Any Child Can Read Better

Developing Your Child's Reading Skills Outside the Classroom

HARVEY S. WIENER

Second Edition

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HARVEY S. WIENER

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The end, at last, to the mystery—
I learned to read
When you read with me
When
you
read with me.

For
Blanche Koster Gold
We miss you, Mom

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xi

1 Introduction: YOUR CHILD CAN READ BETTER WITH YOUR HELP 3

2 Mining Word Meanings 11

3 Words, The Magic Kingdom 43

4 Reading Warm-Ups 59

5 "Just the Facts, Ma'am": READING FOR INFORMATION 78

6 Words and Pictures: 111
USING VISUAL AIDS

7 The Reading-Writing Connection 130

8 Finding Secrets: 144
INFERENCE

9 The Crystal Ball: 167
PREDICTING OUTCOMES AND DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

10 Faraway Views: 194
GENERALIZING

11 Moms and Dads as Reading Helpers: 219
GOOD BOOKS THROUGH THE GRADES

INDEX 271

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ANY CHILD CAN READ BETTER

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1

Introduction

YOUR CHILD CAN READ BETTER WITH YOUR HELP

The Home Reading Option

Today's parents have a lively interest in assisting their children as learners, and this interest has spawned a plethora of books on home reading programs. It's natural to raise this question, then: why yet *another* book for helping children read at home? Surely the bookstore and library shelves are groaning with volumes that can help you create a "home schoolroom," enough to produce a nation of advanced readers. Why yet another book?

For good reasons, believe me.

Obviously, most parents want to help their children learn. A couple of years ago, Professor Joyce Epstein at Johns Hopkins surveyed the parents of more than 250 Baltimore children. Her findings, reported in *The New York Times*, showed that kids had higher reading scores if parents supported their youngsters' efforts at home. What's even more interesting is that although mothers

and fathers wanted to involve themselves actively in their children's learning, very few knew just what to do. A shocking eighty per cent reported that they didn't have a clue about where to begin in helping their children succeed in school. With this apparent insecurity, many moms and dads are reaching for books in an effort to learn what they don't know. Hence, all the how-to-help-your-child read productions.

However, unlike *Any Child Can Read Better,* most "home learning" books address parents of toddlers and preschoolers and attempt to create a race of superkids who can read almost before they can walk. Teach-your-child-to-read books concentrate on turning the home nursery into a classroom—reading drills with flash cards, oversized words pinned as labels on familiar objects, interminable sessions on alphabet skills, phonetics, sight vocabulary, and sounding-out words. Too many books for parents of young learners have turned on the pressure and have turned off the pleasure for mothers and fathers as guiders and shapers of learning experiences.

Moms and dads are not drill sergeants. Home isn't boot camp.

If you're the mother or father of a preschooler, unless you're home learning parents who won't send your children to school in any case, *don't* teach your son or daughter how to read. Leave that job for preschool classrooms, kindergartens, and the primary grades. Sure, create a home environment in which words are important, in which reading is cherished, in which pencil and paper are available and fun to use. Read to and with your child whenever you can; talk with your child about words and books—about anything. I've laid out my position on these issues in other books, particularly *Any Child Can Write* (revised edition, Oxford, 1990), and *Talk with Your Child* (Viking, 1988).

Why shouldn't you teach your baby to read? First, the job is tough to do properly. Teachers and scholars give their lives to instructing children in the mechanics of reading: how to use the alphabet, how to say letters alone and in combinations, how to pronounce words, how to distill meaning from print. No matter how dedicated you are, it's difficult to achieve in your living room what teachers try to achieve throughout the grades. Home learning moms and dads, who for philosophical, religious, and social reasons provide all instruction at home, really have their work cut out for them!

Second, if you become more of your child's teacher, you risk being less of a parent, and you can strain the already delicate relations in a household. It's awfully tough to make your child feel that you love him when you're seething with impatience at his restlessness, at his off-and-on attitude toward books, at his stubborn refusal to sound out a word some days. Simply living with our families can create pressures; burdening often fragile home environments with classroom tactics can make everyone miserable.

I'm not denying that innumerable opportunities exist for teaching and learning at home. In my books I advocate and endorse the contributions moms and dads can make to learning. Yet you must remember that your primary role in your child's life is as a loving parent, not as a teacher of school skills. Being a parent and a subject skills teacher for your own child is like oil and water: they don't mix even under very good conditions.

The third and most important reason to resist teaching your child the rudiments of reading is that she's probably going to learn them pretty well without your help. Why waste your energies here when you could be stimulating more productive learning? She'll get the letter combinations and the alphabet; she'll learn useful sight vocabulary; she'll read successfully on a basic level.

As I've suggested, what many parents try to do at home, teachers do pretty well in the formal classroom setting.

Besides, little scientific data support the claim that kids who learn to read at a very young age are, in the long run, any better off than their later-learning peers. Youngsters level off: by the time they reach the third grade, those who learned to read early, before experiencing school, and those who learned only through classroom instruction, are very much in the same ball park.

Here from David Elkind, Professor of Child Study at Tufts University, and a leading authority on young people's learning, is food for thought on teaching school subjects to kids at home. Elkind is shocked at how teachers, parents, administrators, and legislators are developing for infants and young children the kinds of educational programs aimed quite specifically at school-age youngsters. "When we instruct children in academic subjects at too early an age," he says in his landmark book *Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk*, "we miseducate them; we put them at risk for short-term stress and long-term personality damage for no useful purpose. There is no evidence that such early instruction has lasting benefits, and considerable evidence that it can do lasting harm."

In light of all these observations, let me repeat the question I posed earlier: Why yet *another* reading book?

When elementary school teachers across the grades complain that youngsters don't know how to read, they don't mean that children cannot decode words or unpuzzle basic syntax. Rather, they mean that children cannot extract vital meanings, cannot generalize, classify, predict outcomes, decipher figurative expressions—in short, cannot perform the kinds of intellectual tasks that mark the critical reader.

That's where you come in. And that's why I've written this book for you. Very few among the countless

how-to-help-your-child-read-and-learn books intelligently address the parents of school-age children who are trying to make their way through the maze of assignments and exercises related to classroom reading. I've written this book to help you help your child as she's learning and practicing reading at school where your efforts can supplement daily academic instruction. You won't find any information here on how to teach alphabet sounds and phonics for the very young. You will find information about assisting your child as she reads a classroom textbook or some other class assignment.

That's one reason for *Any Child Can Read Better.*

Another is that children of the many young families of the mid-eighties are now growing up. Yesterday's toddlers and preschoolers now are filling the primary-grade classrooms of America. What you might have learned from other books about helping preschoolers will not stretch far enough as your son or daughter advances through the grades. Still, if you are a parent of one of these grade-school youngsters, you're probably no less anxious today about your child's success than you were when he or she attended nursery school, day care programs, or courses at the museum, the music center, or the sports academy. If at this moment you're a parent of an infant or a toddler, it won't be long before you're looking for ways to help her with her school learning.

As a parent, you need a book on how to help your maturing child survive as a reader in school and out. Learning to read well and for different purposes is an ongoing, organic process. Every page your child reads provides an opportunity to sharpen reading skills, and kids need help in extracting the most possible meaning from print. To complicate matters, once kids have to spend six hours a day at a classroom desk, teachers start piling on homework. Very often the assignments involve language activities, vocabulary building, and reading

comprehension. These home activities regularly mystify children. "Reading" homework—especially when the disciplines expand to such areas as science and social studies—invariably draws parents into its web when kids wonder aloud: How do I do this? What does the teacher want? What does this mean?

I want to restate an important point I made earlier. Many of today's elementary school youngsters have mastered the rudiments of reading. By that I mean that they know how to recognize basic words, and they know the phonetic and syntactical rules for identifying many unfamiliar words. Those who do not know how to "decode" when they enter kindergarten or first grade generally learn the skill in a reasonable amount of time. That is, they meet the goals set by the school for reading progress.

Once kids know the basics of reading, a teacher's work really begins. Yet, try as they may, teachers cannot provide the guidance and stimulation that will advance every child's reading excellence. Classes are too large. Too much content in too many disciplines veers classes off the reading track. Kids' learning experiences vary so widely that typical front-of-class teaching can put off many youngsters. Thus, you, the parent, serve a valuable role as reading support agent, and your home and surrounding community, even more than the school, serve as reading laboratories for advancing skills.

Building Home Reading

This book will show you how to make your child a critical reader in school, at home, and in the society at large. As I've said, this is not a how-to-teach-your-child-to-read book. Too many of these painfully prescriptive volumes already strain our bookshelves. I intend to help you, concerned mothers and fathers, move to the next stage

of your child's intellectual development, in which your home or the preschool setting is not the primary learning environment.

I offer here practical steps for forming essential skills. I'm building on almost thirty years' experience as a teacher of reading and writing from elementary school through college and as a parent for eighteen years. Three lively, inquisitive kids helped me understand the needs of learners at home, as my kids' teachers gave formal classroom instruction, hewing to required hours and mandated curriculum.

I have identified for you the skills that I believe contribute most to critical reading and have organized the chapters of *Any Child Can Read Better* according to those skills. Thus, I'll give you a brief overview of some basic strategy that a novice reader must master; and then I will show you how to use home conversation and relaxed questioning to lead your child to gain command of the essential skills. I'll also show you some typical reading materials that children are likely to bring home in elementary school, and I'll show you how to direct your child's attention to a text's core meaning.

As I point out the necessary skills, I'll draw regularly on the nonverbal world, the world of pictures, signs, advertisements, and supermarket products to assert the potential and power of visual literacy in helping your child master reading. Knowing how your youngster applies an important skill in nonlinear print settings makes your role as reading coach much easier than you might have thought. By connecting those skills with a book's demands, you can use creative, relaxed discussion to draw meanings out of print material. By talking with your child about school-based home readings, you can tease out the careful, intelligent exploration that teachers expect from their pupils but have little opportunity to nurture.

If you have a school-age child at home, I'll bet you've been wondering about what you can do to help your child learn. What, for example, do you do when your first grader brings home a worksheet on word families, when your second grader brings home a photocopied story with questions, when your fifth-grader brings home a science book with a reading assignment to complete by the next morning? How can you help your son or daughter understand the words and ideas and to build on them to advance thought and comprehension? What books can you steer your child toward as interest in reading expands? How can you talk about key books at home in order to heighten both your child's competence as a reader and his or her love for the printed page?

If you're a parent who wants to see her child succeed in today's classroom, *Any Child Can Read Better* will help you answer those questions. It will help you continue to influence your child's learning without increasing stress or anxiety in the home. I do not believe in high-pressured teaching. I do not believe in transforming parents into professors. With comfortable conversation and enjoyable exercises that tap children's native abilities, you can help your child practice the critical thinking and reading skills that guarantee success in the classroom and beyond.

Let's have fun. And what better place to begin than with words, the currency of our language and reading kingdom?

2

Mining Word Meanings

Quick now, what's your knee-jerk advice when your child is reading and he asks you the definition of a tough word he can't figure out?

"Look it up in a dictionary," right?

It's bad advice. It's particularly bad advice for developing readers struggling through a thorny selection and trying to make sense of it.

Don't get me wrong—I have nothing against dictionaries. I love dictionaries. They are indispensable language-learning, language-checking tools. Writers, always aiming for precision amid perplexing word choices, could not survive long without dictionaries. For readers, too, dictionaries are important, but not in the ways we typically advise children to use them.

Certainly, researchers and very sophisticated readers do use dictionaries as side-by-side companions to books. Watch a thoughtful poetry student reading something by Milton or Housman or Browning and you'll see regular expeditions into a dictionary to check nuances and alternative meanings. For the most part, though, established readers will use a dictionary to check an unfamiliar

word *after* they read a selection and can't figure out the word's meaning.

Unfortunately, most classroom dictionary work focuses on having kids look up lists of words. Most often, those words are not connected to any reading exercise; and without a context for word exploration, the activity is an utter waste of time. When the words do relate to content, children are asked to look up the lists of words before reading. Sure, knowing definitions of potentially difficult words can remove some obstacles to comprehension, and I support telling youngsters in advance what a few really difficult or technical *key* words mean—words whose definitions cannot easily be derived from the context (more on this later) but whose meanings are essential for understanding. Still, you don't want your child slaving over a list of tough words, looking them up and writing definitions, as a necessary precursor to a reading activity. He'll be bored and exhausted by the time he starts the first sentence!

In fact, most of us don't often take the advice we give freely to our children. When was the last time that you looked up words prior to reading? When was the last time you stopped reading a novel or an article—just closed the book or the newspaper—to look up a word that puzzled you? I'm willing to bet that you can't remember. In fact, odds are you don't use a dictionary much to check uncommon words that pop up as you read.

And for good reason. You don't want to stop reading because you risk losing your own train of thought as well as the writer's. If you're engrossed in a good book, you don't want to interrupt your pleasure to hunt meanings in a dictionary. And often a hunt it really is—checking guide words, figuring out alphabetical placements, reading numbered definitions, testing a few out in the sentence containing the unfamiliar word. Although most

of us can survive occasional sidetracking steps like these with just minor annoyance and can reenter our reading relatively unblemished, youngsters are enormously taxed by the process. It's so difficult for them to return to their text after they've taken a dictionary detour.

Stop telling your child to use a dictionary if he asks about an unfamiliar word. Instead, show him how to use one of the strategies you really do use for determining meanings when you meet an unfamiliar word.

In this chapter, I want to uncover some of those strategies. By now, you are using them almost instinctively and probably have not brought them to conscious awareness. I also want to explore realistic ways to help your sons and daughters learn and use new vocabulary to sharpen their reading skills.

Learning Words from the Beginning

Let's first go back to your child's preprint word learning for a moment. You should know that your youngster starts to accumulate vocabulary from the earliest moments of wakefulness in the crib. You determine your baby's meaning by interpreting and explaining the sounds she makes. As your infant grows in years, you probably engage in what speech experts call *self-talk*, where you describe what you're doing as you're doing it; and *parallel-talk*, where you describe action by action what your child is doing. You enhance your child's word knowledge by bringing linguistic meaning to the disparate sensory experiences surrounding him.

Regular sustained conversation with children even as young as six weeks starts the all-important process of language socialization—but it also begins the lifelong lesson of learning words and what they mean. Thus, talking with your child regularly and listening to her share thoughts, ideas, and impressions lay the corner-

stone for the vocabulary storehouse that a healthy learner builds and develops straight into adulthood.

Another influence on word knowledge is the reading you do with your child as she grows. Another is your child's independent reading of books at home and in the library. Here, too, we're talking about the earliest stages of contact with print as well as the later, more sustained contact with books.

Even your supermarket shopping excursions with your baby sitting in the grocery cart is a word-building exercise as you drift up and down the aisles reading signs of sale items and labels from cans and boxes on the shelves. "Yes, those are the cookies that are on sale. See the sign?"—here you're pointing to the letters that make the word *cookies*. "And this word, *SALE*. Let's pick out the Hydroxes from all the others on the shelf." Your baby is reading when she pulls that box of cookies into her lap. She may be using only the visual clues—familiar colors or packaging, even graphic print layouts—without really reading the letters to make out the words *Hydrox* or *Oreos*. But she is reading nonetheless, and your encouragement in these informal settings go further than any drill exercises designed to teach words and their meanings.

The sooner that books enter your child's life, the sooner you direct her down the road to advanced word knowledge.

The all-picture, no-word cloth books in the nursery contribute to vocabulary growth as you and your baby construct stories from the illustrations, pointing to a truck or a rose or a blue jay, for example, and naming it. When you pore over a newspaper or magazine with your son or daughter in your lap and together identify what you see in the photographs and drawings, you are establishing the vital connection between print and meaning.

Families that emphasize reading's joy and value

from infancy onward are families that send youngsters to school ready to learn from their teachers the all-important decoding strategies—that is, the basic technical skills for making meaning from print. As I've stated before, these include being able to recognize the letters as well as knowing the sounds made by letters individually and in groups, and the words produced when sounds are strung together. The skills also include knowing the object or idea that the sound clusters refer to. Regarding this last point, of course, the more experiences you can expose your child to, the easier it will be for her to connect a word with its referent. A child who had never seen a blimp might be able to read the word with ease, but she might not have the slightest notion of what the object being signified by the letters was.

My point in reviewing some of these principles of language growth is once again to assure you that most children—yours included, certainly—have the basic equipment to learn reading mechanics. It's the rare child who does not enter school with sufficient command of words for describing and explaining her immediate world and her inner imaginings. And I'll bet that your child's vocabulary is strong enough to help her read the primers and other available reading materials, no matter what instructional method her classroom teacher uses. Those of you teaching your children at home will find the same issues true with your youngsters. Despite its apparent complexity as an intellectual and conceptual task, learning to read in its early manifestations is not an overwhelming problem for most young children.

Getting Unhooked on Phonics

No doubt you've seen and heard the incredible assertions for *Hooked on Phonics*, a home reading program that claims to teach your child to read in record time through

a series of audiotapes and print short stories. For $229.95, promotional materials state, your child learns the ABC's and moves to phonics to learn reading—all this to musical accompaniment that will hold your youngster's attention. He practices by reading 100 brief fictional works and answering multiple choice questions about the readings. Sales for *Hooked on Phonics* have reached extraordinary heights; and, if your community library is like mine, it has weeks of backlogged reserve orders on the program for home borrowing.

Wait. Before you write a check for the miracle snake oil, let's have a look at the complaints about *Hooked on Phonics*. In the first place, the company's claims are extravagant and apparently unjustified, at least as far as the law is concerned. The ads have said that the program can

> quickly and easily teach those with reading problems or disabilities to read, regardless of the problem, and will enable those users to improve significantly their reading levels and classroom grades; that the program can teach those with dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, and other learning disabilities to read; that the program can teach reading in a home setting without a teacher or tutor; that the program effectively teaches reading comprehension skills; and that the program has helped nearly one million students to learn at home.

Would you buy such unrestrained allegations? Well, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) didn't. In December 1994, the FTC reached a settlement with Gateway Educational Products Ltd., distributor of the materials—no more misleading claims about educational profit for kids unless Gateway "can substantiate the claims with competent and reliable evidence." As I write this, no convincing evidence has yet emerged.