good homeschooling will give your child a great foundation on which to build the knowledge and ability needed in the years ahead.



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