

What, Me, Teach Reading?

You know how your mother said, "If you want it done right, do it yourself?" Well, that's the rule with teaching your kids to read. I can hear you saying, "But I don't have a degree in teaching." That's okay. For thousands of years, moms have been teaching kids to read, using a finger in the dirt, a piece of charcoal on a rock, whatever. Rabbis in the old days in Hebrew school had the kids put the letters on their slates using honey, and then lick it off, "so that the word of YHWH might be sweet on their lips". You can and should teach your kids to read. It's easy, it's fast and it doesn't require anything except you and a kid who wants to read.

And how, you say, do you know if your kid wants to read?

Well, they say the magic words-- "What does that word

say, mommy?" The kids know it's a word. They know it says something and they know that YOU know and THEY don't and that you can teach them. That's the beginning. So what do you do?

First, you remember that kids learn to read the same way they learned to talk. They try out new words, new patterns, and you help them learn the proper way to use them.

Remember when your kid called everything with four legs and a tail a Horse? The same kind of miscalls will happen in reading, but you won't get panicked by it. You'll know better.

First, if you've got an older child, say four and up, the thing to remember as you begin to teach the child to read is that we have made the print too small. Kids need **BIG HUGE PRINT**. If you can read it at ten feet they can read

it at near point (which is where you read). If it's too small, they can't see it, much less read it. That's why when kids look at a new book and they say, "I can't read this" it's so hard to tell whether they cannot see the print or whether they do not know the words.

So keep the print huge. If you have to use magazine words or blow it up on the Xerox machine or print it out in 72 point type in the computer, DO IT. Don't make it harder than it already is.

Second, who ever decided that kids need to learn to read using black print? Red is far more exciting, and I think purple is even more exciting. You'll notice that fire engines are red and that all the major chains use red in their logo. Burger King. K Mart, Walgreen's. Wal-Mart. Bright color for beginning readers is more thrilling than black. **Big**

and Brightly Colored is better yet than Small and

Black. So, why are all books printed in small black print?

Are we trying to make reading as hard as we can, so that

only the "Chosen Few" can learn it well and become

captains of industry, leaving the rest of their

contemporaries to clean the toilets at McBurger?

The next thing to keep in mind while you teach your kid to

read is that it has to be fun. If it's boring, if it's predictable,

if it's mindless (like Hooked on Phonics), the kids will tune

it out. If it doesn't empower the learner, ditch it. If it isn't

kidlike, lose it. Kids need to learn their OWN words first,

not somebody else's. Let them cut out words from

magazines or make you type them on the computer. Words

like **Styracosaurus** or **Welding Torch**. Kids will choose

words they love and their first words must have

MEANING. Sylvia Ashton Warner, an old fashioned

country school teacher said "First words must be important. Words like 'kiss' and 'monster' and 'love'." She was right. Kids don't want to learn words like "the" and "is" and "into." They want words that sing and slash and play and bleed. So give them those words, in print as big as you can possibly make. And if you're on the computer, use fancy fonts! For scary words, use that Halloween typeface. For "tea party" you might try a fancy Victorian font.

Then, every day, practice. If you want to learn to play golf or baseball, you know you have to do it every day. Ten minutes ought to do it. And it doesn't all have to be at the same time. Two minutes here, three minutes while you're waiting in line at the Safeway. No desks required, no pens, no pencils, just words as the best toys on the planet and the ultimate playtime is **READING**.

Some kids want to collect the words they know on cards. Some kids just keep them in their heads. Some kids want you to write books that they dictate, others want to just leap into real books. Regardless of what path your child chooses to get to literacy, your job is to make sure that the child has ample opportunity to read. You have to take the kids to where books live--the bookstore, the library, not TV and not the computer.

Kids learning to read need to have bright, attractive big print books they can read again and again. They need it to be EASY not hard. Hard can come later, say about ninth grade. Your job as the child's first best teacher is to make it easy, to make it fun, to make it as enjoyable as learning to dance or play baseball.

It doesn't take much. It takes your unflagging sense of humor, it takes your courage to actually do this thing called reading, and it takes time. If you start now, it will take you about thirty hours total, in two or three minute increments. You can teach the kids in the back seat via the rear view mirror. You can teach them in the shopping cart at the grocery store. You can teach them while they are taking a bath or while they are in the carpool. But this is true--If you want it done right, do it yourself. You'll never be sorry.

©2005 Gwynne Spencer, PO BOX 121, Mancos CO 81328
gwynnespencer@aol.com. Check out her book, ***TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL: A Guide to Teaching Your Own Child to Read*** available from The Fifth Raccoon Publishing Co. for \$10.