



THE DOLLYWOOD FOUNDATION

Building the Foundation for Reading

FACT SHEET

Teaching children to read is often seen as the sole responsibility of our nation's schools. Perhaps there are some subtle influences imparted on children by their parents and day cares. But for the most part, their success or failure in reading is seen as a function of the quality of their elementary education.

Most any kindergarten teacher would strongly disagree with these assumptions. Their experience reveals marked differences among children in their ability to learn, their familiarity with books and language, and their confidence level. In short, long before any child is exposed to formalized education, there are already children far ahead of the curve and even more lagging far behind. In a 1991 (Boyer) study, kindergarten teachers reported that 35% of the children arrive at school unprepared to learn. Playing "catch up" is a very difficult proposition both for the child and the teacher.

The experience of teachers is now supported by a growing body of research which suggests that influence of a learning environment from the very birth of a child has a tremendous impact on the short and long-term reading capability of the child.

According to Karoly et al (1998), children develop much of their capacity to learn in the first three years of life, when their brains grow to 90% of their eventual adult weight. Start Early, Finish Strong, a Department of Education publication, emphasizes the importance of a child's interaction with his/her environment rather than intelligence as a key factor in determining the ease at which a child will learn to read. The publication cites a National Research Council report which states, "Just as a child develops language skills long before being able to speak, the child also develops literacy skills long before being able to read."

Just what are these literacy skills? Letter names and shapes, associating sounds with letters, being read to, familiarity with books, associating reading with love and fun are all key areas of development. In Start Early, Finish Strong, Dr. Perri Klass, Medical Director of Reach Out and Read, states, "With confidence, I tell parents to read to their children, secure in the knowledge that it will help their language development, help them be ready to read when the time comes, and help parents and children spend loving moments together."

The key is to start at birth. To immerse a child in a literacy environment can be a stronger predictor of literacy and academic achievement

than family income. The more words a child hears, the larger the child's vocabulary, and the larger the child's vocabulary the more likely the child will be a proficient reader.

However, in order to read with a child, books must be in the home. In a 1991 study by Needlman, parents given books by their doctor were four times more likely to read and share books with their children. This rate increased to eight times more likely with lower income parents.

It is also instructive to examine the consequences of failing to build an adequate foundation for reading. The most stunning revelation is just how difficult it is to become a proficient reader if a child is trapped by initial difficulty. In a 1988 study, Juel found "...that 88% of children who have difficulty reading at the end of first grade display similar difficulties at the end of fourth grade." Researchers at Yale discovered a similar trend. In their 1997 study, "... 75% of students who are poor readers in the third grade will remain poor readers in high school."

Clearly, the key is to begin this work at birth. There are many dimensions to this work: books in the home, parents who read frequently to their children and the association of reading with fun and love are but a few. Dolly's Imagination Library does not attempt to address all of these dimensions. However, while Dolly's Imagination Library cannot do every thing, it can eliminate one of the reasons why parents do not read to their child—the availability of quality books in the home. Books delivered not just once, but 60 times in the child's critical years of development. Each delivery is wrapped in love and excitement and each another step toward helping children to arrive at kindergarten ready to learn.

Resources:

"Start Early, Finish Strong: How To Help Every Child Become a Reader." Department of Education, America Reads Challenge, 1999.

To order: 877-4ED-PUBS or www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html

"Clinic Based Intervention to Promote Literacy." *American Journal of Diseases of Children*, Volume 145, August 1991, 881-884.

Education Commission of the States: www.ecs.org Click on the Early Childhood and Brain Research Sections

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