



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY READING READINESS?

Nikki Darling-Kuria

For the last several days, Janet had been anxious about her upcoming parent-teacher conference with Sam, 18-month-old Abby's father. Sam had recently brought in alphabet flash cards because he wants Abby to learn to read. Janet completely understood Sam's desire to support his daughter's early language skills, but she was not comfortable with the method or the timing.

Janet brought her concerns to the director, Maria. "How can I help Sam understand that before Abby can read, she needs to have the strong foundational skills that come before letter recognition? You know we work on those skills every day. We tell stories, we talk to the children in ways that introduce them to new words and more complex use of language, and we read aloud from books and printed pages so they get the connection between words on a page and spoken language. Our training has taught us that flash cards for children so young are not effective in building toddlers' language skills. Their brains are not ready for rote memorization. But how do I say that to Sam so I support his interest without sounding critical?"

Maria understood the dilemma. She had been feeling the same pressure from other parents at the center. She said, "Have you asked Sam why he wants Abby to learn her ABCs now? Maybe the conference can be a time for you to hear about his hopes and goals for Abby. Then you can connect to those goals and share what you know about early language and literacy development. You can help him see that you and he are partners in supporting Abby's language learning. One resource you could share with him is the new parent guide the state just published, the one that goes along with the state infant and toddler early learning guidelines you use in the toddler room."

Janet read the parent guide and decided to begin the conference by asking about Sam's goals and expectations for Abby, as Maria suggested. It crossed her mind that Sam was probably using the best technique he knew of with the flash cards. If he was interested in discussing early language development and understanding how to support it, she would share the guide and explain the practices she uses with the children and connect those to emerging language skills.

SOME FAMILIES, wanting what is best for their children, believe that being able to read as early as possible is the best predictor of academic success later. After all, there is a constant bombardment of product advertisements promising that *any* child *any* age can become the next Einstein if only the right combination of expensive toys and DVDs are purchased. It's easy to get caught up in the promises that new, better products will make smarter children. No wonder Janet and Sam have different ideas about what will work best!

Janet needs Sam's help in understanding his perspective, and Sam needs help in interpreting his observations about Abby's emerging language skills. Janet wants to establish a partnership with Sam that will benefit Abby's development. Her plan is to listen to and respond to Sam and share her knowledge about early development with him so that they can come to an agreement about what each can do to support Abby's emerging language skills.

Janet reflected on a recent infant brain development workshop she had attended to help her identify some talking points for the conference with Sam. Janet had learned that memorizing is often mistaken as learning. In fact, rote memorization is a lower level skill compared to skills developed through complex language use, which emerges in the context of meaningful relationships that motivate communication of thoughts and feelings (Hirsh-Pasek, Michnick Golinkoff, & Eyer 2003). She knows that a great way to encourage Abby to talk is to pay attention to her and to what she is

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Illustration by Melanie Hope Greenberg.



doing, making comments that connect to her experience. For example:

“Abby, I see you ate all your chicken. Chicken is good for you and will help you grow big and STRONG (*arms out, flexing muscles!*)”

Janet plans to suggest that she and Abby’s father both can keep this narration running throughout the day. They can describe a variety of emotions, like surprise, excitement, or sadness, as appropriate. Working together, they can give Abby the context she needs to make sense of all the new words she hears. For example, Sam can repeat the words Abby uses or use words in place of her gestures.

Abby points to the cracker box and says “cra.”

Sam asks, “Would Abby like some crackers? (*Handing Abby the crackers*) Are these the crackers that Abby wants?”

Sam can help give Abby her words until she is ready to do it herself by modeling a rich vocabulary in the context of their everyday lives.

The infant and toddler early learning guidelines, which explain what infants know and can do at various stages, provides Janet with further information to share about how toddlers develop and learn. Here is a sample of what she read about language and literacy for 18-month-olds. Children between the ages of 18 and 24 months are starting to “recognize and react to the sounds of language” (Maryland State Department of Education & Johns Hopkins University School of Education 2010, 21). That is why toddlers start paying attention to rhymes in songs and identifying sounds different animals make. Recognizing that a cow says “moo” and a dog says “ruff, ruff” is learning in context.

Another guideline states that children 18 to 24 months “begin to develop imitative reading”; for example, a child “might fill in words in a familiar text” (Maryland State Department of Education & Johns Hopkins University School of Education 2010, 21). Janet

has noticed, and will share with Sam, that Abby finishes the phrases in a familiar book that is read to her. This is very exciting and shows that Abby’s language capacities are developing as expected for a child her age. Such seemingly simple activities build connections in Abby’s brain and help her develop the skills she will need to communicate and help her when she is ready to read.

After deciding on an approach that will establish her respect for Sam’s concerns and reflecting on her own understanding of infant language development, Janet felt better prepared for their conference. She was looking forward to hearing Sam’s thoughts and sharing her learning. She was confident that together she and Sam could come up with realistic goals for Abby that centered on her developing early reading skills that would last a lifetime.

THINK ABOUT IT.

- What are your beliefs about helping children become good communicators and readers?
- How do you go about building partnerships with families? Why is this important?
- What are some of the ways you share your practices with families? What are some early literacy and communication strategies you learned from families?

TRY IT.

- Develop some conversation starters that demonstrate your interest in partnering with families.
- Research your state’s infant and toddler early learning guidelines. If your state doesn’t have infant and toddler early learning guidelines, then use the *Healthy Beginnings: Supporting Development and Learning from Birth through Three Years of Age* listed in the references.
- Create a book about the child’s day that families can share at home with their child. Ask families to create a book about their child’s day at home that you can share in your program.
- Create some talking points that share your knowledge about supporting emergent

literacy in very young children. Practice with a colleague or mentor ways you might begin the conversations. For example:

“Sam, I know how deeply you care about Abby’s development. You really spend a lot of time with her in activities that you both enjoy. I appreciate the books you have brought in to share with the class, and I will use them. If you have any favorite rhyming songs that you sing at home, I would love to hear about them. I think that as we both continue to enjoy talking to Abby and reading and singing with her, she naturally will start talking more and learn more words. You will be amazed how quickly that happens. She will be eager and excited to learn to read when she’s a little older.”

References

- Hirsh-Pasek, K., R. Michnick Golinkoff, & D. Eyer. 2003. *Einstein Never Used Flash Cards: How Our Children Really Learn—And Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale.
- Maryland State Department of Education & Johns Hopkins University School of Education. 2010. *Healthy Beginnings: Supporting Development and Learning from Birth through Three Years of Age*. <http://cte.jhu.edu/online/courses/HealthyBeginnings/HBFINAL.pdf>.

Resource

- Gopnik, A. n.d. “Creating Healthy Connections: Nurturing Brain Development From Birth to Three.” Podcast. 21 min. www.zerotothree.org/about-us/funded-projects/parenting-resources/podcast/creating-healthy-connections.html.

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