

First Steps Toward Reading

Patience is a most important quality for parents who are helping their children learn to read at home. Almost every method of reading instruction works if children are permitted to move at their own pace. Just as a child usually crawls before he walks and walks before he runs, he usually learns letters before words, and learns to read aloud before he begins to read silently.

A child is still learning letters if he finds it easier to read capital letters than lower case letters. He is still learning words if he finds it easier to read aloud than to read to himself. He is fluent when he reads long books to himself for his own enjoyment.

Learning to Read in School

American schools used to begin teaching reading in first grade when children are six. (In Denmark, schools begin teaching reading when children are seven.) Now, American schools start teaching reading in kindergarten when children are just five. Talk to any sixty-year-old kindergarten teacher. She will tell you that kindergarten isn't the "child's garden" that it used to be. Now children sit at desks and study letters and letter sounds and a hundred other things.

Some children are ready to learn such things when they are five, others are not. Those who learn them go on to become good readers. Those who don't, go on to become poor readers and school failures. In one study, researchers found that those children who could not read letters quickly at the beginning of first grade, could not read words well at the end.¹ Another study has shown that the child who can't read well at the end of first grade, still can't read well at the end of sixth grade.²

Some children in kindergarten are just not as mature as other children. Not only do children grow up at different rates, but also some children are just barely five at the beginning of kindergarten, while others are five and a half or six. Joel Erion, a homeschooling father and school psychologist in Pennsylvania, looked at the birthdates of children who had been in school for many years but were doing so badly that they had been labeled as having "learning disabilities." He found that the average learning disabled child had been younger than the average normal child when he entered school. In other words, just because he was younger when he started school, he failed in school.³

More boys than girls fail in school and researchers have looked all over for explanations. Is it that female elementary school teachers are better at teaching girls? Is there a fundamental difference between boys' brains and girls' brains? I suspect that boys are just less mature than girls when they enter kindergarten, they aren't as good at talking and they are less ready to sit still and study letters.

At the end of kindergarten, children in schools take a "reading-readiness" test to determine if they are ready for first grade. Those who can't identify letters, or who don't seem to be able to concentrate, are sometimes held back.

In first grade, the class is generally divided into reading groups so that the better readers can progress quickly while the poorer readers may plod more slowly. Soon, the good readers believe that they are smart and the poor readers become imbued with the sense that they are dumb. Meanwhile, all the children are bored as they fill out endless phonics sheets. One word about phonics sheets: A recent study pointed out that phonics worksheets are used by teachers to keep children busy.⁴

Meanwhile, in the low reading group, the child who cannot easily identify the letters may manage to cope when there are only a few words on a page, but begins to get very frustrated when there are many unknown words on each page. He starts to fidget and looks anywhere in the room except at his books. If you ask him, he will tell you that he hates to read.

After first grade, the better readers continue to read the reading textbooks although they already know the words before they are presented, and the children in the low group continue to read the reading textbooks although the textbooks are frustratingly difficult. Some poor readers are held back in first grade for a second chance. When they are finally passed into second grade, they are still in the low group despite the extra year of reading instruction. They never choose to read on their own because they have come to hate reading. As they progress into junior high school and their school subjects involve more and more reading, many of them fail in other subjects. Because of flunking, they often enter high school two years later than their agemates. Many drop out of school, and many of these drop-outs later fill our prisons and welfare rolls.

Learning to Read at Home

At home there is a completely different story. First of all, children learn to read at a much wider variety of ages. Some learn at three and others at twelve, and there are some who learn to read at every age in between.

I am presently following about twenty home-schooled children who did not begin to read until the age of seven or older, and thus far several of them have become fluent readers. I am guessing that all homeschooled children will eventually become fluent because they have been read to from birth and love books.

Children who learn to read at three or four seem to become readers overnight, while children of eight or ten appear to take two or three years to become readers. Is it that little children have an easier time with reading? I think, instead, that parents of three year olds judge their children's abilities using a different yardstick than parents of six year olds or parents of ten year olds. If a three year old can read twenty words, he or she is a reader, but a six year old must be able to read an easy-to-read book, and a ten year old must be able to silently read a book with many chapters. A child of any age can quickly learn to read ten or twenty words, but it takes several months of effort before he can read an easy book and several years before he can silently read a chapter-book. So, in a sense, it takes a child longer to learn to read if he is older just because he has to go so much farther before he is considered a "success."

Dr. Raymond Moore points out that early reading can lead to eye difficulties and prescriptions for glasses.⁵ This is especially true where the child is anxiously straining his eyes to look at the words on a page. Sometimes reading glasses are prescribed in order to decrease the eye strain of reading small print. Such eye strain could also be decreased by keeping reading times short, print big, and interposing periods of relaxation where the eyes focus on objects far away. Susan relates her own experience with eye strain...

I got reading glasses as a young teenager (13 years old, not an easy time to begin wearing glasses!), and definitely found that I once again began to love to read. The strain was off. Over the past several years (or, I should say, whenever my glasses break or get lost) I have been very interested in reading Aldous Huxley's book *THE ART OF SEEING* that details the work of Dr. William Bates on improving vision with eye relaxation techniques.⁶ The ideas are always helpful. I also noticed that when Jesse began reading at 6 1/2 he often showed signs of eyestrain -- rubbing his eyes, putting a hand over one eye, staring hard and not blinking often enough. An eye check showed nothing "wrong," but I still was very concerned. I began sharing the Huxley ideas with Jesse. We both began palming our eyes before reading and in between each page. We tried to consciously blink much more frequently, and generally tried to relax and not stare and strain. It worked wonders. His reading began to come much more easily, he stopped showing stress, and began to be able to read for much longer times without any problems. This just might be another avenue for parents to look into when their children seem to have some eye and vision problem.

One of the basic ideas of Bates was that when we strain to see -- when we fear perhaps that the words might just fly off the page unless we nail them on with our eyeball -- *that's* when we see much worse. I think perhaps that many early readers might have that fear about the few tenuous words they feel they can read, a feeling similar to what John Holt described in *Never Too Late* when he went functionally blind when under the stress of reading music too fast:

Suddenly something popped loose in my mind, and the written music before me lost all meaning. All meaning. It is hard to describe the experience, which lasted only a second or two. Strictly speaking, I could *see* the notes, I did not black out; but it was as if I could not see them. They were so blurred, as if my eyes were refusing to focus.⁷

I also remember seeing a photo somewhere of a classroom full of young Japanese children doing eye relaxation exercises before beginning their work for the day, so these ideas are being used in other parts of the world...

Learning the Alphabet

The first stage of learning to read ends when the child can recognize a letter quickly without having to think about which letter it is. At the same time that children are learning the alphabet they often learn to read about fifty or sixty sight words -- of course usually starting with his own name, a word of special meaning! When he knows the alphabet, he can read words just as easily if they are written in lower case or in capital letters.

Incidentally, it is not necessary for children to know the names of the letters in order for them to know the alphabet. Some of the best phonics programs teach the letters by teaching their sounds rather than their names. There are many ways that children learn the alphabet at home. Perhaps the most common is through an alphabet book. Since most homeschooling parents read to their children beginning shortly after the children are born, it is a natural step to read alphabet books. When the children are learning the letters they often want to hear such books over and over again.

Although many alphabet books are quite boring, some are quite humorous. My favorite is *Curious George Learns the Alphabet* by H. A. Rey. When Molly and Jacob were learning the alphabet, they loved to hear about the mischievous monkey, *Curious George*, being taught the alphabet by the *man with the yellow hat*. Not only does the book teach both capital and small letters by incorporating them into pictures, but it also maintains a fun spirit. As soon as George learns

the letters up to *T*, he crosses out the word "one" on a message he takes to the baker and replaces it with the word "ten." Then he returns home with ten dozen doughnuts. The kids never fail to laugh when the *man with the yellow hat* says, "Well, that comes from teaching the alphabet to a little monkey. And I told you: no tricks!"

Many home-schoolers keep magnetized metal alphabet letters on their refrigerators. Children become more familiar with letter shapes when they manipulate them. Sometimes, when our children are in the beginning stages of reading, we spell out short messages on the refrigerator with these letters, or encourage them to sort them out or put them in alphabetical order. They are also useful to graphically show how some letters can be "flipped" to make another letter -- *u* becomes *n*, *b* becomes *q*. And some can be turned any way and still come out right, such as *o*.

I recommend that every family with beginning readers in the house get or make an alphabet and put it up on a convenient wall in the house so that their beginning readers can frequently look at old letters that they already know when they are learning new letters. That way they can more easily learn to tell the letters apart from each other. These don't have to be the standard green chalkboard letters seen in drab elementary classrooms -- our kids have enjoyed whimsical alphabets that have the letters made out of objects or animals that begin with that letter's sound, or woodcut illustrations of farm themes for each letter. Some families put up the *Sing, Spell, Read & Write* alphabet that goes with the program's first phonics song. Cutting out letters together from magazines or newspapers, large easy to see letters, could be a fun joint project. Susan once found a set of thrown away billboard posters and made a wild alphabet using these huge, brightly colored letters. Madalene Murphy says her kids all learned the alphabet first from a needlepoint tapestry she'd made of all the letters and hung in their rooms.

When Jesse was just five, Susan wrote about an idea that worked for helping Jesse learn the alphabet...

I'm very interested in staying clear of workbook-type prepared "reading readiness" materials, feeling that the real world holds much more that is valuable and inherently motivating and intriguing. This is an idea that cost us nothing but scotch tape (Oh how *many* rolls of scotch tape!) and has brought us much delight and good sharing.

Things really began last winter. One day I began stapling together a 26-page booklet (my printer's scraps again), marking one alphabet letter on each page. Jesse, just 4 1/2, and his 6 year old friend asked what I was doing (cardinal rule #1 with me -- never

come on as the "heavy" who has a super idea for a neat "*lesson*"). I explained that I planned to search through old magazines to find as many different types of alphabet letters as I could, taping each on to their proper pages in my book. I set to work nearby and they watched as they wanted. Jesse's friend wanted to make a book too, and soon even Jesse decided perhaps it might be fun. The idea didn't exactly "catch fire," though, so I let it be.

It was maybe TWO MONTHS later that this planted seed began to bear fruit and four months later we're still going strong. Out of the blue, Jesse asked to make a *new* alphabet book. He hadn't forgotten the idea, even though I'd thought it was a "dud" of sorts at the time. We counted pages, marked in letters, gathered magazines, and tape, and immediately were engrossed for over an hour. (What is it people say about young children's short attention spans???) Fat *A*'s, curling *G*'s, innumerable *E*'s, and snaking *S*'s began filling our new pages. Our eyes were opening to the vast creativity of the modern type-case. What variety! Jesse began noticing on his own that some letters were *very* hard to find, including his natural favorite, *J*. He began to cut off, secretly, the bottom foot from some capital *E*'s, as we were having such a hard time finding any *F*'s.

The letters began taking on personalities for us -- we talked of "that old *E*" that always was sneaking into so many words, half the time not even making any sound at all. We laughed about *T* always wearing his hat, but *J* changing his mind all the time about his. *A* and *H* always wore belts, but not *V*. We noticed the variations in lower-case printed *g* and *a*, and discussed the differences between handwritten letters and machine printed letters. We simply *had* to make motoring "RRRUM" sounds when we turned to our *R* page -- how different it was from our hissing, quiet *S* page. And we counted letters, compared pages to estimate which held the most, and Jesse wasn't fooled by letters that just took up more *space*. He realized he'd have to count to see which *really* had more. We saw how stocky and wide *M* was -- took up much more than twice the space as skinny *I*.

Jesse even now has begun to notice he can *read* some of the words he's finding in these magazines -- "Look: This says *NO!*" After finding and cutting out a few more words he knew, he said, "Gee! I didn't know they'd have *these* words in here!" It was a banner day when *Time* magazine ran a cover story on *Jesse Helms*...

Jesse has gone back to this idea throughout the summer. One morning while Jacob slept in unusually late, we must have worked a solid 2 hours at it, and went back to it later that afternoon -- all at Jesse's request. We work as partners at it, taking turns cutting or taping in. It's not an assignment I've given him to complete, but a shared adventure *in* the real world of print. I've become as excited as my 5- year-old to find a really unique letter (our favorites are the Meow- Mix cat food letters), or that rare

treasure of treasures, a real *Q*. (We joked that probably there were no *Q*'s because there weren't very many advertisements for *quick, quiet, quaint Queens...*)

I've secretly bought Jesse a copy of *Modern Display Alphabets*, by Paul Kennedy, from John Holt's book list, and wonder if I'll be able to keep it hidden until Christmas. Jesse is trying his hand at making some "fancy" letters himself -- some with bulby serifs, or rainbow stripes, some very tall or very short. He's even begun a game of pretending he's a printer, and he'll make signs to order for anyone in the house. We notice the world of print all about us, and laugh about wanting to cut out letters from signs we pass while out driving.

And, ah, how different this adventure of ours has been from the dutiful, dreadfully dull filling in of kindergarten workbook pages... And little Jacob sits next to us blissfully taping letters into *his* alphabet book, chanting to himself about how the Mommy *A* will nurse the Baby *a...*

Learning The First Words

Children can learn letters as they learn words. They can easily learn to recognize fifty or sixty words even before they are fully familiar with the alphabet. In *Teacher*, one of the most enthusiastic books ever written about the teaching of reading, Sylvia Ashton-Warner allows each of her students to choose a special word to learn each day. The children, many of them Maori Indian children of New Zealand, would think of a word that meant a lot to them -- "Mommy," "love," "skeleton," and so on -- and their teacher would put the word on a card for their special collection. When Jesse was about five and a half years old, Susan began to put words that he would choose on little cards. They invented several cooperative go-fish type games with them, or simple sentence making games, Jesse gaining more familiarity and ease with the words as they played.

When I used to teach remedial reading to second grade students, I would ask each child to choose words which I then put on 3 by 5 index cards using a crayon or magic marker -- a different color marker for each child in the class. Once a week, we would play a game which we called "Sorry." I would shuffle all of the students' words together and add in some cards on which the word *sorry* was written. Then we would take turns choosing cards and saying the words written on them. If we would pick the word "sorry," we would have to pass all our cards to the next person. It was a fun way to learn words.

Nicole Learns to Read Using Wordcards

One home-schooling mother, Juanita Kissell, told me about how her daughter Nicole started reading using wordcards when she was five and a half and just about to enter kindergarten.

One day, Juanita saw Nicole staring at the words in a book called *Snow* that they had gotten out of the library several times. Juanita pointed and said, "Do you know what that word is?"

"Snow?" guessed Nicole.

"Yes," Juanita replied. "Do you know that when you know what the word says, THAT'S reading."

"Oh? Oh!" Nicole was surprised. She thought that reading was more complicated than that.

"Is there any word you'd like to read?"

"Yeah!"

So Nicole started choosing words and Juanita started writing them down on cards. Pretty soon, Nicole had a collection of about thirty words, mainly nouns on cards. She liked to get them out every day.

One day Juanita said, "You know, if we add a couple of more words we could make a sentence out of them." That day the words, *in* and *the*, were added and Juanita and Nicole laid out the cards and made a few sentences.

Within three or four weeks Nicole had about 150 words on cards. Then they started making silly sentences like "The cat is purple." Juanita would make a sentence and Nicole would read it, then Nicole would make a sentence and Juanita would read it. The chance to make funny, nonsensical sentences from these simple words, to create humor out of mere words on cards, would have Nicole laughing out loud -- and loving her beginning reading times at home.

One day after Nicole had about two hundred words, Juanita asked, "Would you like to try to read a book?" Nicole was excited, so, that day they got some Dr. Seuss books out of the library; Nicole read the words that she knew and her mother read the other words.

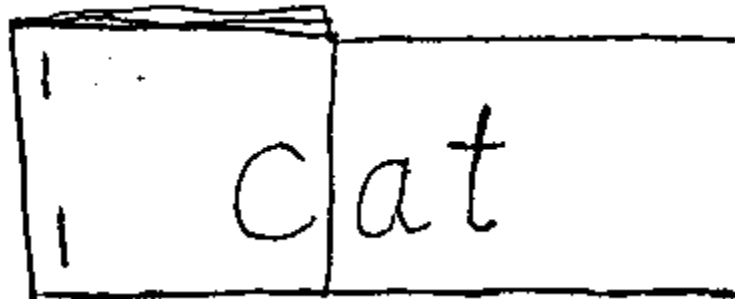
Nicole was attending a half-day kindergarten, so Juanita wondered if Nicole could begin to receive some reading instruction in school. She called the school to find out what was available, as she could see how eager Nicole was and how readily she was catching on. The very next day, without warning, the school decided to give Nicole a reading readiness test. Nicole got very uncomfortable when a strange man pulled her out of class to give her this unexpected test, and she failed it.

Juanita began homeschooling Nicole in first grade. When I saw Nicole in March of that year, she was reading books like *Ramona the Pest* by Beverly Cleary, which are miles beyond the usual first grade fare.

Simple Games for Learning Words

Susan made up lots of simple games which helped Jesse learn his first words, as she described when Jesse was five...

As Jesse has always found great delight in spinning off reels of rhyming words, we began making simple rhyming flip books. You'll need some small blank cards -- index card size, printer's scraps, whatever. Cut most of the cards in half, and staple these on top of one full size card, as shown:



As you flip through the book, a different rhyming word pops up -- seems almost magical to a beginning reader that one letter makes the change. Jesse helps in thinking up words for these books -- especially enjoys inventing silly-sounding nonsense words. Jacob (2 1/2) has even had good fun with the idea -- not in reading the words, of course, but in thinking up his own rhyming combinations. He thinks it's a great joke to ask for "cinnamon-jinnamon-binnamon" for his breakfast oatmeal, loving to twirl the funny words on his tongue, laughing. Jesse notices rhymes everywhere, often saying, "Hey, that would make a good flip book!"

Another game that's evolved is the "Message Game," played with our refrigerator magnetic letters. Jesse is now in charge of alphabetizing the letters every Monday, and scrounging up lost ones from under the refrigerator. This usually takes him about the same time as my breakfast cleanup, and so gives us both some work to do in the kitchen, (Always good to have company during jobs!) First the message is arranged -- our usual favorite starting one that Jesse *always* can read is "Give Mommy a HUG." Then the message is changed to perhaps "Give Mommy a RUG" or "BUG" or "JUG." Jesse must run to get me these things from about the house. Soon, it's Jesse's turn to write *me* a message. (I'm never allowed to look while he's writing *his*, so I can often do another bit of needed neatening during this time...) He usually likes to use his favorite books to help him with spelling out words he needs, coming up with "Give Jesse a dinosaur," etc., and then I must find those items for *him*. He's reluctant to just try putting words together as they sound to him, but he does know that he has resources to turn to other than just me. The game goes on until Jesse wants to stop, often a half-hour or more (or other times 5 minutes!). It is full of lots of laughs, hugs, and sitting on laps and leaping about -- no quiet desk work for us!

Another idea that has been a help to us is making Jesse his own small word book-dictionary. We stapled together 26 long skinny pages, and wrote one letter at the top of each page. Anytime Jesse needs to spell a word, for a letter to Grandma, the message game, a sign he's making, a note to Daddy, etc., I'll write it in his book on the proper page. It's surprising how much learning comes from this simple device. First, of course, it saves all the innumerable scraps of paper we used to have lying about when Jesse wanted words written out for him -- helps cut down on clutter! Jesse always wants me to read over all his "old" words on a page whenever a new one is added, absorbing again the initial sounds of the words. Often a word he needs is already in his book and Jesse can usually somehow figure out which one it is. He's getting more familiar with alphabetical order, and is now able to find the letter for the word he needs without looking through the entire book randomly. He can also guess what letter his word will start with, and is always pleased when he comes up with a word for a letter page that hasn't had any words written on it up to then...

A Short History of Reading Instruction

One of the first reading methods used in this country, beginning in colonial times, was the "alphabet-spelling system" in which spelling instruction and reading instruction were the same thing. Children would learn to read by spelling out loud. Longer words would be spelled by syllables. For example, the word "attention" would be recited, "A T, at, T E N, ten, T I O N, tion."

In *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Laura Ingalls Wilder recalls learning to read by spelling:

Laura was a whole class by herself, because she was the only pupil who could not read. Whenever Teacher had time, she called Laura to her desk and helped her read letters. Just before dinner-time that first day, Laura was able to read, *C A T, cat*. Suddenly she remembered and said, "*P A T, Pat!*"

Teacher was surprised.

***R A T, rat!*" said Teacher. "*M A T, mat!*" And Laura was reading! She could read the whole first row in the speller.⁸**

In the 1830s, the *McGuffey Eclectic Readers* were first published, and pupils began to learn phonics.

Then, in the 1920's the "look-say" method became the predominant method. The idea was that children could learn to read without all of the difficulty involved with learning phonics. Soon, the Scott Foresman readers with Dick, Jane, and Sally swept the country.

Then, in 1955, Rudolf Flesch wrote *Why Johnny Can't Read* which held that many American children were failing to learn to read because they were not learning phonics. Flesch made quite a stir -- his book climbed to the top of the best-seller lists and stayed there. Up to that time, the American public had left reading instruction to the reading educators. Now the educators were on the defensive. Committees were formed. Research was conducted. New beginning-reading methods were tried...

Soon the time came to summarize the new research, to decide whether "phonics" or "look-say" was the better approach. In 1967, Jeanne Chall, mentioning Rudolf Flesch only briefly, concluded, as he had, that phonics (which she called "code-emphasis") was indeed more effective:

The research from 1912 to 1965 indicates that a code-emphasis method -- i.e. one that views beginning reading as essentially different from mature reading and emphasizes learning of the printed code for the spoken language -- produces better results, at least up to the point where sufficient evidence seems to be available, the end of the third grade.⁹

Fun With Dick and Jane

Chall's report was accepted by the majority of educators, and soon, the "look-say" readers were gathering dust. We happened upon a whole collection of those readers almost by accident. When Jacob was four and Molly fourteen months, a retired teacher friend of ours cleaned out her basement and gave us her old readers. Included were all of the editions of the king of the "look say" readers -- *Fun With Dick and Jane*. Two years later Susan wrote...

It's been a golden time for my middle child Jacob lately. Not only is he now SIX (and "as clever as clever"), but his two front teeth are out now, he's getting very proud of his soprano recorder ability, AND he's now really learning to read. And reading a BOOK, not just a spot of words here and there.

Now, I'm a trifle embarrassed to admit to some readers exactly what books it IS that have been Jacob's chosen entry into this new realm of the literary. You'll laugh, or you'll be aghast, or you'll be at least quite stunned, knowing my general disdain for most school textbooks, and school readers in particular. But here it is -- Jacob has begun reading, and become VERY excited about reading, by choosing as his own *We Look and See*, a 1947 version of the old Dick-Jane-Sally-Spot-Tim-Puff books... The real "look-say" pre-primer stuff I've always referred to as dumb, awful, disrespectful, horribly boring, the no-wonder-kids-hate-reading-in-school stuff. Jacob now loves them, they are HIS books. This piece is my wondering why, my sorting out, my sharing with you.

I've had a pet theory (formed when Jesse first became a reader a few years ago around age 6 1/2) that kids only like -- and enjoy and find amusing and worth endless re-readings -- all the very simple "first books" WHEN they view themselves as people actively learning to read. If instead they view themselves as LISTENERS foremost, then the easy books mean nothing, they are spurned and ignored in favor of the REALLY good stuff -- *Peter Pan*, *Heidi*, *Charlotte's Web*, *The Little House* books. Real literature, stories to immerse yourself in, and become and delight in. I saw this with Jesse -- all the I CAN READ BOOKS we had were crisp and new, unloved and un-dogged eared UNTIL Jesse became a beginning reader. Then they were all gathered into a special shelf in his bedroom, read, re-read, talked over, laughed over, seriously discussed, viewed from 20 different angles and insights. Thoroughly known and loved. Books just a cut above his current ability were referred to with a "Why, Jesse, I bet in just another two months you'll even be reading THIS!" It was a new adventure, a new falling in love.

And so I wondered what would do it for Jacob. What book would he claim as his personal ticket? Looking back, his choice seems entirely understandable, even predictable (if still amusing and charming in its innocence...). You see, these old Dick-Jane-and-Sally books are really family treasures now. We've ALL fallen in love with them.

We first got these books two years ago. I recognized them right off as being very close to the versions I'd read as a 6 year old (and links with our own past always carry wide emotional ties, stronger than we know maybe). We all looked through them, laughing at how DUMB the stories were, how clipped and short the language, how ALL hard (and interesting) words were carefully deleted and how almost any situation could be responded to with "Oh, oh, oh! Funny, funny _____!" But besides laughing over the books we also realized they could come in handy. After all, they had BABY SALLY in them, and Molly, then not quite one and a half, loved BABIES in her books. Maybe we could distract and absorb Molly with them, and so get on with our own more important work. And for Molly it was love at first sight -- unabashed, immediate, undying to this day (OUR love has grown much more slowly, to be sure!). Molly hugged (and lugged) these books about, chanting "Baby! Baby!" with a far off look of wonderment in her eyes. Utterly smitten. And we had to admit that Baby Sally did remind US a good bit of Molly -- same chubby good spirits, same absorption in things like carefully daubing bath powder all over herself and all her toys and pets, or trying to stuff kittens into baby swings... And Jesse, just then turned 7, and just beginning to become a SOMEWHAT comfortable and fluent reader, would sometimes offer to read Molly ALL of the three Dick-Jane pre-primers, plus all of the longer first book straight through, and I'd be amused to see him chuckling aloud over the books, really enjoying the EASE of this reading and the humor in these ridiculous non-stories.

And we even did a good bit of "Critical Comparison" with the readers that were used in those days. We compared "Dick and Jane" to "Dot and Jim," and "Janet and John," and "Susan and Ted" -- all the other similar 3 children in a nondescript happy family basal readers. We came to the conclusion that, of books of this particular genre (not that we LIKED the genre, mind you!) the "Dick and Janes" were indeed the best. We compared the more recent mid 1950's versions to the 1947, to the 1939, to the 1926. We had them all, and laughed over the changes we saw over the years. Also definitely noticed the lowering of word count -- the same "plot" would become more and more truncated over time, eventually winding up with no nouns at all, and very top heavy with "oh, oh, oh!"

Now Jacob always most vociferously has labelled these books as stupid and dumb, has flown into innumerable rages when Molly has insisted we read her one of these when HE wanted a REAL story book read. That's of course all changed now. Jesse

"mentioned" this to Jacob at supper tonight, saying, "But Jacob, I thought you always used to HATE these books." (He received a swift kick under the table from me and a scathing glance and he quickly changed the subject...) Jacob's response was utter disbelief and shock -- hate HIS BOOKS? NEVER!!

I can't even now actually remember how it was that Jacob suddenly took to these books. It WAS sudden, it was on one particular day. The timing was somehow right, if unplanned. It was as if Jacob suddenly looked at this print and could suddenly apprehend and grasp the whole idea of reading, a real "aha!" experience for him. The sort that made him grab the book from me and point to the words eagerly HIMSELF, able now to READ, even if it was just "oh, oh, oh." From that day on, we've been always referring to Jacob as "someone who's REALLY learning to read," and we tell everyone else this and he overhears, and he's readily viewing himself in this way, too. Not that he thinks he's completed the process, or become fluent, or become cocky about the whole thing -- it's just that he's readily identifying himself as someone capably going down this long road, he's begun the journey, and feels momentum and a good swing to his step. HE'S moving down the road, he's not being dragged, he's not lost, and not taking too many bad falls. (One somewhat "bad fall" was the day recently when he announced he WOULDN'T read his DICK AND JANE that day, instead he'd read an Arnold Lobel FROG AND TOAD book. He quickly saw he was way over his head, and the discouragement was palpable.)

Now our actual way of using these books is far different from the typical school scenario of the Round Robin reading circle. Jacob knows he'll read to me daily (and I try to be very consistent in not letting a day slip by -- only takes 5 to 10 minutes, after all). He sits on my lap in an old stuffed rocker, cuddled back against me, and he begins. Usually he starts at the beginning of the book each time. "Oh, oh, oh!" and on and on. He points a finger at each word, usually, barely glancing at the picture. He's clearly not just reciting, as he used to do last winter when he "read" *Harry the Kitten* by spouting whole long passages without a glance at the text -- or maybe a finger running under each line in proper left to right sequence but with his eyes completely feasting on the pictures. He makes mistakes, he mis-reads, AND HE CORRECTS HIMSELF -- all without the terrible abuse of fellow reading group mates ready to pounce on any error with urgently upraised hands. And he even uses his growing phonics knowledge with these books. We did lots of informal phonics work last winter -- matching beginning sounds of words, beginning to write by Jacob sounding words out as best he could, making rhyming flip books, talking and laughing about "roaring Richman R" and "leg of lamb L" and "SSSSnaky S." He became much more tuned into thinking of sounds in words, more noticing, and so he brings all this to these unabashedly sight word oriented books. We continue to do more phonics work,

as play, on the side, but for Jacob THIS is real reading -- the work of reading a text with a STORY.

We usually try to read in the morning when Jacob is freshest, and when Jesse is off quiet in the livingroom reading on his own. Molly usually wants to crawl up and listen, too, (remember these were first "her" books) and this is sometimes tolerated by Jacob, sometimes not. Molly never tires of hearing these books, and is even claiming now that SHE can read them, too. Jacob feels very superior and grown-up because he KNOWS he's doing the real thing and that Molly is just pretending. (Actually I don't think it will be all that long until Molly is NOT just pretending, but that's another story...)

And too, for Jacob it is very comforting and necessary and good that the books are so easy. Lots of repetition, and no tongue-twisting mix-ups like the ones found in some strict linguistic or phonics readers. You know, the "Can Dan fan Nan? Pat can fan Dan. Can Nan fan a fat man?" sort of thing. I think Jacob's tongue would get in hopeless knots quickly and he'd burst into tears over such stuff.

A friend recently said to me she couldn't understand why all the "first" readers all repeated things so much. Why not ONE "jump," instead of "jump, jump, jump?" Well, for Jacob it was quite an enlightening thing to realize that if he'd read a word once, and the same constellation of letters came up again, right away, that it WAS THE SAME WORD. He'd be able to tell it at a glance -- the SAME WORD! -- and so get a feeling of speed to his reading, right away.

Jesse is also free to make fun of these books when he feels like it. Today he came up to me laughing, with his arms outstretched and all his fingers spread wide apart. He told me he was acting as if HE were one of the Dick-Jane illustrations -- they are almost always drawn in various states of shock, FINGERS OUTSPREAD (the physical counterpart of "oh, oh, oh" I guess...). A few times, especially if the days reading is hard, or Jacob is feeling a bit grumpy about the whole thing, Jacob will suddenly decide to read every person's name or pet's name as "dumb." "Go, Dumb, go! Run, Dumb, run!" Funny thing is, of course, he has to read all the names silently to himself FIRST to even figure out they are names -- it's actually quite a mental trick for him, and a game he enjoys immensely. We don't have to pretend we always feel enraptured with Dick and Jane's exploits -- although amazingly enough we actually do enjoy them a bit and are often surprised to find ourselves laughing aloud over them.

These books also give Jacob a clear direction -- they're not a dead-end, one story proposition. He's seriously set himself the goal of reading through the whole of the first Primer (it follows the three preprimers he's working on now) by Christmas -- or sooner. We refer to his books as "chapter books" (albeit very short chapters, of

course...) and talk about the whole SERIES, and Jacob views his work with them with the same seriousness of purpose as Jesse's goal of reading all the *Little House* books on HIS own. They now each have their own series, their own turf of equal dimension.

And Jacob, whose forte is NOT sociability and outward friendliness, let alone TALKATIVENESS with others, has come out of his awkwardness a bit through his new reading ability. One night, at 9:30 p.m. when I was feeling overwhelmed that I hadn't YET begun getting everyone up to bed but was letting us slip into another late night/late morning cycle -- just then Jacob announced sturdily that he wanted to go and read to "Pap Pap," his grandfather. Now Jacob has rarely said out right that he wanted to do ANYTHING with ANYONE, and so when Jacob said this, we all acted. We got Molly back into her clothes, got shoes on everyone, and walked up to the cottage, and Jacob read to his grandmother and grandfather, cuddled on his Pap Pap's lap. They were charmed and amazed -- perhaps partly amazed because they'd never heard him utter so many words so clearly in all his life. This good event also spurred Jesse on to prepare his OWN book to read to his grandparents, something he never would have thought of doing on his own -- a good example of a younger sibling inspiring an older, rather than always the other way around.

We've also begun forming little rituals to mark special reading accomplishments. Jacob requested I make him a small stuffed toy cat when he completed the first preprimer, and I agreed, and even followed through on it. I'm often a great PROMISER of homemade toys, but often just don't quite get to the sewing machine to really make the plans realities... So this follow-through on BOTH our parts -- Jacob in reading, me in sewing -- was very good for us and our relationship. Bribery? I don't think so. I see it more as just a concrete way to help Jacob recognize and feel proud of his own accomplishments. A sort of "graph" of his progress.

And Jacob now has his first official books listed on his "Stairway of Books," opposite Jesse's. He's moving along, and I'm sure he'll soon become as voracious a reader as his brother.

Now, I hope no one interprets this piece as a "recommendation" of "DICK AND JANE." They would probably bomb out completely in most families and with most kids. I hope more just to encourage all of you to be ready to respond to YOUR child's way of moving into reading, and be ready to appreciate the work they do, the problems they need to overcome, and respect the materials THEY choose from what you make available. And I hope you can take the time to DELIGHT in your child's beginning reading accomplishments and triumphs, get beyond all the doubts about "proper" methods and just really see and appreciate our own unique kids. HAPPY READING!

¹O. B. Speer, & G. S. Lamb, First Grade Reading Ability and Fluency in Naming Verbal Symbols. *The Reading Teacher*, 1976, 29, 572-576.

²P. Satz, H. G. Friel, & J. Fletcher, Some Developmental and Predictive Precursors of Reading Disabilities: A Six Year Follow-up. In A. L. Benton & D. E. Pearl (Eds.), *Dyslexia: An Appraisal of Current Knowledge*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

³R. J. Erion, Chronological Age, Immaturity, and the Identification of Learning Disability. *Educational Research*, 1986-1987, 11, 2-7. Also Raymond S. Moore cites three other studies that came to the same conclusion that chronological age at school entrance is related to school success in R. S. Moore, *Research and Common Sense: Therapies for Our Homes and Schools Teachers College Record*, 1982, 84, p. 367.

⁴D. Durkin, Is There a Match Between What Elementary Teachers Do and What Basal Reader Manuals Recommend? *The Reading Teacher*, 1984, 37, 734-748.

⁵R. S. Moore, *Research and Common Sense: Therapies for Our Homes and Schools Teachers College Record*, 1982, 84, 355-377.

⁶A. Huxley, *The Art of Seeing*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942; W. H. Bates, *Better Eyesight Without Glasses*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920.

⁷J. Holt, *Never Too Late: My Musical Life Story*. New York:Delta/Seymore Lawrence, 1978 p. 131.

⁸L. I. Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* New York: Harper & Row, 1937, p. 152.

⁹J. Chall, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967, p. 307.