

# Learning Phonics

The longest, hardest, task for children, when they are learning to read, is learning phonics -- the relationships between written words and spoken words.

Often, when children are beginning to connect letters and sounds, they will notice sounds in the words that they see. When we are out in car rides Jacob will sometimes pipe up with some observation about such connections. For example, recently Jacob said, "Did you know that the *PH* in *Murphys* makes the *F* sound?" Usually, the links that Jacob notices are accurate, sometimes they are not.

When Jacob was just beginning to make these connections, Susan wrote...

Jacob is making beginning steps towards reading and it's very exciting. I'm watching him begin forging new links, new hypotheses, tumbling ideas about in his 5 year old mind till he's brave enough and sure enough to show me his little polished gems of discovery. Today, en route to the Western Pennsylvania La Leche League Conference, in the midst of other conversations that he wasn't part of, he suddenly piped up with, "Mommy! the word *juice* starts with *B*!!!" He was obviously very proud, very confident, repeated his discovery a few times. Now usually when Jacob makes these observations he's right, or close (like, "Mommy, *elephant* begins with *L*"). But today it was "*juice* begins with *B*." How was I to respond? Several choices sprang before me, rather like an array of possible answers on a multiple choice test. I could:

1. Rain on his parade -- say, perhaps sadly, obviously pained at his ignorance, that, no, *juice* didn't start with *B*, sweetie, it started with *J*, can't you hear it?
2. I could laugh and ridicule his conclusion (as I feared Jesse might -- luckily he wasn't listening at all as he was utterly absorbed in reading the final blizzard scene in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*).
3. I could give Jacob an impromptu and frantic phonics drill on *J* vs. *B* sounds, worried that he might be showing signs of something worse than even dyslexia -- he not only confuses *D* and *B*, but *J* and *B*!
4. Or I could respond as I did, saying, "Wow, Jacob, you are really thinking about the sounds you hear in lots of words, all on your own!"
5. Or I could have responded with none of the above, ignoring his proud comment as not worth noticing or "reinforcing," and just get back to my discussion with Howard.

I could have tossed aside Jacob's little brave gem as mere muddy gravel. I think that must happen a lot when we respond carelessly to our children, or too anxiously or too

seriously. I'm glad that today I didn't do that to Jacob. There will be time enough for him to rethink, rework, reconsider, time enough to point out the *J* on the orange juice can the next time he mixes up a batch...

## **Dealing With Children's Frustrations**

**Perhaps the key to how quickly children will learn phonics is how much time they are willing to put into trying to sound out words. If they are willing to spend five or ten seconds of effort each time they come to a new word, they will probably make quick progress. If they are only willing to spend about one second and then they start searching the ceiling for the answer, then they won't learn very quickly.**

**Many children get very tense when they are trying to sound-out words. If they get frustrated, and don't think that they can succeed no matter how hard they try, they will spend less and less time trying.**

**If you listen to a beginning reader, sometimes you can hear the tension. I was talking to a mother of a late reader this weekend. I had tested Laura when she was seven and just getting started. Now, three years later, I gave her another test and she was reading at an average level for a ten-year-old. She also was starting to read long chapter books to herself. It was clear that she was well on her way to becoming an excellent reader. Laura's mother said that Laura's reading voice had recently changed. It used to sound stilted and tense. Her baby brother, imitating her, would pretend to read in the same voice. But now, it was smooth and relaxed.**

My kids frequently experience frustrations with learning, especially my boys, Jesse (now 10) and Jacob (now 7). Molly (just turning four) meets challenges usually with more ease and equanimity, but she too has her times of personal outrage and trauma when things don't come easily. Mostly for Molly, however, things just DO seem to come more easily -- her coordination is more mature and ready, she can remember more effortlessly, she is eager. And because she is young, she is not pushed or coerced into trying things that might be beyond her.

One thing I have definitely noticed about both boys -- they seem to thrive on some structure to their days, some "inner skeleton" to our daily lives and our joint expectations. If I just let things slide and don't ask them to take part in certain things regularly with me, then I meet all sorts of frustrations and anger and groans and arguments when I eventually suggest the activity again.

Take recorder playing with Jacob. When we play regularly, we develop a rhythm, a "game" as it were, of how we should go about the music time. Jacob gets better and better (VERY gradually, mind you), less frustrated with himself, and I find my own creativity flowing in finding new ways to help us go about it all. BUT when we slide, and let days, and even weeks, go by without our special music time together, then it is like going back to square one, or perhaps minus three. Jacob can clearly and painfully realize that he no longer is as good as he was just a short while back, his fingers are clumsy, he slouches and groans, furrows his forehead, audibly moans and complains. It is always VERY tempting when this happens to just lay off entirely, just forget the whole idea of playing music with Jacob, just say to myself that he is not "ready" and to try again in a year (or three, or never). But somehow the memory of the good times we've had won't let me do that, and so I persevere. I try again the next day, and often it is more of the same. But we try the next day, and somehow then it's NOT so bad. Maybe I'm working harder at being more patient, more focussed on Jacob's successes, more trying to remember the ATMOSPHERE of our good times and how we achieved that. Things start once again moving along somewhat positively. Less groaning, less complaining, more enthusiasm. Soon Jacob is taking more control of the situation, deciding how we'll structure the day's time -- "First I'll play five *Cats in the Cradles*, then five *Hot Cross Buns*, then five *Mary Had a Little Lambs*, then..." We both begin having a good time of it, and look forward to playing recorder together as an expectation in our day. We get back in our rhythm, and can move forward.

I remember Donald Graves saying in *Write From the Start*, a wonderful book on writing with children, that if children write only one day a week, then they will always balk at that one time. But if children begin to write regularly, almost daily, THEN they can begin to feel like real writers, feel some momentum, some rhythm to it all. They can begin to feel a part of a long process, less worried about each day's little troubles and frustrations. With very irregular writing, they are so focussed on that one effort, which may be turning out VERY poorly, and they can't see beyond that. ALL writers turn out LOTS of stuff that they look back on and decide to toss -- but if you have LOTS of writing, many days and MONTHS of writing, you also find some gems worth polishing in the pile. You can start to realize that each day's particular effort is not so earth shattering, that it's the cumulative body of work that becomes important.

I've seen this so clearly with Jesse. Jesse has written a lot over these several years, but he too has times when he's "off" writing. Summer usually does it (like now...), because there just isn't time to do such a sit-down type of activity when there are the woods inviting play, and treehouse building, or haymaking to help with, or the pond to swim in. Summer is a different time, and I usually respect that writing just can't take place much then. But soon fall will be here, and we'll start in again. I expect he'll feel rusty, creaky in the joints from disuse. He'll probably have trouble zeroing in on a

topic, probably have trouble writing thoughts with any fluency or speed, probably leave out all punctuation and capital letters and seem to have regressed terribly in spelling. He'll probably groan about it all, I'll probably be demanding and critical and impatient, but I feel certain we'll make it. I feel confident we'll get over that initial hurdle. We'll probably spend some time rereading lots of his old writing from last year and the year before, just to get a feel for where he was when he "left off." We'll make a new writing folder, decide on what types of paper or notebooks he wants to write rough drafts in, or if he's going to focus on typing with our word-processor. We'll probably try to set goals together for writing ideas, brainstorming together about topics, styles of writing he might want to try, new places to submit finished pieces. I'm sure the good rhythm of daily writing won't be especially easy to work into, but we'll keep at it. It's what we expect to do now come Fall. I'm trusting our memories of the good writing done in the past will spur us on, get us over those first bad days.

I think that one thing dealing with my kids' frustrations has taught me is that we can't give up. We can't say, "Oh, they just WON'T do it, I give up on them." We become what John Holt always described as "serious" teachers -- we look for other ways to go about it all, try to observe the situation more clearly, read what others have done to get a fresh perspective, step back a bit to get our bearings and then try again. We make changes, we negotiate. We accept the frustration and then move on from there. We try again. We try NOT to just blame the KIDS for all the trouble.

I've also found, in working with our kids, that it always helps for ME to be actively working at learning something new also, so that I can share with the kids my own difficulties and frustrations and how I'm going at working them out. Helps with piano with Jesse. For a month or more I hadn't really tried seriously learning a new piece -- instead I had been working at polishing up some oldies. But I was asking HIM to consider a new piece, quite a hard one for him, "Short Story" in the *Suzuki Book Two*. And sometimes I would push him beyond his endurance or capabilities, wanting to work on everything in the piece at once, wanting him to keep at it for far longer than he could bear. It's helped tremendously now for me to be working on a new piece (the last "Minuet" by Bach in the *Suzuki Book Two*), and to realize again how HARD it is to get a new piece together. I know again the frustration of getting ONE hand going the right way, but it all falls apart when I add the OTHER hand. It takes slowing down, breaking the piece down into smaller bits, ignoring the second half of the piece just now till I get the first part more in control. Getting a feel of the piece humming through my head. Now I'm more empathetic and responsive with Jesse and his limits and needs, because I'm feeling all of this in myself again. My better approach is not just an abstraction, not something I read in a book about a "positive" way to deal with children -- I'm responding now out of my own experience.

Same goes for writing -- when I write, then I can better help Jesse and Jacob write. When I'm out of touch with my own writing, then I'm not much good at getting in touch with their work either. Instead I'm impatient, badgering, looking over their shoulders with a frown, ready to pounce. Expecting instant perfection. (Often when I'M "off" writing is exactly when the boys are "off" writing, so we're ALL out of rhythm, out of sync...) When I am involved in my own work, then I can share with the boys more as a COLLEAGUE, not come on just as a dictator of sorts, or a nasty judge. I can listen better, feel into their way of working more. Maybe I feel more humbled when I'm writing too, or more excited, or just more active myself.

Another thing that has helped us a lot is to notice the weather and what it's doing when we're all feeling particularly close to tears all day and frustrations break out into nasty accusations too frequently. Most specifically we try to notice the air pressure. Last winter we did a stint of reading about weather and made several weather detecting devices. I began reading in a *TIME/LIFE* book about the many experiments that have been done to see what affect changes in air pressure have on animals and people, and it was fascinating. Seems low air pressure makes even pets fussy and fidgety and snappish, and with people -- watch out! Studies have shown that students in schools are much more unruly and have more trouble concentrating during low air pressure times. Tempers snap, everything seems too hard, too overwhelming, too frustrating. Give a change to high pressure, and everything seems more even, more manageable, more possible, and everyone concentrates better. Now around here even Molly can be heard to say, "Watch out, it must be a low air pressure day!" if she can tell everyone is getting on everyone's nerves too much. I'm thinking of buying a good barometer this fall, so we can all keep track of air pressure changes ourselves more accurately, and so become more understanding of our mood changes, less blaming each other personally for bad days. Maybe realize that the bad days are indeed bad DAYS, not an indication of bad PEOPLE.

Another thing that I think will help long-term in helping the kids through frustrating learning times is that we read a LOT of biographies, short and long, about inventors and scientists. And the kids are clearly getting at least one very important message from them -- these folks DIDN'T give up easily, even in the face of seemingly endless frustration. The invention of velcro took TEN YEARS (the inspiration was burrs caught on a dogs' fur...). The zipper took even more. And we all know about Edison's sleepless nights, night after night, when he was working at finding a proper filament for his lightbulb idea. Galileo and Newton kept at grinding lenses for telescopes for months on end, and sometimes had to then abandon the lens if it wasn't just right. The Wright brothers had many more than a dozen flops before successfully getting off the ground. And so it made me feel good the other day when Jacob came up and said, "What if the man who invented zippers had just given up after one year?" They are

realizing that it IS possible to keep going even with long-term frustration, that an idea may take a very long time to come to fruition, that the great people of the world who have made positive changes weren't put off by initial roadblocks and dead-ends. The old "try, try again" saying really applied to these folks, and I think my kids will internalize this more and more over time. At least our reading is giving them a more realistic model for dealing with initial or continuing frustration than that found in most schools. In school it is usually, "Get it right, right now, or else." No second chances, let alone tenth or hundredth chances, no chance to keep at something hard for years on end. It's get it NOW, or we'll list you as "failed" forever.

In this connection, I was amused by an incident the other day when I was visiting homeschooler Carol Wilson in Pittsburgh. During an extra moment I tried playing my Clementi Sonatina on their piano (one of my "polishing up" pieces that still needs some polishing...). Carol's son Luke (almost 9) heard the music, and Carol overheard him say to Jesse, "Wow! What is she playing! That's not even ON my Suzuki tape! That sounds REALLY hard!" Now Carol has often said that Luke feels terribly frustrated with anything if he can't get it perfectly the very first time he tries it, and she thinks maybe Jesse was trying to help Luke feel less overwhelmed by my seeming "mastery" by replying, "Oh, yes, but she's been working on that piece for over a year now."

And it's true, I have been. And I'm sure I'll be working on it still next year, and Jesse knows this. Jesse overhears my practice times, hears me talking about my pieces, hears me stumble over particularly hard parts, knows how I backslide if I don't practice regularly, AND he hears me get better gradually over time. He knows I don't give it all up just because it's hard. He also knows it's not "magic" that I can do what I can now do; he knows I've worked at it a long while, for hours and hours and hours over several years. He knows maybe that people have to EARN their accomplishments. Good long-term thing to know...

## **Using a Phonics Program**

**Many homeschooled children learn phonics through a parent-directed program which teaches them how to sound out words. After Jacob had read several versions of the Dick and Jane pre-primers and had a reading vocabulary of perhaps one hundred words, we purchased *Sing, Spell, Read & Write* by Sue Dickson, foot an attractive, though expensive, phonics program including cassette tapes, workbooks, games, and beginning readers. In a matter of months, six year old Jacob moved through the beginning readers and took off into reading other easy reading books and rereading his Dick and Jane primers with a new eye. As Susan writes...**

I first heard about this phonics/beginning reading program from a flyer in the mail a year and a half ago or so. Looked mildly interesting -- seemed to have cassette tapes of songs to help kids learn phonics generalizations, a bunch of games, a set of paperback readers. Seemed to be specially suited to home use, too, although it had been developed for use first in a school setting. The \$90.00 price tag put me off -- AND the notion that I NEEDED such a pre-set-up "program" to help my kids with beginning reading. Afterall, Jesse had become a competent reader without such nonsense. So I probably tossed the flyer out, although I was wondering if anyone else had ever used it or heard of it.

Then came our second legislative breakfast in Harrisburg to lobby for our Home Education Bill. The *Sing, Spell, Read & Write* folks were there for our "mini-conference" afterwards to give a talk and demonstrate their materials. And so I met Sue Dickson, the woman who actually developed *SSRW*, a former elementary school teacher. She was delightful, really seemed to be a creative, vivacious person who genuinely was excited about finding ways to make beginning reading easier for kids. She said that she'd realized how hard it was for her students to remember phonics generalizations with the usual materials -- in one ear, out the other, all with a yawn.

She HAD noticed that kids seemed to be able to remember favorite SONGS easily -- jingles for commercials, jumprope chants, folksongs. Songs didn't seem like "work" for most kids -- they were easy, a breeze. So Sue began putting these ideas together, and came up with simple songs about letters and their sounds and combinations. Then she wrote little phonics readers to go with them, cummulatively adding on all the sounds a child had come across, added simple BINGO-type games and Go-Fish matching card games, some "raceway" charts for a child to keep track of their progress, and *Sing, Spell, Read & Write* was born.

I wasn't able to sit in on all of Sue Dickson's presentation, as I was leading another workshop discussion at the same time, but I caught the tail end, and had a chance to hear some of the phonics songs. My first reaction to the songs was that they were certainly not particularly great music -- in fact they were down right sing-songy and "canned." BUT my kids and I found ourselves humming and singing these few songs we'd heard for several MONTHS afterward -- they WERE catchy, and we'd been caught. Over the next few months I had a chance to see the *SSRW* materials several times when other homeschooling mothers were sharing them with friends (how useful it is to actually see educational materials, away from a salesperson, and also hear how some others are using them). I liked some of the game ideas, heard more of the tapes, even peeked in the readers and saw they weren't awful. But we still didn't buy the program ourselves.

Jacob, then age 6, began reading that fall using "Dick and Jane" readers. He certainly knew most consonant sounds and sounds of most short vowels from informal work we'd been doing for a good while -- most especially in writing with our computer -- but at some point it all got overwhelming. He was mostly using first letters and general look and shape and feel of a word to recognize words he'd met, with a heavy dose of context clues. He had a growing vocabulary, and was excited about reading, but his reading vocabulary was limited to only those words he'd already specifically come across in his stories.

Jacob couldn't generate new words from old ones -- he couldn't take *jump* and so figure out the new word *dump*, or take *look* and turn it into *book*. And he definitely couldn't sound out a simple short vowel word like *bag* -- he'd get all mixed up about the whole IDEA of sounding out a word, trying to fit in letter NAMES instead of sounds, and generally getting in a dither (and on particularly bad days, not just a dither but something bordering on a tantrum...). He wanted nothing to do with my improvised phonics games with known words, and he got utterly mixed up and angry when I tried to use some ideas from some other phonics books around the house. He was getting frustrated; I was getting frustrated. We needed a change, and I began wondering again about *SSRW*. Our good homeschooling friends the Basemans purchased *SSRW* that winter, and shared a set of the phonics song tapes with us. At first I was surprised that there were only about 8 actual songs on the tapes, each tape being only a few minutes long (ninety bucks for THIS!!!). But I brought the tapes home and played them for Jacob and Molly, and we pointed along with the alphabet chart that went along with the first *ABC* song. I was amazed at the kids' response. Excitement! Retention! Let me do it again! My turn! Play the tape again! And much singing around the house of "A-A-APPLE, B-B-BALL, C-C-CAT, AND D-D-DOLL!!!" -- AND all this from Jacob yet, my least "sing-y" child, my child who rarely joined in at all when we sang as a family. That first day we decided to buy our own complete set, and it arrived in a week, and we haven't regretted spending that \$90.00.

I decided not to start Jacob out with the first workbook, *Off We Go* (an introduction to each letter and its sound in alphabetical order), as I felt he already knew most individual sounds and was getting this all reviewed anyway with the first song in the set. He moved right into the second workbook and the games, and I began reading the little books aloud to Jacob and Molly, just as we'd read any new book aloud together. I decided not to keep the books unknown entities until the day when they were "supposed" to read them themselves.

I noticed a few things right off about the books. They were actual long stories (in numbers of pages) with rudimentary plots and amusing characters, even though they were built on an incredibly limited vocabulary. The first reader, the "Short A -- Apple



Book" is 64 pages long (lots of page turning to really help you feel you are moving along fast), all with just short A words of 3 or 4 letters. And my kids thought it was funny, actually laughed out loud over the thing. And VERY quickly Jacob caught on to the before mysterious idea of sounding out words, completely new words -- what a breakthrough! Through the phonics songs, letter sounds are emphasized rather than letter names, so Jacob no longer had his old confusion about which in the world to use. He was launched.

Some "strict" phonics books are very strict about NO pictures -- a sort of paranoia that a child might (Heaven forbid!) get some clue to the story line from the pictures and therefore GUESS. *SSRW* does have pictures, plenty of them -- rather simple, even awkward illustrations, but at least they give some life to the stories, some humour and fun. It IS clear that the illustrations are "low budget." For instance, it's almost a guarantee that if a color word is mentioned in the text, the illustration will show it wrong -- the "brown shirt" is invariably blue or green. My kids weren't overly bothered by this and actually had fun pointing out these funny discrepancies, but I've heard some kids have been put off by it.

Jacob has not read through all of the books in the *SSRW* series, but just by our reading them aloud together he's gained a lot of useful phonics generalizations. It's not too hard to notice that the story focussing on the odd combination *KN* has *knights*, *knuckles*, *knit*, *knock*, *knew*, etc. Just the slightest bit of pointing this out while I am reading, asking Jacob or Molly to perhaps take a guess at the next *KN* word we come to, is often enough. They'd have the idea.

Also I found that once Jacob had a bit of experience in sounding out long vowel words, and had a working knowledge of most of the "letter clusters" like *OI*, *OY*, *SH*, *CH*, *TH*, *NG*, etc., he was ready to try out most of the REAL books we had in our home designed for beginning readers. Books like *Little Bear*, *Frog and Toad*, *Mr. Pine's Mixed-up Signs*, *The Cat in the Hat*, *Curious George Flies a Kite*, and simple versions of old folk tales. He didn't have to stay only with the *SSRW* books to the very end before realizing he could branch out with confidence to other things.

This reading of REAL books -- books with characters he'd already loved for years, warm and charming illustrations, quality binding -- was a tremendous boost and encouragement to Jacob. I think any family would be making a mistake to try to limit a child to ONLY the *SSRW* books -- though useful and fun, they are by no means great literature or beautiful books in themselves, and I think it would be unfair to a child to make him feel these were all he was "allowed" to read until he'd finished the whole set. Finding books a child LOVES is more important.

Sue Dickson continually reminds us that we need to help our kids have SUCCESS with beginning reading, not make them feel foolish, or feel they are being tested and quizzed relentlessly. And she realizes the value of a sense of humour and play -- very different from a phonics program I came across the other day that made it very clear that "the student is to have an attitude of WORK not PLAY." She is trying to make it easy for kids. Helpful mnemonic devices are all through the materials -- in the songs, in the jingles to help a child remember how to form a letter. What are often sterile "RULES" in most phonics approaches are here turned into amusing and memorable characters, like "Mr. GH" who usually "frightens" the vowels in a word into saying a different sound. And it's nice to be able to just hum a few bars of one of the phonics songs as a gentle way of reminding Jacob of how he might sound out a new word he's stuck on.

And even Hannah, at almost 3 months, beams out with big smiles if you sing the short vowel song to her during a diaper change, so I guess we ALL like it!

## **Molly and Jacob Learn Phonics Together**

**Molly, beginning at age three, has been looking over Jacob's shoulder as he has been using *Sing, Spell, Read & Write*, and she has been learning phonics at the same time as Jacob. She is a little more passionate about words that don't fit the rules, ("Those bad rule breakers!") and a little slower in ability to combine sounds of letters in her head, but nevertheless, she has been learning. Susan wrote, when Molly was still three...**

As many of you have heard already via various grapevines (I almost thought about running the PENNSYLVANIA HOMESCHOOLERS PHONE TREE with the announcement...), we're expecting our fourth child in late summer. We're all starting to adjust happily to this surprise addition (and everyone here is looking forward to my SECOND trimester as opposed to my FIRST -- you know, hoping I'll peel myself off the sofa for a bit and get supper ready on time...) It seems like a fitting time to look over what it's like having three kids homeschooling and the values I've seen over the years for our kids in having siblings around all the time. May help me in making the adjustment to having FOUR homeschoolers in the family!!!

First there's the thought of what the younger ones learn from the older ones, and how special this is, and something that is hard to duplicate in schools. (Some schools do try to simulate the family, with elaborate programs of cross-age tutoring, but these relationships are certainly not as long term or special as having your own older brother and sister around every day...) I know Molly, now 3 1/2, would probably not be reading right now (yes, she can now read DICK AND JANE...) if she hadn't had

Jacob's example to follow, if she hadn't had that overwhelming urge to DO WHAT HE DOES. Being a younger sister, she could tag along and listen-in in a very non-pressured way while I was helping Jacob, and pick up what she could for her own reasons. So she pretended to read for a long time, and gradually we all began realizing she could REALLY read.

And I think of Jacob always listening in on discussions really held with Jesse about various topics much to "hard" by any SCHOOL'S terms for a three, four, five, or six year old. Surprising what the little ones pick up. Jacob became as involved as Jesse in our last year's study of Civil War times, and gradually began adding his own ideas to our talks. Jacob knows all the funny stories about Lincoln, knows more about the Monitor and the Merrimac than I do, and can sing all the Civil War songs we learned. This year he still mentions things he picked up last year when he was the mere "younger tag-along" -- ideas really sunk in when I maybe thought he was just hanging on the fringes.

And vocabulary! The littler ones have picked up vocabulary from the older ones so easily -- not in any school-regimented workbook style way, but rather by always living with a world of words a bit above them. They overhear words like *octave*, or *improvise*, or *treble clef sign*, and they certainly don't know right off what they mean, and they don't question me about what they mean, but the words are there in the environment, and they know they have something to do with music and they gradually catch on. The words aren't introduced suddenly one day out of the blue by a music teacher in a third grade music class, but are old familiar friends that just become slowly more familiar and better known and understood. And how I loved to hear Molly importantly announce at age 3 that she was now going to *improvise!*" on piano (therefore we should be quiet and listen respectfully).

Now I had perhaps expected all of these types of things to happen -- littler ones learning from bigger ones. It's very special to watch unfold all around me, but not entirely a surprise -- seems like the natural sort of thing you would hope for with homeschooling. But a thing that has really caught me off guard is the fact that the littler ones in our family often inspire the bigger ones. It has not been a one way street of older kids giving and younger ones taking.

Take reading. As I said, Molly was certainly inspired by Jacob in her strong drive to make sense of print. But he is equally inspired by HER example. She does things to try to read that Jacob has never thought of doing, and he takes some cues from her and begins trying them too. One thing she does all the time is to VERY carefully scan the print whenever I am reading aloud to her -- something Jesse and Jacob NEVER did as pre-readers. She suddenly calls out, "There's the word *look* -- and she's right! Or now she notices words that are ALMOST like words she recognizes -- "That word is

almost like *look*," and she points and it's the word *book*. Or it becomes a game for them to see who can call out a word I come to that I know they can figure out.

We are now using the *Sing, Spell, Read & Write* program at home, and having great fun with it. And again Molly inspires Jacob, and Jacob inspires Jesse -- and Jesse inspires Jacob, and Jacob inspires Molly, round and round again. Molly and Jacob can play the simple Bingo-type game SOUND-O together very happily (we always play cooperatively, not competitively!), sometimes Jacob helping Molly find a letter on her card, and sometimes Molly pointing out a letter to Jacob. And Molly was the first of the two to feel confident enough to play the game with lower case letters rather than upper case -- and Jacob quickly followed suit. Jesse is going through the whole program in order to help his spelling (it's his decision), and this has made Jacob more eager to keep going and moving along. (Jacob is right now officially "ahead" of Jesse, and therefore feels VERY proud!) They ALL sing the phonics songs together, Jesse not thinking it's babyish, Molly not thinking it's too hard, Jacob pleased to have everyone else part of what he's doing...

## **Informal Phonics Lessons**

**Most parents teach phonics without using a specific phonics series. Cindy Dale, for example, taught her two year old some phonics just by using an alphabet book. Cindy would say, "This is A." And Taraka would respond, "This is A." Each day they would go through this book, as it was one of Taraka's favorites. Eventually, Cindy began to ask, "What is this letter?" And Taraka would just naturally know the letter's name. Then Cindy told Taraka a sound for each letter in the same book, and soon she was asking Taraka, "What is this sound?" By the time Taraka was three, she could tell a sound for every letter. Taraka loved it. Soon Cindy was wondering if Taraka could put the sounds in words together and learn to read that way, but when she saw that it was too difficult for Taraka she dropped this attempt. She was watching Taraka for clues of readiness, and was in no hurry.**

**When Taraka was four and a half, Cindy was searching for a way to resume reading instruction. She found a book called *Teach Your Child to Read* by R. Baker Bausell, Carole R. Bausell & Nellie B. Bausell which suggested that parents teach their children the vowels. So, first Cindy told Taraka which letters were vowels and which were consonants. Then she began to teach each vowel separately. Taraka readily learned the short sound for each vowel. Then Cindy told Taraka rules for when a vowel would have its short sound and when it would have its long sound. Soon Taraka was sounding out words that her mother**

would write down. She would notice final silent *E*'s and if two vowels were next to each other.

When Taraka was about five, she could look at a word and put it together. Soon she was reading a Walt Disney book about *Snow White* which she had enjoyed when it was read to her. Whenever she halted at a word that her mother didn't think she could sound out, her mother would tell her the word. Sometimes, when she halted at a word that could be sounded-out using a rule that Taraka knew, her mother would remind her about the rule ("What does that *E* at the end tell you?") and Taraka would be able to figure out the word. Similarly, Willy Parker enjoyed learning how to sound out the vowels at age five. He already knew the sounds of the consonants -- he had learned them by playing games with magnetic letters on the refrigerator when his mother would be doing dishes. On a typical day he would pick out a letter and ask, "Mommy, what is the sound for this?" Judy would reply, "That *C* makes the `cuh' sound." Sometimes she'd start a game, "Let's think of all the words in the kitchen that start with *C*." And they'd come up with *cup*, *cupboard*, and *cookies*. Then Willy might say, "Let's think of all the words in the park that start with *C*." This pleasant game would go on until the dishes were done, a perfect example of informal teaching and companionship!

At about the same time, Judy would often read to Willy from a Richard Scary alphabet book. Willy had his favorite pages which they would read hundreds of times. At first, Willy would point to a picture and ask, "What is this?" Judy would say the word underneath the picture and underline it when she'd say it. After they had read the page together many times, Willy would sometimes try it himself. He would underline a word with his finger and say the word while he was moving his finger from left to right. One of his favorite words was *oom-pa-pa* which was written by a picture of a pig playing a trombone.

One night, Judy was paying the bills while Willy was sleeping in his room next to the kitchen. Willy, never a heavy sleeper, came into the kitchen and found his mother muttering, "How could they possibly want this much for the telephone?" Willy crawled up on her lap and wanted to know what she was doing. Judy explained that she was looking over the telephone bill and she showed him it, "Look, there's the time the call was made, there's the date, and there's the place that the call was made to." Then Willy asked about the words *date*, *time*, and *place* written across the top of the page. First he asked, "Which word means the time?" Then he wanted to know how she knew that *date* said "date" and *place* said "place." "How do you know that *place* doesn't say `date'?"

Judy slowly sounded-out the word *date* and said, "Remember those games we play with the magnetic letters when we start with the *D* sound?" Then he wanted to know why the *A* made the "long-A" sound not the "short-A" sound. Judy pointed out the *E* at the end and said that when a vowel is alone between two consonants and there is an *E* at the end of the word, then that vowel makes the long sound. Willy asked, "Why?" and Judy explained that that was the way it was, and she wasn't sure why.

Then Willy sounded out the word *time* by himself and he got very excited. Then he read *place* and he read all three words over and over. Then he asked his mother to write other words so that he could read them. She put *lake*, *bake*, and *cake* on cards and he read them and soon was jumping up and down and hugging his mother. After that he wanted to read everything. They'd be driving and he'd read words on posters and signs, and he was always asking about the rules behind how words were spelled.

Soon his mother showed him the *OA* in words like *boat* and *coat*. Willy asked, "Why isn't it spelled *BOTE*? Is someone trying to trick me?" Although he didn't like the inconsistency of English spelling, he did go on to read more and more, and soon became a fine reader.

## Discovering Phonics Ideas as an Adult

Someone once asked me whether I thought it was important for fluent readers to learn phonics. I said, "No. The purpose of phonics is to help you learn to read. The only reason to learn phonics once you can read, is so that you can help others learn to read." Susan has been learning phonics lately. She writes...

One thing that has been fun for me as an adult trying to help my kids make sense of print and the patterns of our language, is that I've come to understand some phonics or spelling patterns that I've never seen written about in books. I've been doing some of my own detective work now, and it's exciting to pass this on to the kids. Take the words *have* and *live*. They seem to be "rulebreakers" because of the short sound of the first vowel even though there is an *E* at the end of the word (a usual signal for a long vowel sound). But when I began thinking about it I suddenly realized that in English, we NEVER have a word end in a plain un-adorned *V*. *V* just always takes an *E* after it at the end of a word -- that's its pattern in our language. Other languages are different (I think of the *Kirov Ballet...*), but that's just the way English is.

Also it's been fascinating to gradually discover the various nationality roots of strange word families in English. Ours is indeed a "melting pot" language, taking words from

all over the place. For instance, we'd found that *CH* could make one of three sounds -- most commonly the one in *choo-choo*, but also the *SH* sound found in *chandelier* or *Chicago*, or the *K* sound as in *Christmas* or *chorus* or *school*. It was comforting to me to read that the odd *SH* sounding *CH* words are most usually from French, and the *K* sounding *CH* words are from Greek. A quick look through a good dictionary that gives word origins confirms this. Indeed I can imagine an older child getting quite excited to discover these sorts of generalizations using a quality dictionary. I'm not saying a six year old should be required to remember this of course, but I think some knowledge of word origins CAN help a child realize that there IS a consistency to our language, it's just that our language's roots are so complex and tangled that things sometimes seem more arbitrary than they are. And more importantly, perhaps seeing a parent or other adult actively trying to ferret out these consistencies or patterns, finding meaning in seemingly chaotic "messes" is a good model for our kids (AND I just looked it up in the dictionary, and *chaos* IS a Greek word...). Also it shows once again that the study of anything can bring you to everywhere -- studying even phonics and spelling patterns can bring in the whole flow of Western history.

---

---

---

Copyright 1988 by Howard B. Richman and Susan P. Richman, All rights reserved

---