

Helping Children Learn to Read

Sometimes, when we're sitting around a campfire, I tell my kids some made-up stories about our monkey puppet (named "Monkey") and his friend John going camping. Generally, one of the trouble spots comes when they try to build a fire. Sometimes John just gets the fire sparked and started when Monkey brings over a whole pile of leaves (which he thought would burn) and drops them upon the fire smothering it out.

Part of building a campfire is sparking it with a match. The other part is gently kindling it little by little until it becomes a roaring blaze. If little sticks are not continually added the fire will die out, if the sticks that are added are too big, they may not catch, and too much at once is sure to smother the flame.

This chapter consists of stories of parents who have helped their children learn to read much as a woodsman might kindle a campfire. Sometimes these parents have helped to spark their children's interest. Sometimes they have carefully nurtured the fire until it finally grew into a roaring flame. Above all, these parents did not smother the fire but instead fed it little by little until their children finally became fluent readers.

Brian Teaches Himself to Read

Brian Coughenour taught himself to read. He had always been the kind of child who would figure things out on his own. When he was a baby he would do much of his babbling when lying by himself after waking up from a nap. He was also the kind of child who treasured his favorite stories and liked to hear them over and over again.

Like almost all home-schooled children, he was read to from an early age. He would listen to his favorite stories again and again until he practically had them memorized. He learned the alphabet after having an alphabet book read to him many times. When he was three, his parents found him off by himself reading his favorite book. Actually he had memorized it -- he knew the words by where they were on the page. When his mother would be reading to him, he would be looking closely at the words. Once, he pointed out to her that she was turning the page before speaking the words at the bottom.

When watching Sesame Street on TV, he would see words put together ($F + AKE = FAKE$; $L + AKE = LAKE$). He became interested in how sounds and letters are related and he began to question why some words are not as they "should" be.

At about age four and a half, or perhaps five, he began to read books which had not been previously read to him. By the time he turned six, he would frequently read on his own although he still enjoyed being read to.

Brian taught himself to read by reading books which he had memorized. His reading stemmed from his loving books so much that he wanted to hear them, or read them, again and again. He once asked his mother, "Wouldn't it be a terrible world if you could only read a book once?"

When people ask Debbye Coughenour how she taught Brian to read, she responds that he taught himself. While he did teach himself, that's only part of the story. She read stories to him as often as he wanted to hear them, bought books that he could treasure, and put his books on a low shelf where he could get them whenever he wanted.

There is a certain similarity between how some homeschooled children "teach themselves" to read and the way some children "teach themselves" to use a potty. I was over at a home-schooling family's house when it hit me. Kate McPherson had just mentioned that her littlest one had just taught herself to use a toilet, and I realized that my little daughter Molly had also just taught herself. Generally, in our society, most children are toilet *trained* and *taught* to read. One method of toilet training is to put children on toilets and force them to stay there until they use it.

When Molly taught herself to use a potty, we put the potty at floor level. She was allowed to walk around naked so that she could easily use it. She was allowed in the bathroom to see her family use the toilet. Every time she said, "Pee!" somebody accompanied her to the bathroom (and quickly!). When she did pee in the toilet or potty she had an appreciative audience noting her accomplishment.

In general, children who teach themselves to read all share some common home conditions: (1) their interest in words and print is encouraged by their parents, (2) their parents are willing to read books to them over and over until they have the books memorized, (3) the books are kept at a height where they can get them out on their own whenever they want, (4) they have an appreciative audience who listens to them read and notes their accomplishments.

Bobby Learns to Read by Memorizing Words

Bobby McMonigal has always had an excellent memory. When he was four he became interested in the words his mother, Gerry, was reading to him. Sometimes he would point to a word and ask Gerry what it was. After she'd tell

him, he'd repeat the word and he would learn it. Then he asked Gerry to underline the words with her finger while she read. When she came to a word that he did not know, he would stop her finger and thus halt her reading while he studied the word. Through such study, he began to build up a large reading vocabulary.

When Bobby was four and a half, he got a book off a library shelf and found that because he knew so many words, he could read it. When he came to a word that he did not know, his mother simply told him what it was. He read many books this way.

When he was almost six and already a pretty good reader, his mother purchased a phonics workbook. She thought that Bobby would be able to read better if he knew about long and short vowels. When she tried to use the workbook with Bobby, he got upset. After a while, he wouldn't even look at the page. Despite his exceptional reading, he couldn't seem to hear the differences between the different vowel sounds.

Apparently, children can learn to read without ever learning the difference between a "short-A" sound and a "short-E" sound. I have been studying Hebrew and have noticed that many of the vowel sounds are written below the letters for the beginning reader but are dropped in the newspapers and in most books. Fluent readers of Hebrew do not need to see these vowels in order to read the words. Perhaps children like Bobby discover on their own what very few adults realize -- that in English, like Hebrew, the words can be distinguished from each other without paying much attention to the sounds of the vowels.

Emily Learns to Read at Age Two

With some children the fire is easily kindled. When Madalene and Tom Murphy's eldest, Emily, was just two and a half, she loved to have the same books read to her over and over again. *The Ginger Bread Man* and *Small Pig* were her favorites. She must have listened to *Small Pig* hundreds of times. Emily didn't pay much attention to pictures, but she did pay attention to words. Soon she demanded that her mother underline the words with her finger when reading so that Emily could follow along. Soon Madalene and Emily started to play a game. After Madalene would finish reading a page, she would point to a word on the page for Emily to read. Emily loved the game. Sometimes, after they had finished reading together, Emily would take the book off by herself. One day, her parents found her sitting on her bed reading *The Little Engine That Could* to herself. By the time Emily was three, she was a reader.

Christian Learns the Same Way)

While Emily looked at the words more than the pictures when her parents were reading, her little brother, Christian, looked at the pictures, and he really did notice what was in the pictures! For example, when his parents were reading him a book in which a bulldozer knocked down a statue and dragged it away, Christian noticed that when the bulldozer knocked down the statue, the illustration showed that the statue's feet were left on the base. Six pages later, he noticed that when people were on the statue while it was being pulled by the bulldozer, the feet were shown as if they were still attached to the statue. "Hey, wait a second!" he said. Then he flipped back to the earlier illustration and pointed out the discrepancy.

While Emily liked books to be read over and over to her, Christian quickly got bored with a simple book. Where Emily at the same age would have wanted to listen to a simple *Babar* book, Christian would want to hear a heavy *Narnia* book. He wasn't at all interested in the kind of books that he would have been reading if he were beginning to read.

One day, when Christian was about five and a half, his mother decided to try to teach him to read the same way that Emily had learned. She got out the book, *Small Pig*, which had been Emily's favorite, and she read it to him several times. Then, after she'd read a page, she asked Christian, "Do you want to find *pig* for me?" While this game had been enthusiastically received by two year old Emily, five year old Christian was not at all enthusiastic. He would only tolerate *Small Pig* for a little while before he would want to listen to something more interesting. Nevertheless, after several sessions with *Small Pig*, Christian had it memorized and he could read it aloud. His parents were not sure, however, if he was really reading it, or just repeating it from memory. At that point, reading instruction was dropped for about six months.

The real breakthrough came when Christian was six. He found an easy to read book at a book sale called *Look Out For Pirates* which he bought with 10 cents of his own money. The book had nice pictures, and an interesting story line, large print, and not too many words on a page. For the first time, he was interested in listening to a book being read over and over again. Perhaps he had learned, through his experience with *Small Pig* that he could learn to read by listening to a book frequently and then matching the written and spoken words.

That week his mother and father each read *Look Out For Pirates* to him a few times. Tom, his father, read it in a very funny manner making fun of the

language spoken by the characters, because, as in other easy reading books, the characters just don't talk normally. Christian liked the way his father read it. Soon, he was off by himself matching the words on the page to the story as he knew it.

Then he was able to read it aloud, and it wasn't that he simply had it memorized. He was so into it, that he dramatized it on cassette tape and started writing down the whole book in order to make a "new" book.

Next, Madalene tried a phonics workbook with him. Christian didn't like the "stories" in the workbook. One day he looked up and said, "This is really boring!" His mother agreed, and so the workbook was put away.

Instead, they started using library books and easy reading books they had around. Madalene or Tom would listen to him read each day. One day, when he was about six and a half, he was looking at a tool catalogue, making plans for a current woodworking project. No one was available to read the captions to him, so he decided to read them to himself. When he came to a word he didn't understand, he'd ask somebody about it, spelling it out loud. Soon he had bookmarks placed throughout the catalog so that he could ask about all of the unknown words the next time a parent would be available.

By age eight, Christian became a good enough reader to read the kind of fiction books to himself that he enjoyed. On a typical night, his father might first read to him from *Touchstone* by Robert Louis Stevenson and then say "good night." Then Christian might read from *Star of Wild Horse Canyon* before turning out the light.

Emily and Christian learned at different ages, yet both now are fluent readers. They both learned to read by listening to stories over and over again, and then by paying the attention necessary to match the words on the page with the stories as they remembered them.

The Murphys have invented a new reading method that is particularly suited for homeschoolers. It doesn't use reading textbooks or phonics workbooks, it just uses books you find around the house, or buy at yard sales, or get out of libraries. You start by getting cozy and reading a favorite book out loud. After you have read the book up to ten times, you start playing the game. It works with two year olds like Emily and five year olds like Christian. The principle of the method is -- "ignite the fire and nurture it."

Felicity Gets Inspired by a Gift

Felicity Newell's interest in reading was sparked by a gift. There is a slogan, "Never underestimate the power of a woman!" I think a similarly true slogan would be, "Never underestimate the power of something new!"

Felicity Newell had learned the alphabet and the sounds of the letters when she was six. Her mother, Ruth, had put word labels all around the house and words on word cards including every word from the Dr. Seuss book, *Hop on Pop*. But Felicity had dragged her feet, and reading instruction had been suspended for a while.

Then, when Felicity was just about seven, her grandmother sent her a set of reading text books about a fictional English community. Felicity took to the books right away. Each book built upon the last book, and the series developed the characters and the setting. In some ways the series perfectly fit the Newells. Ruth is English and they have always been interested in England. Soon after the books arrived, her mother came down with the flu, and Felicity brought the books to the bedroom in order to "read" them to her mother. After all, she knew her mother read to her when she was sick. That began formal reading instruction again.

For the next several months, Felicity stayed with the first few books in the series. She would read them to her mother and to her little sister. Also, she and her little sister incorporated the characters in the books into their imaginative play. They had little figures which they pretended were the people in the reader.

Felicity read the first readers so often that soon it wasn't clear whether she was reading them, or repeating them from memory. Although she could read those particular books, she still did not consider herself a reader. She wanted to be able to read the *Narnia* books by C. S. Lewis, which she had enjoyed listening to so much. When she was almost seven and a half she would still state that she did not like reading.

Suddenly, when she was seven and a half, things took off. She had been making slow but steady progress in the reading series. She had just finished reviewing the earlier books in the series by working through some workbooks which Grandmother had belatedly sent along. Perhaps the review helped her, perhaps the writing in the workbooks helped. Whatever the reason, she took off.

She began to read picture books which had earlier been read to her. She even read and enjoyed *Hop on Pop* which she had earlier disliked. Three months later she was reading long books with several chapters, and had even begun reading the *Narnia* series to herself. A couple of years later, Felicity had become such a

fluent reader that she was able to read *Wuthering Heights* to herself. She and her mother each read it so that they could discuss it with each other. I know that I did not read *Wuthering Heights* until I was a senior in High School, and I had a difficult time with it then.

Jesse Begins to Read to Himself

When Jesse first started silently reading to himself, there were still many words that he did not know. He found that, when reading silently, he could skip words that he did not know and still get the gist of what he was reading. The first long chapter book that Jesse read was a book about Robin Hood. Jesse finished one chapter and told us he had just read "Robin Hood and the Butterchurn." Susan didn't think that there was a chapter in the book with that name and found that Jesse had really just finished "Robin Hood and the Butcher!" The point is that Jesse was not reading every word correctly, but he continued to read silently, and this is the way he became a fluent reader.

Jesse has always been a social reader -- in other words he has always seen reading as part of the social situation of being read to or reading to someone. All through his learning to read, he never was one to take books off by himself. In order to encourage Jesse to read to himself a little each day, Susan made it a social situation.

For at least a month, Jesse would read silently to himself while Susan would sit near him reading to herself *and* nursing or holding a napping Molly, and Jacob would look through books silently to himself. Susan made it a point to read adult books SHE was interested in for herself -- NOT books for the kids, or books about homeschooling! They actually set a kitchen timer for fifteen minutes at first, and even took the phone off the hook to help concentration. After the timer sounded, they'd talk informally with each other about what they'd been reading. After that month of "social" silent reading, Jesse was hooked, and would read silently to himself while the others would be in another room doing something else. (Maybe toddler Molly helped the transition by not continuing to be very silent herself!)

To encourage Jesse, Susan asked him to put the titles of any chapters or books that he'd read on cards. These were taped to the wall along our stairway, forming Jesse's first "Stairway of Books." When Jesse had read enough to fill the stairway (one for each step), we had a little ceremony while Jesse stapled the titles together to make a little book. When Jesse was seven, Susan wrote...

As Jesse began reading more and more books on his own this year, I wanted him to begin taking responsibility for keeping track of books completed -- thought it would save me a bit of record keeping. I felt it was important to show a full listing of Jesse's independent reading when I met with our assistant superintendent, as we don't use any reading "series," and so can't describe his progress in "levels." I first suggested Jesse write titles of books completed in a stapled together notebook. Jesse perfunctorily wrote titles down a few times, if reminded, but clearly had no interest in the ritual, and usually managed to misplace his "Book's Book." It was just another idea that petered out. Once in our new house another idea came to me. I saw the woodwork along our stairway in a new way -- couldn't Jesse display cards along it, showing what books he'd read? He could see his "stairway of books" grow every day. The idea had instant appeal to Jesse. We decided that new books he'd never read before would be one color card, and old favorites that he was rereading would be another color.

At first, Jesse reread lots of well known easy books, but very soon began trying more and more new books. As he said, "you can TELL the difference now." We held a bit of a ceremony when Jesse completed his first stairway -- Jesse read aloud all the titles from bottom to top, then with great pomp untaped them and flew them down to me at the bottom of the stairs, and then we stapled them together and put a little cover on it all. Jesse's now on his fifth "stairway," and the idea hasn't gotten old yet.

I'd always shied away from ideas like this before, feeling they were too close to the gimmicky "bookworms" strung across school bulletin boards, where competition and quantity become more important than enjoying reading. At home, though, there's no extrinsic competition involved, no time limits beyond the goals Jesse might set for himself. For Jesse at age 7, the idea is just a lot more concrete and visual -- and fun -- than merely recording titles in a booklet. AND Jesse doesn't need reminding about it (usually!), AND our superintendent was impressed. I'm pleased!

Julie Reads When Her Mother Can't

One home-schooled child, Julie Schlereth, took off into reading when she realized that her mother would soon be undergoing a jaw operation and there would be several months where she would not be able to enjoy books unless she read them to herself.

Like other homeschoolers, Julie had always enjoyed hearing her mother read aloud. Even when nursing, reading aloud would soothe her. She talked and walked early. By the time she was four, she could sing the alphabet song, point out the letters of the alphabet, and could write her name. Beginning at age five, she had been writing letters to her Aunt. When she didn't know a word she

would ask her mother how to spell it. However, she couldn't or wouldn't read any books herself.

When she was just six years old, she would play a word card game with her mother. Her mother wrote down all the words on cards that Julie knew. Then they started to make sentences using the words. Sometimes Julie would ask for a word to be put on a card because she needed it in a sentence.

When Julie was six and a half, her mother began to work with her using the McGuffey readers. They got up to lesson 5, and then Julie refused to go on. Her mother said, "Today we must do something. Let's read your McGuffey reader." Julie replied, "I hate those books. I'm going to throw them away."

I have heard similar stories from other home-schooling parents. The general pattern is that a child starts reading at the beginning of a first grade reading text book and keeps reading on a daily basis until the stories get frustrating, and then reading instruction ends for a while. I made the same mistake once myself. I was tutoring a 10 year old school-educated boy who could not read. I started having him read a little each day from a beginning reader, but the book soon got too difficult and he got frustrated.

I failed to realize that when schools use textbooks they teach each five or six page chapter for a whole week. The children study the words in isolation, do worksheets, read, and reread. I was doing a chapter a day instead of a chapter a week. The solution is simple. Either home-schooled parents have to imitate the schools and slow down, or they have to use several beginning readers at once, going from one to the other so as to stay at an easy level for a much longer time. When Jacob was beginning with "Dick and Jane," we had several editions of those readers and so he was able to go back and forth between them. Getting back to Julie Schlereth...

When she was six and three quarters she read her first book. It was just before Christmas and she read a very simple book, *The Christmas Santa Almost Missed* by Marion Francis. It was about Santa losing his cap and not being able to find it. She also read a *Sesame Street* book that she had listened to at least a hundred times. In January she read another book by Marion Francis, *Who Cried for Pie*. Despite these successes, she still did not consider herself a reader. As she approached seven, when her mother would say, "Let's read," she would say, "No way!"

There is a curious stage in children's progress into reading when they appear to have all the elements together that they need, but they still aren't reading. They

may know lots of words, but something about all those words on a page in a book scares them. Julie was at this stage for several months. Then, as she turned seven, something happened -- her mother got TMJ, a serious jaw disfunction which made it difficult for her to talk (or read out loud!) and Julie began to hear about the operation that would result in her mother's jaw being temporarily wired shut.

Soon, in response to an appeal in our homeschooling newsletter, other homeschooling families began to send tapes of their reading aloud to the Schlereths. Some of those families' recordings included children reading aloud. After hearing the children, Julie decided to make a tape of herself reading *A Kiss for Little Bear*, a book that she had practically memorized. One day, Julie's mother found her slowly reading a book that she had listened to hundreds of times. She came to the word, *Madeline* that she must have known from context and her mother saw her sounding it out. Her mother wondered why Julie was sounding out words that she already knew, or at least could easily guess from context. I think she was looking closely at the words and noting how the sounds fit with the letters.

Soon Julie started to like to read. Just after she turned seven she was talking to her Grandmother on the telephone and said, "Grandma, when I come over, I'm going to bring a book to read to you!" By the time Patty had her operation, Julie was a reader.

Anita Learns to Read at Age Twelve

Many home-schooled children of the past did not learn to read until they were ten or twelve, yet this late start did not prevent them from eventually becoming excellent readers. Two notable examples, General George Patton and President Woodrow Wilson, did not learn to read until shortly before entering high school. During World War II Patton read the book on tank warfare by the German General Erwin Rommel and effectively used those tactics against the Germans. Wilson wrote history books and great speeches. He is the only President of the United States to have obtained a doctoral degree.

Even today there are a few cases of home-educated children who do not learn to read until they are ten or twelve. Although Anita Giesy had learned the letters and some phonics at an earlier age, she did not start to read seriously until she was ten and did not take-off into reading until she was twelve.

When Anita was ten, she told her mother that she wanted to learn to read menus at restaurants. So she and her mother began to set aside some time each day when Anita would read aloud.

First Anita read *Meet Theodore Roosevelt* by Ormonde DeKay Jr, a "Step-up" biography with about 86 pages filled with large- type words. At the beginning, she would read about a page a day, but by the end she was reading an entire three page chapter in a day. Whenever she would come to a word that she didn't know, her mother would tell her whether that word followed the rules or not. For example, if it was a word like "laugh" Theo would say, "That word doesn't sound out, if you don't know it, you're not going to be able to figure it out." However, when Anita would stop at a word that followed the rules Theo would say, "That can be sounded out." Then Anita would approach the word on her own if she wanted to. Every sentence was an effort. She'd have to read it several times. The first reading of a sentence would be to figure out what the words were, and the second reading would be to figure out the meaning. Anita complained that she didn't like to read because she couldn't get pictures in her mind of what was going on.

Meanwhile, Theo was continuing to read to both her and her older sister Suzy. Reading together had long been a shared and valued experience in the Giesy household. Usually they would read in bed just before the girls would go to sleep. One night, Theo started drifting off to sleep in the middle of a sentence, and Anita woke her up and pointed to and read the next few words to get Theo going again. Anita was obviously looking at the words while her mother was reading.

When Anita was eleven she started babysitting. She had always enjoyed being read to so she decided to take books to read to the child she was sitting for. One time she read five of her books to the child. Whenever she'd babysit she'd read books out loud and in this real situation she read more than she had ever read before.

Soon, she started reading silently to herself at home and she could get the pictures in her mind which allowed her to enjoy what she read. For example, she'd be reading about walking through a snowy street and she'd be able to see the lane and the shops on either side. Soon Anita's good friend Ellie read her the first few chapters of a teenage romance written at about a sixth grade reading level. Anita continued reading it to herself at her own pace, about two pages per day. Typically, Anita would be lying on her bed reading to herself while her mother would be nearby sewing. When Anita wouldn't know a word she would spell it out loud and her mother would call back the word.

Anita continued to progress with reading, and she also got into writing. When I saw her a few years later, she showed me the first sixty pages of a novel that she was writing.

Nathan Gets to the Top of the Mountain

For some children learning to read is like a long climb up a tall mountain. When Nathan Wilcox was seven and a half, I gave him a reading test which his parents and I hoped could demonstrate to their school superintendent that Nathan was indeed learning to read.

Nathan had been reading for about ten months. He had learned the alphabet; he had learned about long vowel sounds and silent *E's* at the end of words, He had been reading a little almost every day for the past ten months and he was just beginning to read easy books himself. His current project was Dr. Seuss's *The Cat In the Hat* which he was reading two or three pages a day. Despite all this reading, when I gave him the reading test he only scored at the same level as the average child beginning first grade, so, according to the test, Nathan had not yet begun to read.

Nevertheless, Nathan's parents were optimistic. His father said, "I think he'll make it next year. He's at the point where he's beginning to desire the information that books offer. Until children get a little good at it, reading is not exactly great fun. It takes a little effort. It's not so different from many other things in life. Many things take effort before we get to enjoy them."

About eight months later, Nathan read a simple book called *Mr. Cuckoo's Clock Shop*, to his infant sister, Autumn. After he put that away he picked up *The Case of the Hungry Stranger*, an *I Can Read Mystery* by Crosby Bonsall. Noticing him browsing through this library book, his mother said to him, "It really won't be long before you'll be able to read this book. You already know most of these words."

Nathan liked mysteries, so he looked through the book. But it looked too hard -- he sneered, "Oh yeah, right!" and slammed the book shut and threw it on the shelf. But about a half hour later his parents found him sitting on the couch with his legs propped up with the mystery book. He was reading silently and chuckling to himself! First he got the page down so that he knew it, and then he'd read it out loud. His mother called out from the kitchen, "Nathan, is that you over there reading that page?"

Nathan read that page and another page, and in one sitting he read seventeen pages. First he would read to himself a little bit, then he would read to his parents. For the first time he seemed to be able to sound-out long words. He seemed to be looking closely at the first few letters and then guessing the word. Since he was reading with understanding, there were only a few possibilities that each word could be. Sometimes he couldn't get it, then he would spell it out and his parents would tell him what it was. He finished that book in two more days and then began to get other *I Can Read Mysteries* like *The Case of the Cat's Meow* from the library.

A few months later, his parents told me about their excitement that day. His mother said, "I loved to see him sitting over there silently reading and laughing. Seeing that happen really made me feel that homeschooling was all right. Now he reads for enjoyment when he reads. I know he's going to enjoy reading."

His father added, "Children have got to learn that they can take off in many areas of life and reading is one of the first examples of it -- something which seemed like a mountain they had to climb and all of a sudden they got to the top and they soared out beyond it and a new horizon opened up."

Later that day I gave Nathan the same reading test that he had taken eleven months earlier and found that he had gone up about two and a half years in reading level.

After the test I asked Nathan if he had any advice for others. "I know a couple of kids," I said, "who can't read yet and their mothers are really worried because they're afraid that their kids aren't going to learn to read. Do you have anything to say to those mothers?"

He answered, "Don't worry, in time they will want to read. Like one day they may pick up a book and discover that it isn't boring, it's fun!"

"Do you have anything to say to kids who can't read yet and might be worried that they might not ever be able to read?"

"Always have faith," Nathan replied, "because you *will* learn to read!"