

How to Grow a Good Speller

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Most people assume it is the job of the teacher to make sure kids learn to spell. But if the truth be known, it is the job of every parent to start to teach this vital skill at the very beginning, right in the first years of a child's life. The skills that a child needs in order to be a good speller later on are built in the earliest years of life. Observing the order of events (which is what spelling is), being able to tell parts from wholes (which is what phonics is) and being able to puzzle out how a word should look in the mind's eye are all skills that come from early childhood. When the child begins to learn to spell, however, there is a marked difference between the sexes. Girls are indeed superior at most language skills because they enjoy the benefits of "superior factory installed equipment." The brain layers, the corpus callosum, which connect the right brain to the left brain, and through which most impulses travel, most notably in reading and spelling, has been shown to be three times thicker in girls than in boys. What are the implications? In tasks which take place predominantly in one hemisphere, boys do very well. Math, logic, computer skills, all left brain tasks, are notably the "boy's" best areas. Tasks involving both hemispheres and all the synapses firing in the right sequence, back and forth, tasks like reading, spelling and writing come harder for boys than for girls, imply because girls have brains whose halves can talk back and forth easily. This is why it is so much easier for girls to learn to read. And spell.

They see the whole word all at once and put it into "storage", so to speak, the way most of us learn people's faces. Boys, on the other hand, they are usually more comfortable with phonics and tend to sound out every word they come to, slowly

learning to recognize words they have sounded out over and over. GOOD readers are sight readers, not phonic readers. Good spellers memorize words. Words, like friends, have faces that are unique, which we call spelling. When we break down an object into its components, we not only change the way we see it, but we change the way that our brain processes the information about that object. Whether the thing is a word, a bird or a car engine, the act of taking it apart and reassembling it makes it a new thing. Scrambling words, and unscrambling them is a vital part in the process of spelling. Magnetic letters, alphabet noodles, Alpha-Bits cereal are all great teaching tools that you can eat. Begin teaching spelling with names of people in the family. Learning to spell names correctly is just the beginning.

Take time every day to make words on the refrigerator with magnetic letters. Have the word there for the child, then take it apart and have the child reassemble it. It often helps to have the word written on a sheet of paper, and then the child can match the letters to the word. Eventually, they learn to "see" the word in their mind. For more tactile practice in visualizing the word, write the word onto the child's back and have him say the letters as you spell the word. When you get to the end, be sure to tell him what the word is. This is all a GAME, not a TEST and your job is to make sure that your kid always wins.

Writing words in spaghetti sauce or noodles is just as valid as a workbook and often far tastier and more meaningful for the child. Another simple way to get your kids to be good spellers is to leave dictionaries in every bathroom in the house. Put words in every daily duty.

When you can't spell a word, do YOU look it up in the dictionary? How? If you can't spell it, how do you begin to look it up? The dictionary is the repository for the history of our language. It is NOT a great tool for teaching spelling any more than a

refrigerator is a great way to teach ice-skating. A dictionary in every bathroom make the child a word browser. You can put words on the television, using yellow stickum notes. You can put words in the car by playing spelling games every time you take a trip to the corner. Making a child copy a word 100 times is NOT going to make them good spellers. It will probably improve their handwriting, but in the end it makes them hate words. On standardized tests, the spelling section is very seldom a list of words to be spelled as they are dictated. Rather, there are four words in a row, all spelled wrong except one. No wonder kids do poorly on this. Playing with words, making words do your bidding is one way to make a good speller. Take time to make spelling a game: play Scrabble, scrambled words, crossword games with your kids. Pay attention to billboards. After you have passed one that you are sure that your kid saw, ask him to spell ANY word from it. This constant bombardment of the kid-learning-to spell by a parent making a game out of it is unique. And it works. There are kids who seem to be born spellers. They can memorize long, convoluted words with what seems to be no effort at all. My guess is that these kids are also able to recall lots of names and faces correctly. Kids like that are the ones who have phenomenal memories for details, as well as for how the "whole enchilada" looks when it is served up. They are predominantly right-brain kids who given the chance and the parent stimulation will grow up to be terrific spellers. All you have to do is channel that energy, that conservatism of matter, into spelling words correctly. If you've got an older child who is a poor speller, all is not lost. When you go through papers and find misspelled words, write the correct spelling above their version, and circle both. Have them unlearn the old spelling by repeating the correct spelling five or six times. NEVER label a child as a poor speller or they will feel obliged to fulfill your expectations. Encourage good spelling at every opportunity, and make words your student's best friend.

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