

# TEXAS Parenting News

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

FALL 2005

## Turn off the TV: Get a hand on learning

Let's forget for a moment the violence and sex in TV programs. Here's another reason for turning off the tube: hands-on learning.

Preschool children need to be using their hands—building with blocks, scribbling on paper, rolling a ball, for example. The physical activity strengthens the fingers and enhances coordination, forming the foundation for writing, drawing, typing at a computer keyboard, and many other skills.

But it's more than that. The hand and arm form a deep learning pathway to the brain, and the pathway gets laid down in early childhood. It begins in infancy, as babies grasp, drop, and bang objects. It continues in the preschool years as children work puzzles, pound pegs with wooden hammers, shape clay, and match nuts and bolts.

By manipulating objects, children develop thinking skills. Children learn that objects have shape, color, weight, and texture, for example. Gradually children learn to classify objects by these traits. They begin to recognize patterns—red-blue, red-blue, red-blue, for example. They learn how to match similar objects and put them in sequence—smallest to largest, for example. Eventually, these concepts lead to math skills—counting, adding, subtracting—and to science skills—observing, predicting, testing.

So it's important that children get plenty of hands-on learning opportunities at home. And they don't need store-bought educational materials. Ordinary activities—setting the table, sorting socks, and folding laundry, for example—are a good way to start.

You can also make learning games from household objects and recyclables. See below for examples, and then make up your own.

Caution: Make sure all materials are safe. Don't use glass or sharp pointed objects. Small objects, like buttons and beads, pose a choking hazard for children 3 and younger.

### Nesting cups

Provide a set of four plastic measuring cups. You can also use plastic storage containers with lids. Allow your child to explore the cups with hands and mouth. Then ask the child to fit them one inside the other. Talk about what is happening. Use words like *big* and *little*, *in* and *out*.

### Classify and sort

Provide an assortment of plastic forks, knives, and spoons. Name the different items and allow your child to handle each one. Then invite the child to pick out the forks. Try this with tableware of different colors.

Gather other items that children can classify by size, shape, or color: plastic lids, plant pots, cereal boxes, ball caps. Make a big pile of different items and invite your child to put together things that are alike. Talk about the results. Mix up the items and



ask the child to find a different way that things are alike.

Start collecting things—rocks, shells, leaves, unshelled nuts, twigs, fabric scraps, floor tiles. Invite your child to sort each type by color or size or texture (smooth, rough). Have your child sort them from largest to smallest or lightest to darkest.

### **Straw necklaces**

Cut different colored drinking straws into four equal lengths. Place the sections on a tray and arrange a few in a pattern—red-white-blue, red-white-blue, for example. Ask your child to make the same pattern with the remaining sections. Continue making patterns and have your child copy them. Or have your child make a pattern and you copy it.

## **BY MANIPULATING OBJECTS, CHILDREN DEVELOP THINKING SKILLS.**

Cut straws into 1-inch pieces. Cut yarn into 12-inch lengths, and wrap tape around one end to make it stiff. Show your child how to string the straw on the yarn to make a necklace. Encourage your child to make necklaces of different patterns.

### **Matching**

Save envelopes from junk mail. After collecting several, have your child deliver “mail” to each person in the family. Say “One envelope to every person, one person to every envelope.” Do the same with different items such as muffins, combs, and keys.

Provide an ice cube tray and two each of an assortment of small items, such as bolts, chip clips, clothespins, thread spools, milk jug caps, caps from markers, large buttons, erasers. Ask your child to place one item in each hole of the tray, with the same items side by side. Talk about the results.

### **Learning numbers 1-5**

Gather five index cards and 15 milk jug caps. Write the numeral 1 on the first card and draw an outline around a milk jug cap. Write the numeral 2 on the next card and draw two outlines. Continue until you have a card for each number, one through five.

Show your child how to place a milk jug cap on an outline. Say the name of each number as the child places caps on the outlines on each card. Once the child can match caps to outlines, mix up the cards and let your child try again. Then remove the cards, and ask your child to set out one cap, then two, and so on. Encourage your child to count other items in the house—two lamps, five apples, three pencils.

When your child understands five as a quantity, proceed to six and higher.

### **Felt shapes**

Cut four shapes—square, circle, triangle, and rectangle—roughly 2 inches across out of felt, denim, or another heavy fabric. Cut out successively larger sizes of each shape. For example, cut circles with diameters of 3, 4, and 5 inches.

Name each shape and let your child handle it. Mix up the shapes and see if your child can pick out the shape you name. Ask your child to pick out all the triangles. Have your child arrange each shape by size, from largest to smallest.

Suggest laying out the shapes in a design or picture. One of you makes the design, and the other copies it. Challenge your child to guess or predict what you’re going to make. Take turns.

### **Empty handed**

Place four small objects, like buttons or pennies, in your hand and close it into a fist. Open your hand and ask: “How many are there?” Close your fist, remove one object, open your fist, and again ask how many. Continue until you have none. Explain that none is represented by the numeral 0, which is called “zero.”

Repeat this game with more and different objects. Think of examples of zero in your home. “How many submarines do we have? Zero.” Look for the numeral zero on food package labels: “How many grams of fat? Zero.”

### **Encourage family activity**

As children get older, play board games like checkers and card games like Go Fish. These games not only help the family have fun together but also teach children how to pay attention, follow rules, take turns, learn number concepts, and think logically.

# Help your child be a successful reader

by Melody Patterson Zoch

**T**o do well in school, your child must be a good reader. The key to reading well is comprehension. Children must be able to not only read the words on a page, but also understand and make sense of them.

Regardless of your education or experience, you can help your child increase reading comprehension. It's a skill that can be taught, and it requires lots of practice at school and at home. In short, for children to become good readers, they must read!

Here are some tips for getting started:

- **Communicate with the teacher.** Talk to your child's teacher on a regular basis. Voice any concerns you may have. Seek advice on how to help your child at home. Be a role model by showing your child that you trust and respect the teacher. If you have the time, volunteer at the school so your child sees your interest in the school and in education.
- **Designate time and space for reading.** Establish a quiet area of your home for reading without distractions like the television. Having time set aside each day for reading can help your child get into a routine. Children, no matter what age, need to read uninterrupted for at least 30 minutes every day. Children in third grade or higher need more time. If your child is not yet reading, read aloud to the child and use the suggested reading comprehension practices below.
- **Discuss the purpose of reading with your child.** Explain that reading can be for pleasure or to learn new information. Discuss the purpose for reading before and after each reading session.
- **Use appropriate books.** Talk with your child's teacher about your child's reading level and ask for suggestions on books to read. If your child is reading below grade level, ask about specific ways to help your child.
 

In my classroom, I give students a take-home bag with books suitable to their reading level. On any given day they have between four and six books in their bag. If your child's teacher does not already provide books on a daily basis, ask about borrowing books to take home. Or check out appropriate books from the school or local library. You can also buy books economically at stores that specialize in used books.
- **Give encouragement.** Be positive about the child's progress. Emphasize strengths and accomplishments over weaknesses or difficulties.



This will be especially important once children enter grade school and feel stressed about passing standardized tests on reading or language.

## How to improve reading comprehension

Here are effective, easy practices you can use at home with your child:

- **Retellings.** After reading, ask children to recall what they have just read, either through an oral retelling or by writing. When retelling, children reveal information about what they understood and how they organize that information. It's important that they tell us as much as they can remember, not just the main ideas.

After reading a story, have your child close the book and tell you everything he or she remembers. Closing the book ensures that children are not just looking back at the pictures as reminders, but that they actually remember everything they're saying. If your child struggles to retell the story or has trouble remembering parts of it, this is a sign that the child needs to go back and reread.

Explain that every time we read, we need to be able to retell the story. If we cannot, then we have not effectively read for meaning. If your child experiences great difficulty with retelling the whole story, break it up into small parts. Once the child can retell the small parts, gradually increase the amount to be read and retold. This can help your child feel successful and prevent frustration.

While your child is retelling it may be necessary to offer prompts, especially at first. Some examples:

- "What happened next?"
- "Tell me more about..."
- "Can you explain that some more?"
- "How did the story begin?"
- "How did the story end?"
- **Think-alouds.** Good readers actively think while they read. You can model this technique. Start reading a book aloud and stop periodically, but not so much to distract your child, to say what you're thinking. Some examples:
  - "I wonder what's going to happen next?"
  - "This part makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_."
  - "I imagine this to look like...."

- "This reminds me of...."
- "I like/don't like this story because...."

After modeling a think-aloud, have your child do it. Listen to what your child says and make sure that it relates to what was read. Caution: It's possible to spend too much time thinking aloud and get off track from the reading.

- **Mental images.** While reading a story, describe or draw what you picture in your mind. Then have your child do the same thing. Explain that creating mental images is like seeing a movie in your mind while you read.
- **Asking questions.** Good readers ask questions about what they are reading. Encourage your child to do the following:
  - Ask questions about the story and look for the answers.
  - Look for clarification or reread if something does not make sense.
  - Make and verify predictions.
  - Reflect on the reading.
  - Establish the goal for reading.

## Engage in conversation

What all these practices have in common is that children need to talk about their reading. Becoming engaged in conversation helps improve reading comprehension. As a parent, you provide the conversation—and the time.

## About the author

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*Texas Parenting News* is published by the Texas Workforce Commission for free distribution. ©2005, TWC.

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