

# **How I Taught My Four-Year-Old Son to Read**

by

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## I. Introduction

The purpose of this pamphlet is plain and simple: to teach your child to read at an early age. You love your child; you want the best for him or her; you are concerned about your child's development and you want your son or daughter to do well in school. These are probably the reasons why you obtained this pamphlet.

When my son, whose nickname is Michael, turned four years old, I began a series of exercises and games aimed at teaching him to read. Four months later, he was reading at a level comparable to the way that I read in first grade when I was six years old. To give you an idea of the level, he was able to read about 90% of the words of the 64-page book *Go, Dog. Go* by P. D. Eastman (Random House).

Reading was not the best subject in school for either my wife or me. If genetics were everything, then Michael should have been struggling to read even a single word at age four. The methods I have used with him have made the difference. I have tried them out on other children and they work. There is a very good chance that they will be successful for your child too.

Although preschoolers are mentally capable of reading, most of them are emotionally not quite ready. Generally, the attention span of a four year old is limited, reading is not necessarily one of their interests, and usually they are unable to concentrate deeply. Therefore, the learning process is irregular in that two or three days may go by without the preschooler being the active participant of a reading activity. The parent needs to profit from those short periods when the child is alert and willing, and even during these opportunities patience on behalf of the parent is required.

If you follow the steps that I have used, there is a reasonable chance that your son or daughter will be able to read simple books before turning five years old. If this does not happen, it is still likely that your child will be reading before entering first grade.

You should remember that the ultimate goal is for your child be a proficient reader by the time he or she graduates from high school. This pamphlet tries to increase the chances of achieving that goal. Studies have been done demonstrating that the earlier your child begins to read the more likely he or she will be a skilled reader. However, if your child is unable to read simple books before first grade, you should not despair. Most of us grew up learning to read starting in the first grade and most of us became reasonably good readers. I, myself, am an average

adult reader. I just wonder, though, how much better I might be had my parents engaged me in the verbal activities of this pamphlet when I was three to five years old.

Regardless of the level of success, your efforts will strengthen your relationship with your child. When you teach your child reading, you do it from the heart and your son or daughter will sense this. He or she will be aware of your love. After all you are giving your child lots of attention for a worthy purpose.

Let us begin with some basics. Reading starts with word recognition. A sentence is understood by reading its words. I have uncovered five important ways for the preschooler to recognize words. They are (I) sight recognition, (II) phonics, (III) context, (IV) memorization, and (V) visual aids. They differ greatly in their ease of use, their scope and their utility. I am convinced that all five methods should be employed to varying degrees.

### Method I: Sight Recognition

Even before his third birthday, my son used to ask my wife and me about the words written on signs. Michael would pause, point his finger, and shout, "Stop," each time he saw the red hexagonal sign. In the beginning, I was not sure whether he recognized the word or the red hexagon. But at some point, it became clear that he knew the word because if I wrote "STOP" on a piece of paper, Michael would say, "Stop." The next words he learned were "NO PARKING" and "EXIT." In conjunction with "NO PARKING," he recognized "NO" and "PARK" and eventually the phrase "NO DOGS IN THE PARK."

The reason I tell you about these "sign words" is they are examples of sight recognition. At this early age, my son had little concept of phonics. He was not sounding out the word. He simply recognized the pattern of capital letters "S," "T," "O" and "P" as "stop." Being able to read words this way is a question of pattern recognition.

Reading a word by sight recognition has the advantage that even toddlers can do it. At the adult level, it is also the fastest reading method. A person using sight recognition can read silently many times faster than the person who pronounces phonetically the words to himself in his "inner voice." Fast skilled readers use this method. It is interesting that Chinese characters are almost entirely pictorially rather than phonetically based and that a Chinese person can often read more rapidly per word concept than an American or European. Chinese learn characters through memorizing the patterns.

There are two disadvantages of the sight recognition method. The first is that it is memory intensive. Because written English is a phonetically based language, it is easier to decipher the pronunciation of words that are encountered for the first time by "sounding them out." Memorizing the patterns of words (as the Chinese do) rather than using the phonetic code (as in English) requires years of study. However, I believe that sight recognition should be emphasized for most children at the preschool stage. It is surprising how much can be accomplished if a child memorizes about thirty of the most common words. It also opens the possibility that the child will develop into a rapid silent reader as an adult. Nevertheless, overuse of this method later in the first few grades of elementary school at the expense of phonics might retard reading progress due to its extensive dependence on memorization.

A second disadvantage of sight recognition is that it can lead to errors. This was quite evident in the case of my son who sometimes said "cat" for "car" and "the" for "they" between the ages of four and four-and-a-half. Earlier, Michael even mistook "turn" for "enter" and vice-versa.

Because Method I is memory intensive but yields rapid recall, it is best used for the most common words in the English language such as the articles "the" and "a," the pronouns, the prepositions, and the most common verbs such as "to be," "to do," "to make," and "to have." A child's own name should also be part of his or her sight-recognition vocabulary.

## **Method II: Phonics**

The next technique is phonics. In this approach, spelling is used to "sound out" a word. To say "stop" using only phonics, the child must (i) know the sounds of the consonants "s," "t," and "p," (ii) know how to pronounce the two-consonant blend "st", (iii) know the vowel sound "o" is "aw" and (iv) be able to put all the sounds together. Because English, unlike Spanish and Italian, is not a perfect phonetic language, vowels are particularly difficult for young children. How is your child going to know that "cow" and "row" have completely different vowel sounds?

However, the big disadvantage of the pure phonetic approach is that it is slow and painful for the young child. If your son or daughter encounters an unfamiliar word and tries to decipher it through phonics, it may take him or her five or more seconds. If it took you five seconds to read most of the words in a sentence, you would rapidly lose interest in reading. The same is true for preschoolers. Rely-

ing on phonics alone renders the reading process too difficult. I believe that overemphasis of this approach is the main reason why some young children become turned off to reading, despite what is said in advertisements touting the power of phonics. If phonics were the only way to read, then China would be a country full of illiterates since Chinese characters cannot be read phonetically.

Of the five methods, however, phonics has the greatest range of applicability because it allows one to pronounce a large number of words. Probably for this reason, it is the approach that is more often used in elementary schools. As the child becomes older and more skilled in verbal techniques and better at phonetic awareness, the utility of this approach becomes increasingly important.

So what role should phonics play in teaching the four year old to read? My personal experiences indicate that vowel recognition is too difficult. However, many preschoolers have no trouble saying and recognizing the sounds of consonants. The reason for this is that parents and preschool teachers have been introducing phonetic awareness of consonants at ages two and three. Preschoolers know "b" is for "baby," "c" is for "cat," and so on. Therefore, using phonics to determine the initial sound of a word is well within the reach of the preschooler. When combined with the other four methods, it can make the difference between being able to say or not say a word.

In the case of my four-year-old son, not only was Michael able to determine the first consonant of words with about 95% accuracy but, about three-fourths of the time, he could tell me the last letter of a word. I found this quite surprising because it is much more difficult to hear the final consonant in speech. I attribute this to his preschool teachers, who introduced and worked considerably on the pronunciation of the letters in teaching him the alphabet.

Obviously, knowing the final consonantal sound in a word can help in determining its pronunciation. However, I would not emphasize its use at this stage because it renders too cumbersome the word-recognition process and it is unclear whether most preschoolers have good final-consonantal recognition abilities.

In short, teaching the child to recognize the first consonantal sound of a word is a good reading aid. It, unfortunately, cannot be used for words that begin with vowels.

## **Method III: Context**

Now we come to the third technique: Context. Often one is able to guess a word through its place-

ment in the sentence and the phrases before and after it. If I say, "I went to the BLANK to buy some food," then for "BLANK" you might guess "store," "grocer's," or "supermarket." Skilled adult readers use context to achieve rapid reading. Obviously, in terms of reading comprehension, it matters little whether "BLANK" is replaced by "store," "grocer's," or "supermarket." What is important is that "BLANK" is "a place where food can be bought." Context is a fast reading technique.

Using context for word recognition has two disadvantages: It is limited in that only certain words can be guessed from context, and it is imprecise in that several choices for the guess are usually possible. It is, however, one of the developed tools of a skilled adult reader.

#### **Method IV: Memorization**

I can remember a little of the very first book I read. Some of the lines in it were "See Spot." and "See Spot run." When I was first asked to read it in grade one, I, as well as other kids, had difficulty. However, after the teacher showed me how to say the words and after trying several times, I managed to read the book. It was repetition that allowed me to remember half the words; the other half I read through sight recognition. The latter is Method I; the former is Method IV.

Once in a while at the end of the PBS *News Hour*, the national poet laureate recites a poem trying to stir, in a little way, the emotions of millions of TV viewers. Although the poem is one published in a book, the laureate neither holds a book nor reads from a screen behind the camera. There is no need for such aids; he knows the poem by heart. He is reading it using pure memorization.

Memorization can be a useful learning aid for the young child. In middle and high schools, children are sometimes asked to memorize a poem or a short passage. Many of us parents know a few lines of Shakespeare by heart and there are many examples of text that we have memorized, everything from the national anthem and the beginning of the Gettysburg Address to song lyrics and nursery rhymes.

Extensive memorization as an adult reading method is rare. It does appear in specialized situations: Actors say their lines through these methods. TV and radio newscasters and field reporters often read their scripts several times before going live; sometimes they are assisted by teleprompters. The same is true of Presidents when they address the nation in speeches.

We cannot expect our four year olds to memorize a book or even a short paragraph. However, we can use memorization as a learning aid for reading. How? One way is for us to read a book several times before asking our child to do so. Many of the sentences will become familiar and your son or daughter will naturally remember some of the phrases. A second way is to have your child read the same book several times.

But isn't this cheating? Is your child really reading or merely functioning as a three-foot-tall parrot? Why should you read a book several times before asking your child to read it?

The answer is this. Learning to read is a difficult endeavor. It takes 12 years of education to read as well as a high-school graduate. We parents easily forget how long and slow the process was for us.

The child in kindergarten or first grade is trying to learn an unnatural process requiring eye-brain coordination, sophisticated cerebral analysis and complicated pattern recognition. In the beginning, this reading process should be made *as simple as possible*. You do not want to frustrate your child's efforts. You want to encourage him or her by making reading easy. Who cares if the preschooler remembers half the text, if at the end of the book he or she is delighted to have succeeded. One goal at this early stage is confidence building. There is plenty of time after the preschooler has achieved a certain level of reading expertise to ask him or her to read a book that he or she has never seen before.

Another nice aspect of reading memorized text is that your child can proceed relatively rapidly thereby assisting reading fluency. The importance of reading fluency should not be underestimated: Comprehension tends to be better for those who read quickly. It is definitely harder to understand a sentence if one reads it at one word per three seconds. As we all know, it is more difficult to maintain one's balance on a bicycle if one rides slowly.

Thus, memorization is more of a useful learning aid rather than a method. To a very limited extent, adults do use memorization in reading. This is because there are many stock phrases and structures in a language. If I say, "The BLANK jumped over the moon; What word should I use for BLANK?" almost every American-born person and many toddlers will say, "Cow." Consider standard phrases such as "a moot point," "a conscientious effort" and "the ad-hoc committee." If you are given the first two words of these three-word phrases, then there is a fairly good chance that you can guess the third word. This is because you have heard such phrases dozens of times and, given part of the phrase, you use context (Method III) to determine the rest. Some examples

of standard structures are "If ... then ..."; "Not only ..., but ..."; and "First, ... . Second, ... . Third, ...". When a skilled reader sees the word "if" at the beginning of a sentence, he or she knows that there is a good chance that the word "then" will appear somewhere in the middle. Anticipation of words to come and knowledge of certain structures assist you in reading. You know these structures because you have seen them so many times that they are second nature.

### **Method V: Visual Aids (Pictures)**

Pictures help to make reading simpler for your child. These visual aids suggest the meaning of sentences and often provide hints to help your child guess words. Thus, in stores and at libraries, select good picture books.

A skilled adult reader with a novel in hand naturally sees the images and hears the sounds created by the text. Because such a reader recreates the story in his or her mind, he or she almost feels like the author. A series of images enters the mind like a movie. It is this creative process that renders reading so exciting. The skilled reader is the projector, speakers, screen and audience. Given the option of reading the book or seeing the movie, such a reader will chose the former.

An advantage of picture books, then, is to help the child to develop reading visualization. Hopefully, as the child reads the text, he or she will incorporate the nearby pictures in his or her mind's eye.

\* \* \*

Having introduced the five methods, let me summarize their role in adults. Skilled fast readers use I (sight recognition) and III (context) more than mediocre readers do. Slow adult readers rely on II (phonics) and enunciate internally each word.

Some of the above methods such as context are unable to identify a word unambiguously. This is one important reason why all five methods should be taught to the child. Let me give you an example that illustrates the power gained in this holistic approach.

One day, I had my son read to his best friend (also four years old) a book about hats. From time to time, I asked the friend to read a word. On one page was a picture of a huge hat. My son read the words, "Big hat." No problem here; Michael knew both these words from sight recognition. On the next page was a picture of a tiny hat. I asked the friend, "What do these two words say?" He responded, "Little hat." I praised the friend saying, "Very good! You got one word correct and almost got the other." Then I asked

my son to read the words. He replied, "Ss, ss; small hat." "Michael, that's excellent," I told him. Indeed, it was quite amazing in that he had never read the word "small" before. The word "hat" was in his sight-recognition vocabulary, but I am convinced that from the context and the picture he sensed that the unknown word was "little" or "small" and that initial-consonant recognition helped him decide between these two choices.

In the above example, my son used four of the five techniques. Method I for the word "hat" and methods II, III and V for the word "small." Michael is able to guess words by combining methods. Of course, he is not conscious that he is doing this; he is simply naturally doing what works.

## **II. What To Do with Two and Three Years Olds**

It would be incorrect to title this pamphlet "Four Months to Preschool Reading." While it is true that Michael made enormous progress in reading during the first four months of his fourth year as a child, he had already achieved various verbal milestones during the first three years of his life. Many preparations for early reading were already in place. None of these were probably different from those done by the typical devoted parent: providing the toddler with a good environment and with stimulating, educational toys, giving the child appropriate and measured attention, and doing all the usual necessary things to nurture a young one toward being a productive human being.

When your child is two and three years old, your general goals should be: getting your child interested in reading, teaching your child the letters, and developing a little word recognition and some "letter phonics."

### **Read to Your Child**

The most important activity that you the parent can do at this stage is to read aloud to your child frequently. The benefits of such readings are well documented: See L. Morrow in *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 38, 1985, p.870-875 and pages 110-121 in *Awakening to Literacy* by W. Teale (Hanemann, Portsmouth NH, 1984). In the case of Michael, either my wife reads or I read two stories per night (sometimes one long one or three short ones) as part of his bedtime routine. We occasionally supplement the bedtime readings with daytime readings. Michael has been read to for so long that he believes that the bedtime story is an inalienable right that our found-

ing fathers incorporated in the Constitution. These intimate moments when I am one-on-one with Michael are very special for both of us. He clearly enjoys all the attention of the bedtime readings.

I met a couple in a playground who had a daughter and a son. The daughter was nearly six years old and already reading. I asked them if they had read to their daughter frequently and the wife responded, "Yes." They then informed me that their son was not doing nearly as well in terms of his reading development. When I asked them if they had been reading to their son, they said that they had gotten somewhat lazy and that they rarely did. Although this is only one example that clearly indicates the importance of reading to your child, I am sure that there are thousands of other examples that support the case.

There are several useful things a parent can do during these reading sessions. One is to get the child to play a more active role. When I read to Michael, I ask him questions. These questions are sometimes as simple as soliciting him to find an image in a picture. For example, the text of *Goodnight Moon* reads "Goodnight brush"; so once while reading this book, I asked Michael, "Where is the brush?" He then searched the picture until he found the small object on a table. Here are some other examples of picture questions: "How many clocks do you see on this page?" and "Can you show me something in this picture that is green?" Comprehension questions are more difficult for the toddler but are worth trying: You can ask your child to explain what you have just read, or even pose the question "Can you repeat the sentence that I just said?" Although I would sometimes ask Michael to tell me what has just happened in the story, it is best to be specific. If you have read that the mother rabbit has found her lost baby rabbit in a hole of a tree, you can ask your child, "Where was the baby rabbit hiding?" or "Why is the mother rabbit happy now?" If you have read the same story to your child several times, you can ask him or her what will happen next. "What is Arthur going to do now?" Questions like the above will help your child's reading comprehension when he or she begins to read. When your child becomes four or five years old, you can even ask him or her to retell an entire story that you have just read in his or her own words. Lastly, it is useful to pause occasionally during your readings to give your son or daughter a chance to ask questions.

I pass my finger below each word I read to Michael. This is a good practice for you to do. It is very difficult for the adult to realize how little a two-year-old child understands. Use of the finger sends the message to the young developing mind that the words written on the page are the sounds you are

speaking. The toddler also learns that words are read from left to right within a line in the order that they appear and that one proceeds with the lines from top to bottom. In other words, "finger reading" teaches some of the mechanics of reading. Most of the time, your son or daughter will be looking at the pictures in the book. However, there is a chance that the mature three year old will actually notice the pattern of letters above your finger and learn the word. This then can help with the child's sight recognition (Method I) vocabulary when he or she is older.

Parental reading can be supplemented by other readings such as "story hours" at some libraries. If your child goes to a preschool, the teacher should read to the class. If your child has a caretaker, ask the caretaker to read to your child, or if your child has an older sibling, have the sibling do so. Regardless as to who reads to your child, have the person (1) ask questions and (2) use a finger below words.

When your child is three years old, try having him or her do pretend reading. "Michael," I used to say to him, "Look at the pictures and tell me what you think is written on the pages." Gibberish often came out but I always responded positively: "Wow, Michael you're doing a great job reading!" You can also ask your child to make up a story. "Michael, tell me a story as you look at this book. Don't worry if it's not the one written there." You can even ask your child to move his or her finger over the words imitating the way you read.

## Learning the Letters

Before a child can read, he or she must know the letters of the alphabet and be able to say them and recognize them. Eventually, he or she should be able to write them. Thus, there are three aspects of letter learning: (1) pronunciation, (2) recognition and (3) writing.

I have only a little to add to the many well-established methods for the teaching of letters. Some of your child's toys should be "letter-oriented": Michael had blocks and foam pads with ABC's on them and magnetic letters that would stick on such things as the refrigerator door. He had several alphabet picture books – the types that we are all familiar with: "A is for apple, B is for boy, etc." These books are good for developing first-letter phonics (see above under Method II).

As preparation for first-letter phonics, provide your child with the sound while teaching the alphabet. For example, instead of simply saying, "B is for boy," say, "B is for boy. Baa, baa, baa, B." Michael's preschool teacher started this practice when she no-

ticed how much better students were at letter phonetics when they moved up to the four-year-olds' class.

It is often useful to have flash cards for various learning purposes. Instead of buying them, one can create them with a computer. Generate the content in a program and print it out (preferably on higher weight paper). Then apply clear packing tape on both sides to imitate lamination and cut out the cards. The advantage of these computer-generated, tape-laminated flash cards is that you can make what you need to your specifications.

For letter learning, I typed capital letters of font size 72 in various colors in a word processing program to make the cards. Instead of simply asking my child to read the letters on such cards, I incorporated them into games. For example, I took a board game in which pieces advance by spinning a needle. When I spun a number, I advanced my piece by that number, but when Michael spun, he advanced by twice the number if he could tell me the letter on the card; otherwise, his piece remained in its spot. In another board game, dice were used instead of a spinning needle.

You can use the computer-generated, tape-laminated method to create dominoes with letters replacing the dots and then play the game with them. Also try playing card games such as "Fish" with your child using the letter flash cards.

Your personal computer is useful in other ways. At age two, Michael could type letters and enjoyed doing so. His favorite letter was "O". Take a word processing program, depress the "caps lock" key, set the font size to 72, change the font color to your son's or daughter's favorite color and let him or her type away. After your child is used to this exercise, you can ask him or her to type specific letters or even short words.

Michael has been able to manipulate a mouse since he was two years old. By age three, your child (perhaps with your assistance) should be able to use educational computer software. Michael learned a lot about letters from programs such as *Dolly Doo. You Can Too! Alphabet* (Arc Media). The Reader Rabbit series (The Learning Company) is fairly good. You should definitely pursue this approach with your child.

There are many opportunities for letter learning outside the home. The long-distance buses in our community are distinguished by letters. Often when I saw a bus, I would ask Michael which one it was. He would look at the letter or number on it and tell me. The "P" bus was one of his favorites. Later, he became so excited about bus types that he would shout the number or letter without prompting.

It is easy to play "I spy" while riding in a car or walking along the street using signs as a source of letters. You can say to your child, "I spy a K. Do you see it?" You can also reverse roles by having your child spy a letter and ask you to find it.

TV programs, particularly those with an educational slant such as *Barney* and *Sesame Street*, are an excellent source of vocabulary for the young mind and they teach children about letters. Watching TV seems to be the one activity where the toddler can maintain concentration for more than 15 minutes. Many concerned parents are afraid of the bad aspects of television: its addictive nature, passivity and violence. However, toddlers can learn a lot by watching. Michael actually learned to count to ten by watching *Sesame Street*. Television has had a definite place in teaching Michael to read. He even watched "Wheel of Fortune" on a couple of occasions. He started shouting letters out loud like the contestants.

Because of the potential negative aspects of TV, parents need to exert control over the viewing process. The number of hours that a child watches and the types of programs should be restricted since children at these ages have **limited** self-control and cannot make good programming decisions.

I often recorded programs on a VCR. This had several advantages. I could decide when Michael watched the program. If I wanted to stop in the middle and have him, for example, eat dinner or take a bath, then I could do so and even use the prospect of seeing the rest of the episode as incentive for eating the food or taking the bath. If he had – in my opinion – watched too much TV on a particular day, I could promise him that he could watch the taped program the next day. If you occasionally watch TV with your child, you can make the viewing process more active by stopping the tape and asking questions. These questions can be of the same nature of those in your reading sessions (See above).

Another way to exert control over the TV viewing is through videos. We provided Michael with a sizeable selection, many of which we rented from the library. One emphasizing letter learning is *Dr. Seuss's ABC*. Since Michael also had the book, he could turn the pages and look at them as he watched the video. It is worth buying or borrowing good learning videos.

The "ABC song" is sometimes sung on *Barney* and *Sesame Street*. Almost every parent teaches the reciting of the alphabet using it. This song is a good way of learning the order of letters, although, as a result of singing it so much, some children will have trouble saying "A, B, C, D, E, F, G, . . . , Z" without introducing a tune and many will slur or blend the

sections "H I J K" and "L M N O." It is worth saying these two sections slowly to your child.

The following is quite important: In the beginning, you should focus almost entirely on the capital letters. They are more distinct and easier for your child to learn. Remember one of your goals is to render the learning process as simple as possible. After your child has fully mastered the capital letters, the lower case letters can be introduced. With Michael, I concentrated on capitals for more than a year before introducing the lower case letters at around the age of three-and-a-half years.

To teach him letters, his preschool teachers had him paste little pieces of colored paper or small macaroni noodles in the patterns of letters in the alphabet, which brings us to another topic: Letters in artwork. They can, for example, be incorporated in collages: besides images, cut letters out of magazines to be pasted on an art sheet. When your son or daughter can write the first letter of his or her name, have him or her sign drawings with that letter. When he or she can do so, have your child write his or her name on the pictures that he or she creates with crayons and pencils. In no time, your child will be like a little Andy Warhol.

## Writing the Letters

The last stage of letter learning is writing them. Although a toddler will be able to write a few of the simple letters such as O, I and X at a fairly young age, wait until your child is extremely comfortable with letter recognition before trying to teach the writing of the complete alphabet.

It is very important to show your son or daughter how to correctly hold the pen or pencil in the tips of the thumb and first two fingers. Sometimes due to their small hands they will use a fourth finger, which is OK. Do not let your child grab it with a fist – if an incorrect grip is adopted now, it may last a lifetime and lead to poor penmanship. I have met several adults with poor handwriting due to bad a grip.

In teaching writing, start with the simpler letters first: O, I, X, L, C, T, J, U, V and Q. Show your child the correct stroke order. Generally, the strokes are drawn from top to bottom, left to right and in counterclockwise loops. Michael would often write an "I" from bottom to top and I would stop him saying, "Draw the I from top to bottom," and sometimes I would ask him to write it again.

To facilitate writing, you can do several things: You can guide your child's hand or you can write the letter first and have your child imitate you. You can create dotted or dashed images of the letters and have your child trace them. Activity workbooks can

be bought with the features. With Michael, I used *Kindergarten Comprehensive Curriculum of Basic Skills* (American Education Publishing), which develops both verbal and non-verbal abilities.

It also helps to create mental images of letters.

Here are some that I used with Michael:

A is two ladders leaning against each other.

B is a P with a belly.

C is part of an O.

D is an O with its back straight.

E is an F that is sitting down.

G is a C with a little T inside it.

H is two I's that are holding arms.

J is an I that is dragging its feet.

K is a soldier with an arm and leg sticking forward.

L is an I that is sitting down.

N is a Z on its side.

M is an upside down W.

P is an I with its head leading forward.

Q is an O with a little stick in it.

R is a P with its leg sticking out.

S is like a snake.

T is an I with a tabletop on it.

W is an upside down M.

W is two V's together ("W is double V").

Y holds its arms up high and apart.

Z is an N on its side.

Do not be concerned if your child writes a mirror-imaged N or S: This is not necessarily a sign of dyslexia; most children, Michael included, do this. Praise your son or daughter saying, "Your 'N' is nice but this 'N' is even nicer and the way most kids write 'N'," and then write the N correctly for your child.

By the time Michael was three-and-a-half, our modest teaching efforts had paid off: For the first time, he was able to write a capital letter given an image of it. Michael loved to draw with crayons, pencils and pens. I occasionally encouraged him to incorporate letters into his artwork: That image of a bus takes on additional meaning when it is part of the "P" line! Michael's progress with writing was steady. At four years old, he succeeded for the first time in writing his name using lower case letters.

When he was still three years old, I began to make an effort to teach him to recognize the lower case letters. Already knowing the capitals makes the learning easier. Being smaller versions of their capital counterparts, letters such as "c," "i," "j," "k," "m," "o," "p," "s," "t," "u," "v," "w," "x," "y," and "z" were learned almost instantly. However, Michael sometimes mistook the letter "l" for "i" or the number "1." As in the case of capitals, I made colored, computer-generated, tape-laminated flash cards and used them to teach Michael the "little letters" as he sometimes called them.

Michael often mixed up "b," "d," "p," and "q." Even when he was reading at four years and four months, he would sometimes make a mistake with one of these letters. I spent a little extra time teaching these four.

### **Toddler Word Learning**

Encourage your child to learn the words on traffic signs. It is easy to make up games using them. For example, while driving in a car, ask your child to find as many "EXIT" signs as he or she can.

In the case of Michael, he eventually also noticed the writing on other objects such as the TV VCR controller. He learned the word "PLAY" from it and noticed the word "STOP" that he had already learned from street signs. Have your child find the "PLAY" button and push it to start a tape. In a similar way, Michael learned "ON" and "OFF" from the buttons on the TV set.

If your child has little difficulty recognizing the capital letters by age three-and-a-half, then he or she is ready to learn a few words. I recommend beginning with a small set. For Michael, I started with "GO," "NO," "YES," "I," "DOG," "CAT," "DAD," "MOM," "YOU," "ME," "TV," his name "MICHAEL", some words that he had learned from signs and buttons: "STOP," "PARK," "EXIT," "PLAY," "ON," and "OFF", and "ING" for adding to verbs (I wanted to make "PARKING"). These words were selected based on simplicity, utility and familiarity. I made colored flash cards of them using the tape-laminated, computer-generated method. I substituted these word cards for the letter cards in games such as concentration, dominoes and board games with dice or spinning needles that I had used with Michael when he was three years old.

Michael and I also used to play a money-paying quiz game. (You can do this with letters too). "Your piggy is very hungry," I used to tell him. "He needs to eat some pennies. For each word that you say correctly, I will give you a penny. You can feed the pennies to your piggy bank." Then I would go through each flash card giving Michael a coin if he could correctly read the word. Penny-offering can be used in many places to motivate a somewhat unwilling child. Stickers or something small that the child wants can be substituted for the pennies.

Next I augmented the set of flash cards with more words: "GOOD," "DO," "WE," "BAD," "A," "NOT," "THE," "RUN," "IN," "HELP," "HE," "SHE," "THEY," "IS," "ARE," "AM," "RED," "COW," and two words that he had learned from signs and buttons: "ENTER" and "TURN." After Michael had learned to recognize these words

(Method I being implemented), I had him read short sentences such as "HELP ME," "I GO PLAY," and "TURN OFF THE TV."

In the beginning, Michael did not seem so interested in the sentences I made. Instead, he used to arrange the words in a random order and laugh as I read the nonsense sentence. "YOU DO TV CAT SHE TURN," I would utter. The longer the sentence, the more he laughed. He also made jumble-mumble sentences with some small magnetic plastic cards that my wife had been given at work that were sticking on our refrigerator door. Initially I was annoyed that he preferred the nonsense sentences over meaningful ones but in retrospect I think this exercise was good: He was having fun with sentence-making and learning a little bit about the construction process. Even later at age four, Michael preferred making nonsense sentences over real sentences with the cards.

Do not despair if your child cannot learn all the words in this small set. It took Michael extra long to learn the word "YOU," and he even confused "ON" with "NO." If your child can recognize some of these words then eventually he or she will be able to have a small Method-I set that can be used for fluent reading of simple books. Your goal is to establish during the coming year sight-recognition reading of the most common and important words in the English language.

In constructing my set, if I found that I needed a particular word repeatedly to make a sentence, then I would write it down to be included in the next collection. For example, there were sentences and phrases such as "TO THE PARK" that I could not make because I lacked the word "TO." So, "TO" was added to a list of useful words for the next flash card set.

After Michael seemed to know a majority of the words from the first two sets, a third set was added: "DOES," "CAR," "RUN," "AND," "GOES," "MY," "HIM," "SEE," his last name "SAMUEL," "BLUE," "TO," "AT," "NAME," "AN," "ZOO," "LIKE," and "IT" along with "S" to make plurals and to conjugate verbs of the third person singular.

By the time Michael was three years and nine months old, he was able to recognize more than 30 words. Even with this modest success, I had no idea at this point that seven months later he would be reading at a first grade level.

## Good Toddler Reading Books

When Michael was still two years old, I went looking for a counting book with certain features that would render it easy to read. In particular, I wanted the text to be in capital letters and to be augmented by images beneath or above the words. I searched the local libraries and bookstores but found nothing to my liking. Although it is possible to find picture-aided readers, such books are rare and often do undesirable things such as using an image of an "eye" to get the child to say "I," which is phonics-based and associates the wrong type of word with the image. I eventually made my own picture book with a computer using a graphics program. I printed it out, assembled it and used it with Michael. More than a year later, I decided that it would be helpful if other parents had access to this book. I spent time redoing the illustrations to make them more professional and the result was the book *One! Two! Three! This Book 's for Me!* (Jupiter Scientific, 2002).

In developing this book and interacting with Michael, I isolated six elements that render a book more easily readable for the toddler:

(1) Repetition and predictability: If words or phrases appear over and over again then the child is more likely to remember them and to be able to read them. Likewise, it helps the child if certain phrases are easily anticipated.

(2) Rhyme and rhythm: Both of these features help with pronunciation and make the book more pleasant to the ear.

(3) Written in capital letters. The capitals are easier to recognize and are learned first by the preschooler.

(4) Simple language: Short and easy words and sentences are better for these very young minds.

(5) Pictures: They allow the child to see what is happening and give a visualization of the text.

(6) Visual aids: These can be of all sorts. Picto-words™ in *One! Two! Three! This Book 's for Me!*, which are images beneath certain words, allow the toddler to associate a word with an image and later will help the child with reading. As another example, the word "BLUE" can be in blue. In rebus books, pictures are substituted for certain nouns. I am ambivalent about the use of rebus books: On one hand, they do render the reading easier; on the other hand, the opportunity to see the word is lost.

The studies in "Katy Learns to Read and Write" by Sherry Walton (*Young Children*, Vol. 44, p.52-59, July 1989) support the ideas of this pamphlet such as the value of predictable patterns of rhyming,

repeated words and phrases, pausing to let the child say a word, and the usefulness of asking questions about the reading. Likewise, "Becoming a Kindergarten of Readers?" by Jeanette Throne (*Young Children*, Vol. 43, p.10-16, September 1988) favors books with picture clues, with rhythmic, repetitive rhyming language, and with predictable events. This article also recommends finger pointing, memorizing text and the use of street signs in learning to read, which are techniques that this pamphlet advocates.

Note that toddlers are most attracted to books with interesting images. Here is a small selection that exemplify the books that I like and read to Michael as a two- and three-year old: *The Foot Book* by Dr. Seuss, *Curious George and the Bunny* by H. A. Rey, *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* by B. Martin and J. Archambault, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (and other books) by Eric Carle, *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown, *Good Night, Gorilla* by Peggy Rathmann, *Disney's Pocahontas into the Forest* by Mary Packard, *Whose Mouse Are You?* by Robert Krauss, *Dr. Seuss's ABC*, *Duck in the Truck* by Jez Alborough, and *Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes*.

The above classics fall into particular categories: Letter books (*Dr. Seuss's ABC* and *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*), nursery rhymes (which, by the way, are good for developing Method IV reading by memorization), picture books (*Disney's Pocahontas into the Forest* and *Good Night, Gorilla*), rhyming text (*The Foot Book*, *Goodnight Moon*, *Duck in the Truck* and *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*), and simple story books (*Duck in the Truck*, *Whose Mouse Are You?*, *Curious George and the Bunny* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*). Rhyming books are important because they eventually can help with vocalic phonics. See the last section "What to Do Next" below.

Since Michael liked trains, I used to read to him many books on this subject such as the "Thomas series" (author is Rev. W. Awry), and I bought some of the corresponding videos. I also purchased books related to PBS programs such as *Arthur* (Marc Brown) and educational books such as one on dinosaurs and one on the parts of the human body.

About half the books that my wife and I read to Michael were rented from the library. Some books we read only once; others we read repeatedly. My guess is that the average repetition rate was about three times. Hence, Michael was exposed to over 200 books during his toddler years!

### III. How I Implemented the Five Methods

If your child is four years old and knows the capital letters and is able to recognize at least twenty words among the flash card set then he or she is ready to learn simple reading. If your child has not achieved these milestones yet, then you should implement the methods and exercises of Chapter II of this pamphlet.

Unfortunately, there are very few preschool reading books written in capital letters. I was fortunate in having my own computer-generated printout of *One! Two! Three! This Book 's for Me!* I continued to teach Michael, who had just turned four years old, the lower case letters using the methods in Chapter II. I tested him at four years and one month and he succeeded in recognizing them all except one.

At this stage, it is also worth developing reading-related skills such as writing, spelling, vocabulary, speaking abilities and grammar. Concerning the latter, I always correct Michael's grammatical mistakes. One, which he picked up from and was reinforced by his schoolmates, is saying "mines" instead of "mine;" I have been trying to fix this error for over a year!

Continue to read to your child but have him or her participate more actively in the process. This can be done by asking questions or even having your child read particular words or phrases. Before going into details about the five methods, let me tell you the story of how Michael finally achieved first-grade reading proficiency.

When he was four years and two months old, he had made enough progress in word recognition that I began to have him read the simplest books I could find. I had to help him with about half the words. Actually, he was not quite ready for these "50-50" reading sessions; however, the Oakland Public Library had a program that I wanted Michael to participate in.

Each summer, students of all ages can sign up at a local Oakland Public Library branch to get prizes for reading books. A student must do 32 fifteen-minute reading sessions. Although a parent is permitted to do the reading instead if the child is under six, I deliberately told Michael that he had to do it himself if he were to get the prizes. This incentive was just enough to motivate him to try to read.

If Michael did not read a sentence smoothly, I read it after he had finished. I sometimes did this with all the sentences on a page. The advantage of doing this is that it gives a sense of fluency and as-

sists in reading comprehension. I can remember when I was in grade school and forced to read aloud; I concentrated so much on trying to say the sentences nicely that I had no idea of what I was saying. By rereading what Michael had read, I was giving him the chance to concentrate on the meaning of the text.

When Michael did not know a word, I often gave him hints. If this failed, I told him how to say the unknown word. Sometimes, Michael read a particular word correctly only to get stuck with the same word a page or two thereafter. In such cases, I used to turn back and ask Michael to reread the earlier sentence. Then, I would say, "Look! Are these two words the same?" and I would flip back and forth between the two pages.

I also pointed to the words as Michael read them. This forced him to pay attention to the text and helped him to concentrate.

Michael began with *The Foot Book* by Dr. Seuss on June 11 and, in slightly less than 2 months, managed with my help to read 28 other books. Two books he read twice: *The Foot Book* and *One! Two! Three! This Book 's for Me!* One book, *Go Dog. Go!*, took him two sessions. The other books he read were *The Little Engine that Could: Colors; Flying!; Curious George and the Bunny; Jungle Adventure; The Poor Old Dog* and *The Pig at the Candy Store* in *Fables* by Arnold Lobel; *Goodnight Moon; Thomas and Bertie; Chicka Chicka Boom Boom; Freight Train; Bears in Pairs; I Hear, I See, I Touch; Good Night, Gorilla; Ten, Nine, Eight; I Am a Bunny; Where the Wild Things Are; Whose Mother Are You; Bears in the Night; Clifford, the Big Red Dog; Cave Boy; Old Hat, New Hat; Inside, Outside, Upside Down; Bathtime for Biscuit; Biscuit Wants to Play; Biscuit; Oh, Cats!; and Biscuit Finds a Friend.* About half of these books can be found in the anthology *The 20th Century Children's Book Treasury* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

On the second Tuesday in August, Michael and I went to the library to collect his prizes: a free pizza and an ice cream cone at a local restaurant, passes to two museums, a free entry into Children's Fairyland, discounts to Oakland A's baseball games, a certificate of accomplishment, and a pouch to hold these things in. In addition, they gave him some colored stars and a book of his choosing (he selected *Frog and Toad are Friends*). Michael was delighted.

As the librarian handed these to him, a young girl asked what one needed to do to get the prizes. The librarian explained the summer reading program to her. I asked the girl, "What grade are you in?" She replied that she had completed first grade. "Can you read?" I continued. "Yes," she answered. I gave her

a book that I was checking out for Michael and asked her to read the title. She began to phonetically sound out a relatively simple word, one that Michael would have read immediately. After about 6 seconds, she managed to say the word. Then, she went on to the second one. It was the same story. It took her about 25 seconds to read the title and I had to help her with one word. It was evident to me that the phonetic approach that she must have been using in first grade was not working for her.

### **Method I: Sight Recognition**

When Michael turned four years old, I added more words to the flash card set: "ONLY," "GREEN," "RAN," "FUN," "ONE," "DID," "WHY," "US," "HOW," "HEAD," "HAND," "WHAT," "WHERE," "HER," "HIS," "OUR," and "HIM," and the question mark "?". I continued using the cards as I had done when he was three years old: in games, in sentences including nonsense ones, and in quizzes for which he received small rewards. It just took a session every two or three weeks to teach Michael the majority of the words. Many times when I offered to play a game with the cards, Michael refused and went off to draw with crayons, make constructions out of LEGOS® or watch TV. Such is the nature of teaching children at this early age.

I continued to take advantage of Michael's interest in signs while walking or while driving a car. He became quite good at finding particular sign words such as "SPEED" or "RIGHT". From such activities, he even learned short phrases such as "NARROW BRIDGE" and "NO U TURN." One nice thing about street signs is that most are in capital letters.

I started giving Michael a word writing lesson about once a month. I succeeded in teaching him to write simple things such as "NO" and "ME," and he was able to write almost any word in capital letters if I spelled it out for him. Using such dictation, I always had him write a thank-you note to anyone who gave him a gift. I told him that people would be unhappy if they gave him a present and did not receive a thank-you letter; "Perhaps next year they will not give you anything."

If your child has difficulty in writing on his or her own, simplify the process by doing tracing instead. Alternatively, you can place numbered dots in strategic spots that will spell out a "secret word" when your child draws through the numbers in order.

You can also have your child write words with chalk on a sidewalk or on a blackboard. Writing is a

slow, detailed exercise that can help a child increase his or her sight-recognition vocabulary.

I was also able to develop some spelling abilities in four-year-old Michael. Once in a while, I would ask him to spell a word. For example, when asked, "How do you spell 'no'?" he was able to say, "n, o." The words "cat," "dog" and "Michael" were also in his limited spelling vocabulary, which consisted of about a dozen words. If your child cannot spell words from memory, try having him or her do the simpler exercise of spelling a word from a written version.

The following was quite useful for increasing Michael's sight-recognition vocabulary. I used to look ahead through a story for a word that appeared repeatedly and that I wanted Michael to learn. For example, if the word was "ball", then I would say to him, "We're going to pretend that I am unable to say the word 'ball.' Each time I come to this word, I will not be able to continue unless you read the word. Please help me by saying 'ball' each time I come to it."

This relatively easy exercise is worth trying even at age three. The pause provides the child with a hint that he or she should say the word. How did I know whether Michael was reading the word or responding to the pause? I didn't.

So next, I told Michael that I was unable to read two particular words. I showed them to him very carefully before proceeding. Now he had to look at the letters to decide which one to say. This exercise of having your son or daughter read a word or two is excellent for getting him or her to play a role in the reading. It is definitely worth doing often during your readings.

In other bedtime sessions, I used to ask Michael to read the words that I knew he knew from his flash card set. This would have been a very easy exercise for him had the text been written in capitals. It is quite interesting and I found it somewhat amazing that he was able to read words written in lower case letters even though the flash cards for them had not been generated. Apparently, he had been sufficiently exposed to lower case letters thanks to his teachers at preschool and his parents at home to recognize the lower-case writing of a word from its capital-letter version.

I also promoted the "letter" games of Chapter II of this pamphlet to word games and had Michael play them. Naturally, games are more fun for a child than exercises or lessons. If you need additional ideas in this regard, take almost any verbally oriented game designed for an older child (such as "Boggle" or "Scrabble") and simplify it so that it is appropriate for your child. It is also easy to construct

"word guessing games." At Easter, do an egg hunt but hide words instead. When a child finds a hidden word, he or she gets a real candy Easter egg if he or she can say the word. At other times of the year, hide the words in a room and play the hunting game for other rewards. If need be, tell your child that he or she is "hot" when approaching a hiding spot. On a blackboard or a piece of paper, you can create your own "word search" puzzle. Make a 3x3 or 4x4 grid and put letters in the boxes to spell words in various directions. Then have the child find as many words as possible.

I estimate that at four years and four months, Michael's sight-recognition vocabulary was about 100 words of which about half came from the flash card set. The others he had learned through reading and other means.

## Method II: Phonics

First-letter consonant phonics assisted Michael in his early-stage reading. It provided him with a hint as to what an unknown word might be, especially when context (Method III), memory (Method IV) and pictures (Method V) were incorporated into the reading process.

To develop first-consonant recognition skills in Michael, I reversed the letter phonics exercise by asking for the letter of a phoneme: "Ta, ta, ta. What letter produces this sound?" I also used to say a word to him and asked him to tell me with which letter it begins. On other occasions, I would ask him to provide me with words that begin with a certain letter.

To further sharpen his consonantal phonetics, I quizzed him on the last letters of words: "Train, train, train," I would say, emphasizing the final consonant, "What letter does trainnn end in?" I used final-letter recognition to help Michael distinguish "NO" from "NOT" and "CAT" from "CAR" when he mixed them up in sight-recognition exercises.

It requires more creativity to incorporate phonics into games but this can still be done. For example, in board games, pieces advance only if the child can say the phonetic sound associated with a letter on a flash card. However, another approach proved much more effective with Michael: computer programs. *Jump Start Phonics* (Knowledge Adventure) and the first grade part of *Madeline 1st and 2nd Grade* (Creative Wonders) contain entertaining and interactive games. There is also software related to TV shows, such as *Blue's ABC Time: Activities* (Nickelodeon Software). Often Michael played with such computer programs for an hour or more.

By the way, the Madeline programs have a section in which the child can select phrases and have a

professor say them together to make funny sentences. Michael laughed and laughed as he played this part. Of course, Michael was already familiar with Madeline because I had read the Madeline books to him.

I took advantage of the phonetic nature of the English language to provide hints for words with which Michael had difficulties while reading. If he could not recognize "bank," then, pointing to "bank," I would ask him, "What letter does this word begin with?" If he said "B" then I would ask him, "What is the sound of B?" If this was not sufficient to allow him to guess the word, I would provide further hints. Sometimes, I would shortcut the process by saying to him, "See this word. It begins with B. What is the sound of B?" or even, "See the B at the beginning of the word. The word must begin with the sound 'baa!'" Occasionally – if I thought it might be useful – I would provide a hint based on the final consonant.

Workbooks can be useful in teaching phonics. One that I used a little with Michael called *My Phonics Word Book* by Cass Hollander (McClanahan Book Co., 1993) grouped words with the same vocalic stems such as those associated with "-ag": "bag," "drag," "flag," "rag," "tag," and "wag." There are stickers for each stem that the child can place on the page. This provided a little motivation for Michael since he loves stickers.

Another exercise worth doing is the following. Soon after Michael completed the Oakland Summer Reading Program, I said to him, "Bingo, bingo, bingo. Bing-Go, Bing-Go has two syllables. Interesting, interesting, interesting. In-Ter-Rest-Ing, In-Ter-Rest-Ing has four syllables." I did this with several more words and then asked Michael, "How many syllables does Win-Dow have?" He used his fingers almost instinctively to count out the syllables: As he said, "Win," he poked his index finger out and as he said "Dow," his middle finger went out. Then he counted his fingers and told me, "Two!" I tested him on several words and he provided the correct number of syllables each time. Subsequently, I have quizzed Michael on several occasions. He definitely knows the concept of syllable number.

If your four- or five-year-old child cannot do this exercise, I suggest that you mimic Michael. For example, as you say "In-Ter-Rest-Ing," stick a finger out for each syllable and then count them at the end. Show your child how to do it.

Although I de-emphasized the use of last-letter phonics in reading, I did teach Michael the sounds associated with the two endings: "-s" and "-ing." This was not difficult to accomplish because

Michael had already been exposed to these through the flash cards. I showed him a word such as "DOG" without an S, pronounced it several times, showed him "DOGS," pronounced it several times and told him that adding an S to the word means that there is more than one dog present. After doing this with several words and asking Michael to pronounce the singular and plural of familiar nouns, he learned the sound and meaning of the final S. I proceeded with "-ing" in a similar way.

Sometimes in reading, Michael did not notice the final S. In such cases, it was easy to point out the letter and have him correct himself. The "-ing" was a little more difficult for him. I would begin by covering up these last three letters and asking him to say the stem. If he could do that, then I would cover up the stem and ask him to say the "ing." Finally, I would ask him to say the two together. About two-thirds of the time, he was able to say the word.

In selected cases, a word can be decomposed into sufficiently simple parts to provide a useful hint. For example, "away," can be broken up as "a - way."

Activities and exercises involving rhyming are worth doing because they pave the way to vocalic phonetics. For example, I would say two words and ask Michael if they rhymed. It is easy to incorporate this rhyming test into a game. In fact, in one part of the software program *Jump Start Phonics*, the player gains points by correctly recognizing words that rhyme. After Michael got good at recognizing rhymes, I increased the difficulty by asking him to provide me with a rhyming word: "Michael," I would ask him, "What rhymes with cat?" When he said, "bat," I would continue, "What rhymes with tree?" and so on. By the time Michael was four years and four months old, he was quite good at rhyming.

As I have said, phonics played a subdominant role in Michael's success as an early reader. However, if you sense that your child is an audio-dominated learner, you should pursue this approach more vigorously. Since phonics becomes increasingly important as a child becomes older, you should gradually work on games and exercises involving phonetics as your child develops more reading dexterity. Probably the best route is the computer: obtain good phonics software programs.

### **Method III: Context**

It was evident to me that Michael occasionally used context to try to guess a word. For example, he might be reading a sentence and say "house" when the text said "cabin." Sometimes when he couldn't read a word, I would have him read the rest of the sentence and then ask him what he thought the un-

read word might be. Often, I read the sentence for him skipping over the unknown word. I also used context-based hints to help Michael guess an unknown word. For example, I might say, "This word is a color," or "This word is a number," or "This word is an insect."

"Filling in words" can easily be turned into an exercise. Say to your child, "We're going to play a guessing game. I'll read a sentence but say 'blank' in place of one word. If you can tell me the word that is supposed to be there, then I'll give you a point. When you get ten points, you win a sticker!"

Many computer programs have fill-in exercises. I also recommend obtaining workbooks with fill-in blanks. Context reading is in the repertoire of the skilled adult reader. There is no reason why you should not start developing this ability in your child.

### **Method IV: Memorization**

The most blatant evidence that Michael sometimes used memorization to read was the following. On rare occasions in a book with which he was quite familiar, he ignored the text completely but utter a perfectly respectable sentence that matched the meaning in the book. In other words, the reading process broke down completely but Michael provided in his own words what he knew was on the page.

For the preschooler, Method IV should be used as a way of rendering the reading less difficult. Why not, for example, have your child read a familiar nursery rhyme among the first things that he or she tries to read? There is nothing like easy success to build confidence.

There was a reason while I selected *The Foot Book* as the first book for Michael to read for the Oakland Public Library summer reading program. I had read it 20 or 30 times to Michael in his toddler years. He knew half the sentences by heart. Repeated reading of a particular book is one of the best ways to implement Method IV. A book of second-grade difficulty can be reduced to the first-grade level through repetitive readings of it.

Previously familiarity is needed for Method IV implementation. Hearing the text before reading it is one way to achieve this. Occasionally I rented from the library "books on tape." The book and corresponding cassette come in a plastic bag. While looking at the book, Michael would listen to a reading of it. The best book cassettes sound a beep so that the child knows when to turn the page. One advantage of books on tape is that the child can listen and look without an adult present. If Michael liked a story, he would listen to the cassette many times. On a few occasions, he liked it if I read the book in time with

the recording. There are also audiotapes for letter and word songs and for nursery rhymes. After your child has heard a story many times, help him or her read the text without playing the audiotape.

The simplest way to incorporate Method IV into the bedtime stories is to ask your child to read the repeated phrases of a book. Sometimes select books that have one or more phrases appearing frequently. At one point, I had Michael say "Good night" each time it appeared in *Good Night, Gorilla* while I read the rest of the words. Since "good" was in his sight recognition vocabulary, this was a particularly easy exercise for him.

### **Method V: Pictures**

Books with pictures begin the process of visualization in reading. Picture books are favored by toddlers, and stories accompanied by illustrations help the young reader. Ask your child to describe what he or she sees in an image of a picture book. Spend some time discussing the imaginary (and not just the words). One can even play the "I spy" game with the illustrations. "I spy a silver key somewhere on this page. Can you find it?"

Sometimes when Michael got stuck in trying to read a word, I would refer to something in the picture as a way of giving him a hint. For example, if there was a cow, a pig and a horse in the picture, I would say, "Michael, this word is one of the animals in the picture. Which one is it?" If he still could not figure it out, then I might ask him to identify each animal in the picture and have him use first-letter phonics.

In the counting book *One, Two, Three! This Book 's for Me!* (Jupiter Scientific, 2002), many words have images just beneath them to assist the reader. For example, the text accompanying the number three reads "Three, three, three! How much is three? Three is a tree and a tree and a tree-ee-ee. Is that an owl on a branch I see?" The illustration opposite the text shows three trees in front of a red fence in a meadow with an owl in one of them. Each word "tree" in the text has an image of a tree below it. A picture of an owl and a branch respectively appear below the words "owl" and "branch." In addition, there are other visual aids. The numeral "3" is below the word "three" and some of the text is color-coded: The word "tree" is in green and "branch" is in brown. It would be nicer if there were more books available with this type of visual assistance. Such books can be used as the very first ones preschoolers read.

### **Good Preschool Reading Books**

The six elements listed at the end of Chapter II that render a book more easily readable for the toddler also make a book easier for the preschooler. As your child becomes a better reader, you will want to de-emphasize elements (1)-(6) so that the he or she learns to read without these six aids. For example, a picture book is appropriate for the preschooler while a short story with a few illustrations is better for the second grader.

Whereas the two and three year old is most attracted to the pictures in a book, the story element becomes more important for the preschooler of age four and older. Therefore, select interesting stories to read to your child. It is still useful to choose books that incorporate some of the six elements mentioned above: Texts that rhyme or have rhythm or that incorporate a repetitive idea or phrase are still very useful. Books with nice pictures and simple language should also be favored.

Here is an abbreviated selection that I enjoyed reading to Michael and that he seemed to like: The "Madeline" stories by Ludwig Bemelmans, the "Berenstain Bears" series by Stan and Jan Berenstain, the "Babar" adventures by Jean de Brunhoff, various works by Dr. Seuss, "Curious George" books by H. A. Rey, the "Amelia Bedilia" series by Peggy Parish; classics such as *The Three Little Bears*, *Pinocchio*, *Peter and the Wolf*, and *Goldilocks*; collections such as *Children's Bedtime Treasury* by Derek Hall, Alison Morris and Louisa Somerville, *My Easy-to-Read Stories* by June Woodman (Brimax Books, 1986), *Good Night Stories* (Peter Haddock Limited), *The Big Red Book of Beginner Books* (Random House); individual works such as *The Best Mistake Ever! And Other Stories* by Richard Scarry, *Doctor DeSoto* by William Steig, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Engine* by Virginia Lee Burton, *The Night at the Museum* by Milan Trenc; books based on TV programs such as "Arthur" stories by Marc Brown; and books based on movies such as *Walt Disney's 101 Dalmatians*.

## **IV. Other Issues**

### **Requirements of the Parents**

We are on the second sentence of the fourth page of a twelve-page book. Michael, seeing an image of a truck, asks, "Why do trucks have bigger tires?" "Because trucks are heavier than cars," I reply and continue, "What is this word?" with my finger pointing to the spot. "Do some trucks have more wheels

than others?" he queries. "Yes. Now read this word." "Dad, why is the back of this truck open?" It goes on and on like this for three minutes. I am unable to get Michael to read the word. He is completely engrossed by the picture in the book and his curiosity produces one question after another. While I welcome these questions and know that he is learning from my responses, I am utterly frustrated that I cannot get him to finish reading the page. My patience is pushed to the limit.

Situations like the above occurred about 10% of the time during the four-month period in which Michael learned to read. They drove me crazy. Sometimes, I succeeded in re-focusing his attention back on reading. Other times, I gave up; we never finished reading the story that day. If Michael is adamant about not reading, there is little I can do about it.

The point that I am making is that extreme patience is often required on behalf of the parent. Four year olds cannot maintain the focus of an adult and their minds sometimes wonder off into never-never land. They can be unwilling and stubborn. At times, they lack attentiveness or are unable to concentrate for more than a few minutes. Although you must be reasonably devoted to teach your preschool child to read, you also need to be *patient*. If you cannot get your child to do an activity after several attempts, then my advice to you is to give up, try another time but still maintain a positive attitude. Instead, seek out ways to motivate your child or offer him or her a reward. When a mule won't move, it's no use to push from behind but sometimes a carrot in front of the nose will work.

It only took about 20 minutes every other day of reading exercises, which is not very much, to achieve the results with Michael. What is important is to be *persistent* and *devoted* in the sense of doing a few reading activities per week. Without your efforts, you cannot expect your child to learn to read spontaneously.

You must be willing to try the ideas of this pamphlet, appropriately adapting the methods according to what works best for your child. Be open minded and creative in finding your own techniques, tricks and learning games.

There are those who do not advocate early learning. They believe that what is appropriate for the young child is creating a stimulating environment in which the child can develop more or less on his or her own. Few of us would disagree with the idea of providing a stimulating environment for our child. However, I believe that a little directed influence by the parent can produce extraordinary results. The fact that Michael can read at an age of less than four-

and-a-half is an example of the success that can be obtained with a small amount of parental input.

It is important to have a sense of timing about your child's development. For example, at around one year, an infant begins to walk. Before that age, he or she can only crawl and it is useless to teach the baby walking. It seems as if certain developmental milestones are programmed to take place at pre-determined moments. The same is true of verbal skills. If you try to teach them to your child before he or she is really ready, then you are doomed to fail. If children know the alphabet and some words, my sense is that they *are* ready to learn some simple reading at four or five years old. *Do not force* your child. You need to coax your son or daughter into doing learning activities. You are trying to get him or her to take the first steps – not run a 440-yard dash.

### **Motivating the Child**

Perhaps the most important way that I motivate Michael is to praise him liberally for his efforts: "Michael, you read this whole page by yourself! That's great!"; "Wow, what a good job you did!"; "Very good!"; "Excellent, Michael, excellent!"; "Well done, little guy!"; "Perfect!"; or "You did it!" There is no holding back in the flow of accolades for him as he progresses in the learning process. Even the smallest positive step is praised.

I never punish Michael for failure. I might punish him for bad behavior but not for refusing to have a lesson, or play a game or for losing interest during a reading activity.

Motivate your child by proposing rewards of small items such as pennies and stickers. For a larger endeavor, provide a big prize as incentive. The above-mentioned Oakland Public Library summer reading program is an example of the latter.

Making the learning fun is a key to the success. If you fail in this regard, the child will lose interest or be bored. Obtain some books on the subjects that your child likes. Note the things that make your child happy or laugh. Then incorporate them into the learning sessions. You'll know when you're on the right track when your child starts jumping up and down with excitement or runs into the other room to get the other parent to come and see what's happening.

The learning also needs to be as easy as possible but not trivial for the child. If it is too difficult, the child will become frustrated and quit. Giving hints and providing help should be part of the learning program.

## Other Issues

I have used my training as a scientist to assist in developing this pamphlet: First, I came up with ideas. I tried them out on Michael. Then I abandoned the ones that did not work and incorporated the ones that did. I observed Michael carefully, developed theories of the learning of reading and eventually noticed the five reading methods. I tested the ideas and techniques and appropriately modified them. In other words, in producing this pamphlet the scientific approach of experiment, observation, theory, feedback and modification were used.

The methods of this pamphlet are supported by studies. See, for example, "Reading in Kindergarten: Direct Versus Indirect Teaching" by Mary Willert and Constance Kamii (*Young Children*, Vol. 40, p.3-9, May 1985) and "Research in Review: What Preschool Children Know About Reading and How They Learn It" by Susan Kontos (*Young Children*, Vol. 42, p.58-65, November 1986).

The Internet is another source of early reading activities and information. The majority of websites emphasize the phonics approach. The quality of content varies greatly. Here are four sites that you might find useful. The URL <http://pbskids.org/lions/tips/index.html> provides many nice tips for getting your child to be an active participant of your reading sessions. The 200 most common words in English are listed at <http://www.aability.com/jiffy.html>; These can be useful for the selection of words to focus on for Method I (sight recognition). The US Department of Education's "Helping Your Child Learn to Read" at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/Reading/index.html> has some useful information and reading exercises. Lastly, you can read rebus versions of nursery rhymes with your child online at <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/Rhymes.html>. The website [www.enchantedlearning.com](http://www.enchantedlearning.com) has a lot of other educational content for children.

There are second and third graders who have considerable difficulty reading. Since reading is so important in many other subjects, problem readers often perform quite poorly in school and receive below average grades across the board. What I found somewhat paradoxical is that it appears to be relatively easy to teach a preschooler how to read simple books. Certainly, the methods of this pamphlet should work even better on older children given that they have longer attention spans, can concentrate more deeply and are generally intellectually and emotionally more mature. It is hard for me to believe that if the reading process is rendered easy and fun for the pupil by using the methods of this pamphlet that

such pupils would not be able to progress considerably. My guess for the source of the problem is that phonics does not work very well for certain students and that the American educational system overemphasizes this approach. The failure of phonics for preschoolers is documented in "Early Phonics Instruction: Its Effect on Literacy Development" by Maryann Manning, Gary Manning and Constance Kamii (*Young Children*, Vol. 44, p.4-8, November 1988).

## What to Do Next

After Michael came home from collecting his prizes at the Oakland Public Library summer reading program, I did not have him read a book for two weeks. I felt that the pressure to finish before the deadline had taken its toll and I wanted him to take a break from reading. In the coming year, I plan to have him read about one book per week.

If you have implemented the methods of this pamphlet and your child can now read simple text, you will want to take further steps. The following are some suggested general goals: (1) improve your child's writing and increase his or her written vocabulary, (2) develop your child's spelling skills, (3) increase your son's or daughter's phonological awareness, and (4) continue to help your child become a better reader.

Concerning the latter, it is still important to read to your child. It is the backbone of the early reading program of this pamphlet. Even when your child can read skillfully and completely on his or her own, it is a good idea to read occasionally to him or her aloud. As your child becomes familiar with the words in the flash card set, add more as part of the continuing program to enlarge your child's sight-recognition vocabulary. Create cards for "-ED" and "-D" and other frequently appearing endings and teach them to your son or daughter.

Compensate for your child's maturity as he or she grows. If your child is progressing well, you might want to introduce him or her to the PBS program "Between the Lions."

In terms of achieving (1) and (2), invent games that incorporate writing or spelling into his or her playtime activities. You will want to spend more time on words in lower-case-letter format and the writing of them. Make lower-case versions of the flash card words.

Although I have downplayed the role of phonics, I would recommend increasing your son's or daughter's phonological awareness through a series of steps. Strive to get your child to recognize consonant blends such as "BL" and "ST," since this will allow

him or her to say the initial sound of all words except those that start with vowels. Make flash cards for the most common two-consonant combinations. To increase phonetic sensitivity, try the following exercise on syllable isolation. After providing your child with examples in a manner similar to syllable counting (See Method II: Phonics above), ask him or her questions such as "What is the first syllable of cookie?" or "What is the second syllable of airplane?" If your child is able to recognize rhymes, then you can introduce some vowel phonetic exercises. Sample questions to use are: Which two words rhyme among "dog," "cat," "key," and "hat?"; Which word does not belong among "can," "fan," "ring," and "man?"; and What word begins with "m" and rhymes with "sat?" Many similar exercises but in an animated context are provided in the Madeline, Reader Rabbit and Jump Start series of computer programs. You should definitely take advantage of such software.

My efforts and those of my wife make me confident that Michael will be among the top readers in his class. With a little effort on your behalf, your child can be a superlative reader too.

\* \* \*

I have just picked up Michael at preschool. We drive to the library to check out some books. It just happens that Anna, a classmate of Michael, and her mother are there. Michael and Anna play a bit. Then I give him a book, "Michael, why don't you read this to Anna." Michael begins to read it using his finger even though I have not told him to do so. He is doing well; only about one out of twenty words does he need help with and Anna is interested in the story. Her mother tells me that she has tried to teach her daughter to spell but she shows little interest. From the conversation, it is evident that she has not tried to teach her to read.

I decide to try out the methods. I stop Michael and show Anna the word "Woof." "See the 'W.' This word is 'woof.' It's the sound that dogs make. Woof, woof, woof. You read it." She turns her head away. "She is timid," her mother informs me. Michael continues reading. I interrupt again. "What is this word?" I ask Anna. She does not respond. "What is the sound that dogs make?" "Woof," Michael says. I try again, "Anna. Say 'woof.'" Finally, she softly speaks the word. "Very good! You read a word! You made the sound that a dog makes." We continue. When I praise her the third time for reading "woof," she leaves her seat and starts jumping up and down.

Next, I have her read the word "quack." She says, "quack, quack" even though the word is written

only once. I praise her and then say, "There is only one 'quack.' See." Of the text that remains, she reads all the "woof's" and "quack's" correctly.

I speak a little more to her mother. "I bet she would like Madeline books." I find one on the shelf. "Do you know this book?" I ask Anna. Michael informs me that the teacher has read it to them at preschool. I begin to read it, pausing at places where I expect the text to be familiar. Both Michael and Anna fill in the words. Actually, Anna does not even look at the pages. She seems to be able to guess the word from familiarity (Method IV), from context (Method III), or from the fact that the word rhymes with a previous word, which is a type of phonics (Method II). "Wow, Anna! You're reading," I tell her even though I know she is not looking at the words. She is smiling and wiggling in her seat.

I begin to quiz her. "Where is Madeline going?" Michael interjects, "To the hospital." "Why is she going to the hospital?" Neither of them knows the answer. I take the opportunity to explain to them what an appendix is, where it is located and how it sometimes gets sick. I read on. "Why does she have a scar?" Again, I need to answer my own question. "Whose toys are these?" I ask pointing to the images on the page. Anna answers, "Madeline's." "That's absolutely right, Anna! Why are there so many of them in her hospital room?" "Because she's sick," Michael shouts out. We continue. Anna begins to answer many of the questions that I pose. She seems to be really enjoying herself. Several times, I have to ask them to talk quietly. "This is a library. If we shout, we will disturb the others." Then I ask what I consider to be a difficult question, "Why are all the other children crying and saying they are sick?" Anna answers, "Because they want to get toys too." I am amazed. "Wow, Anna! You really understand this book. You're a good reader!"

Although she has turned four just a few months ago, it is clear to me that if I were her father that she would be reading like a first grader in four or five months. In less than 15 minutes, I have managed to make what-seems-to-be enormous progress. The process seems so simple. I feel as if I have discovered important principles about how to teach a child to read at an early age. And that is why I have written this pamphlet: to share them with you.