

Teaching Beginning Reading

Jessie Dykstra

Despite the challenges from radio and television, reading is here to stay. Our society is a reading society. Besides being an essential tool in many vocations and a part of some hobbies, reading often occupies our leisure hours. As Protestant Reformed teachers we also know that reading will play a very important role in the life experience of a covenant child. He will desire to read the Word of God thoroughly. He may want to study the many explanations and discussions about the Bible and the doctrines developed from the truths found there. Reading is a very highly valued achievement.

No child should undertake reading at any age level without mental readiness, social-emotional readiness, and physical readiness. The child should be developed in his sensory, particularly his visual, apparatus. He should be mature in motor skills. He should have experiences and interests that will arouse the desire for reading. He should be able to memorize by rote. He should be able to follow directions. He should be able to recall the events of a story. Readiness is usually a complex product of constitutional and environmental factors. It is usually acquired by maturation and by being surrounded with rich language experiences.

Children should not begin reading before they have reached a mental age of at least six or six and one-half years and have demonstrated a readiness to master beginning skills in reading. To start a child before he is ready does not produce proper reading development. He may be forced to concentrate so hard on word recognition that he cannot comprehend the ideas those words are supposed to convey. He may memorize sentences without noticing the smaller similarities and differences in the words that make up the sentences. He may not comprehend the idea that one or more letter symbols represent a sound. He may even become discouraged with lack of success and lose interest, cease trying, and escape involving himself in the efforts and tensions of striving for accomplishments he was not able to attain. The most effective way to help children cope with failure is to ensure that they meet with success in overcoming obstacles. Success breeds success.

When systematic instruction is started, a preprimer that presents a small and simple vocabulary with a great deal of repetition should be selected. The words of the preprimer should be introduced gradually in blackboard and chart reading. The rate at which the group advances should be determined by the progress of the group rather than by an arbitrary standard. At this stage the less mature child may reach a rather crucial point, and the teacher is very alert to notice if any child is simply repeating something he has heard instead of associating meaningful words with certain groups of printed symbols.

The rate of progress, by this time, usually to divide the children into smaller groups according to their need for extra practice or their ability to increase their rate of advance. The sight vocabulary should continually be carefully controlled, and these words should be analyzed systematically. In this way these words do not become independent entities, easily confused, but each word is related to many other words in form and meaning.

We do not rely upon only one method of teaching word perception and recognition. Instead, we try to help the children to develop four or five ways of identifying or recognizing words for themselves. If a child depends only on configuration and context, he either recognizes the word or he is helpless — there is nothing more he can do. When he has letter sounding to fall back on, he can always try to help himself.

Some of the methods of attacking new words or partly new words are these: 1. By configuration or general shape. 2. Some peculiarity in the word. 3. By use of a picture clue. 4. By use of a context clue. 5. By recognition of a familiar part in a larger word, where such a technique applies. 6. By phonetic synthesis. 7. By phonetic analysis. 8. By structural analysis — knowing common prefixes and suffixes, recognizing syllables and other parts.

Comprehension is the part of the skill of reading that makes it worth what it is. Therefore children should be taught to think about what they are reading. They should be able to follow written instructions, and to answer questions about the material they have read. Experience charts and other original group compositions bring reading close to the child's life, and thereby help to give the experience of reading real meaning to the child. The teacher should check the vocabulary of experience stories with basic word lists. By careful checking, she can select the most common words and phrases for mastery and disregard the occasional and unusual word that may have been used because of its immediate interest.

If an abundance of reading material that is on the child's level is available to him, and if the rest of the family show an interest in reading, the child should develop a functional reading ability. He should read for information and pleasure.

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