

Developmental Considerations & Preparation

An excerpt from *Cursive First* by Elizabeth FitzGerald

Most parents want their children to excel in the academics. Homeschooling parents experience great pressure for their children to measure up to or exceed their public or privately schooled peers, perhaps as a way of validating their educational choice for their children. Well-meaning grandparents may ask, "Shouldn't Tommy know his letters by now?" Rather than using others as the standard for when our children should start in a Language Arts program like *Spell to Write and Read*, let's look at what the child is telling us about how ready he is for this undertaking. If we start too soon, we could frustrate and exasperate him. On the other hand, we don't want to delay too long so that he tries to write on his own and picks up bad habits that are difficult, if not impossible, to retrain later.

1. **DEVELOPMENTAL READINESS INDICATORS** A child's development reveals much about his readiness. Following are some important prerequisite skills needed for learning how to read and write. Observe and evaluate the child to determine if he is able to:

- demonstrate a teachable attitude, a willingness to learn and listen
- use one hand consistently for holding a fork, writing, and coloring activities
- demonstrate interest in paper and pencil seatwork
- demonstrate an interest in letters and numbers
- maintain attention to a directed seat activity for 15 minutes
- demonstrate age-appropriate development in fine motor coordination (cut with scissors, lace beads, color with crayons or colored pencils, control a pencil during tracking activities)
- hold a pencil with the correct "tripod" grip
- demonstrate understanding of terms such as *above, straight, over, under, next to, followed by, before, after, tall, short, round, top, middle, bottom, across, diagonal, horizontal*
- read numerals and find them instantly on a clock face
- touch to places or items on a page with a pointed finger when given oral instructions
- demonstrate understanding of left-to-right and top-to-bottom sequence with fingerpointing across and down a page

2. **PHONEMIC AWARENESS** Among the skills a child needs to learn to read, *phonemic awareness* ranks extremely high. This term refers to the child's awareness that the speech stream is made up of words which in turn are made up of individual sounds. The word *cat*, for example, is made up of three distinct sounds: /c/-/a/-/t/.¹ This can be difficult for young children as it requires that they redirect their focus from the *content of language* to the *sounds of speech*. Many little ones only think of a furry animal when one says "cat", and have no clue as to what is meant by the word's "sounds". They have to learn this skill. **Research is showing that good phonemic awareness skills are a determining factor in a child's ability to learn to read (Lyon, 1998).** Do not overlook the importance of this step or skim over it too quickly!

Spell to Write and Read includes an entire chapter dedicated to helping the teacher assess a child's understanding of phonemic awareness, ideas for how to help build this in the student, and other ways to help prepare the youngster for learning to read and write (see *SWR* pp 20-22). One particularly fun book and tape set is *Oo-pples and Boo-noo-noos* (Yopp & Yopp, 1996), but there is an abundance of resources on the market today to help the teacher work on this crucial skill.

3. **BRAIN MATURATION & REPETITION** Brain maturation is yet another issue to consider in regards to children's readiness. Some children mature faster than others. This has nothing to do with their intellect or their future options in life. Rather, it has to do with a predetermined and God-given timetable within each child. Developmental readiness for reading will vary just like walking, getting teeth, etc.

¹ Letters within slash marks refer to sounds spoken in words.

Reading and writing can't be rushed just like teeth can't be made to grow. Trying to force academic skills before the child's brain, cognitive understanding, and manual dexterity are ready proves to be an exercise in futility. Children also need repetition in order to succeed. If the teacher believes the child is ready, the concepts need to be presented with abundant repetition. If the child seems to be just not "getting it", then it may be best to put the lessons on hold for a little while to let the child mature a bit more before trying again. It's amazing how much of a difference even a month can make for some children!

4. TYPICAL AGES FOR READING & WRITING READINESS Some parents have wanted to use *Spell to Write and Read* to teach their four- and early five-year-olds. It is fine to try teaching children this age, but the writing needs to be an integral part of instruction for invaluable multisensory learning. Mrs. Sanseri recommends beginning her program with Kindergarten or 1st graders (five- and six-year-olds). Some children are ready before this while many are not. If the little one demonstrates he is not quite ready for the paper and pencil activities, other mediums can be used for the writing tasks (see #8 below). It may be better to spend time pouring over books with the child and exploring the world around him than to expend energy when the child simply shows no interest in learning writing skills. When he is developmentally primed and reading instruction commences, he will have a broader base of knowledge to facilitate his reading comprehension.

5. ANTICIPATORY TEACHER TRAINING Familiarity with the phonograms and the methodology for teaching *Spell to Write and Read* prepares the teacher to guide a young child who demonstrates interest in letters and the written word. The child needs to be correctly taught from the beginning. This is very important as **it is very difficult to unteach bad habits once they are formed, especially in penmanship!** My oldest son could recognize and name the first 26 phonograms by the time he was four simply by looking at the cereal box or a sign on a building and asking, "What's that letter?" Because I knew the phonograms, I could answer him in the way I would eventually teach him how to read.

6. PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES Following are some suggestions of activities to do when the child is not yet ready or is still developing some needed skills.

- Work on Phonemic Awareness.
- Teach the child how to say the individual sounds of phonograms as he demonstrates interest in print around him.
- Teach him how to properly sit at a table, and how to hold the paper and pencil.
- Teach him how to recognize his written name.
- Teach the child how to write his numerals 0-9.
- Have the child serve as Mommy's helpers during an older sibling's lessons--it is amazing what they can pick up!
- Read the *Teaching Home* magazine² September/October 1998 edition for an entire section on working with prereaders.
- Play lots of phonogram and language games³.
- Read, read, read to the child! Do not limit the preschooler to picture books. Gradually expose him to chapter books which require him to think and imagine with language alone and no picture cues.

7. GROSS & SMALLER MOTOR KINESTHETIC ACTIVITIES *Kinesthesia* is a term referring to the body's perception of movement. A precursor to the child's ability to write is his ability to "feel" where and how his body parts are moving (shoulder, arm and hand). The following activities help develop general gross motor coordination which in turn will lay the groundwork for smooth fine muscle control.

- Draw large shapes on a blackboard.

²The *Teaching Home Magazine*, Box 20219, Portland, OR 97294 (503) 253-9633, www.TeachingHome.com.

³The Phonogram Fun Packet is a set of eight different games to help reinforce learning phonograms and spelling rules. Other game packets for math and geography can be added on to this basic set. All these packets are available from www.swrtraining.com or from www.beallslearninggames.com

- Draw shapes or phonograms (after instruction) on the sidewalk with chalk or with water and a paintbrush, using straight a wrist and a straight arm.
- Write phonograms in the air with a straight wrist and a straight arm.
- Make large arm movements with finger-painting.
- Mold clay into snakes, shapes & letters.
- Squeeze rubber balls or clothes pins.
- Climb over and pull on things.
- Play games which include hopping, running, balancing or skipping.

8. TACTILE & KINESTHETIC MULTISENSORY ACTIVITIES Once instruction in proper letter formation has begun, multisensory experiences powerfully reinforce the reading and writing skills! Have the child practice drawing shapes and writing phonograms:

- with the index finger in a shallow pan or box containing salt, sand, or cornmeal
- on paper with the clockface, first using the finger to trace and then with a pencil, colored pencil, or a marker
- on the chalkboard or white board, using his index finger to erase what the teacher has written
- using finger paints
- in the air with a straight wrist and straight arms⁴
- on the teacher's back and the teacher on his
- on the outside of a sealed ziploc bag with colored gel inside; put this bag on top of a paper plate with the letter written on it
- with jello or pudding on a paper plate with the letter written on it
- in readiness workbooks that work on skills to develop control of the writing tool, *not on writing letters*
 1. tracing shapes
 2. tracking (keeping pencil between two lines from one side of the page to the other)
 3. matching pictures
 4. I highly recommend the *Developing the Early Learner*⁵ series of books for readiness workbooks and *ReadyWriter*⁶ for pencil-control activities

Start when the child is demonstrating an interest in learning to read and write, when he is ready to learn from instruction, and when he demonstrates readiness in the areas mentioned above. Usually, around five years or six years of age a child should be ready. Remember that girls tend to be ready earlier and are better able to handle fine motor tasks than boys. There is always the exceptional boy who will prove this wrong, but for the most part, girls will develop faster than boys in these areas. Follow the instructions for a beginning student found in *Spell to Write and Read* and adjust to the needs of the child. Younger children will probably have to go a bit slower, but **the teacher must avoid getting bogged down in teaching the letters and expecting complete mastery before moving into spelling instruction.** Do not drag out the introduction of phonograms, or the child will lose interest! Remember, phonics should be first and fast (see *SWR* page 13). Mastery in writing, in learning the phonograms, and in spelling and reading will come as work is continued through the program.

⁴ Air writing and writing on someone else's back with a straight arm and wrist are gross motor skills and are only possible with joined writing

⁵ Bibeau, Simone, *Developing the Early Learner: The Complete Perceptual Growth Program*. Perception Publications, 1982. Available from Sonlight Curriculum, Ltd. (303) 730-6292, www.sonlight.com. Note: If you're ordering from Sonlight's online catalog, do a search for "Developing the Early Learner."

⁶ Myers, Edwin C. and Nellie M. Myers, *ReadyWriter*. Providence Project, 1989. Also called *Learning Vitamins for Stylus Skills and Beginning Penmanship*. Available from the publishers: www.providenceproject.com.