

pediatric pointers



Empower Parents To Grow Readers

After lunch, we put our heads on our desk and waited while Mrs. Walden found the place where we left off the day before. Tummies full from lunch and tired from a brief but energetic burst on the playground, we nestled in and anticipated. The lull of her voice swept us off to magical places for 30 minutes each day. We begged her to read just one more chapter.

It wasn't that my parents didn't spend quality time with me. They were honest and hard-working people who loved my brother and me. They just didn't know the importance of reading to us. Consequently, I couldn't read until the third grade.

Statistics show that my brother and I never should have "caught-up." But, because our home was rich in so many other ways, we did—and exceeded. My brother also had the good fortune to have Mrs. Walden three years before me. She sowed the seeds of literacy for us, and we both grew up to be avid readers and writers.

After contemplating a career in writing or audiology, I chose the latter. Working primarily with pediatricians, I understand the importance of early identification and intervention on many levels. Working in collaboration with the community I live in, I work as a part of a team to find and provide amplification long before 6 months of age. But that is just where my role begins.

The unfortunate circumstances of many of the families I serve provide daily economic and social challenges for them. Transportation issues alone have spoiled appointments and fittings on many occasions. At a time when important neural connections are being created by sensory experiences, I agonize over missed opportunities.

Still, I am always hopeful about outcomes.

Brain development hinges on a complex interplay between the genes you're born with and the experiences you have. Research suggests that activity, experience, attachment, and stimulation determine the structure of the brain. Hearing aids provide sensory

stimulation important for reinforcing neural connections that are key tasks of early brain development and listening. But that is just the beginning of the brain's complex wiring act.

A baby's brain is remarkably unfinished. Most of its 100 billion neurons are not yet connected in networks and await the important experiences in the environment to determine their function. A child's brain forms twice as many synapses as he/she will eventually need. If these synapses are not used repeatedly, they are eliminated. Timing is critical. The time to plant is now.

This is when opportunity comes knocking. Many caregivers are hungry for information about how to promote language. In addition to numerous referrals to other professionals in the community, I plant the seeds about the importance of reading to their babies. I also give them an age-appropriate book in either English or Spanish. This small gift may make a lifetime of difference.

Reactions differ. Most seem surprised and, just like my parents, didn't know they should be reading to their babies. I include materials from the National Institute for Literacy with every hearing aid fitting. These materials are free and include information, research and activities for parents. Most are available in either English or Spanish.

I encourage parents to read, sing and talk as often and as much as they can with their children. If I've done my job correctly and given their child full access to speech, they should be able to develop the skills they need to learn to read. Providing language-rich environments and stimulating a baby's brain can be done through simple acts that produce amazing results.

Knowledge is power. Empower the families you serve with information about the importance of neurons in a baby's brain just waiting for the experiences of the environment to determine their function. Reading stimulates the connections for language and plants the seeds for literacy. Growing up literate is every child's right. **\$**

more info

RESOURCES

The Partnership for Reading

www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading

National Parent Information Network (NPIN)

www.npin.org

National Institute for Literacy (NIFL)

www.nifl.gov

Reading Rockets

www.readingrockets.org/families

PBS Parents

www.pbs.org/parents/readinglanguage

Zero to Three

www.zerotothree.org

National Education Association

www.nea.org

Reading Is Fundamental (RIF)

www.rif.org

Leading to Reading, RIF

www.rif.org/leadingtoreading/en/



Jacqueline Rogers Scholl, AuD, CCC-A, operates the Scholl Center for Communication Disorders in Tulsa, OK. Contact her at n2earz@yahoo.com.