



Montessori Matters



Almost done! Excitement grows as we anticipate opening our new addition. Come celebrate with us during the Housewarming Party on December 4th, 6:30 - 7:30 p.m.

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On the Calendar

November

- 18 Picture Retakes.
- 24-26 School Closed: Thanksgiving.

December

- 4 House Warming Party!

For additional calendar dates, go to www.rmschool.org

After School Studios

- 15 Discovering Chinese - Children's House 3:00-4:15
- 16 Science Club - E1 3:15-4:30
- 17 Sign Language- Children's House 3:00-4:15
- 17 Science Club - E2 3:30-4:45
- 18 Chinese Club - E1 & E2 3:15-4:30
- 19 Chess Club 3:15 - 4:30
- 19 Art Class - Children's House 3:00 - 4:15

Learning to Read

By Paul Epstein, Ph.D., Ann Epstein, Ph.D.

Some people there are who, being grown, forget the horrible task of learning to read. It is perhaps the greatest single effort that the human undertakes, and he must do it as a child. — John Steinbeck, 1962 Nobel Prize Winner for Literature

Learning to read is one of our most complex cognitive achievements. Indeed, we forget that reading, unlike walking, is not at all natural. Even so, children – if taught – can become independent readers usually between the ages of five and seven. Still, we cannot say just exactly when a child will accomplish this.

In this issue of *Montessori Matters*, we describe what's involved with learning to read. In the next *Montessori Matters* article, we will describe many of the Montessori classroom activities

Learning to read involves an amazing set of neurobiological and cultural factors. Maryanne Wolf, professor of Child Development at Tufts University and Director of the Center for Reading and Language Research, writes about the process of learning to read in her book *Proust and the Squid*. To read these words, Wolf notes that the brain has to coordinate the occipital regions (which are responsible for vision) with the temporal and parietal regions (which are responsible for language and computation). Reading requires coordinating vision and memory to decode and recognize symbols, combinations of symbols, and contexts for the meanings of those symbols. Most adults cannot recall how difficult this was to do as children. Most of us have

You can't always trust a spell-checker

to write correct English:

Eye halve a spelling chequer.
It came with my pea sea.
It plainly marques four my revue
Miss steaks eye kin knot sea.
Eye strike a key and type a word
And weight four it two say
Weather eye am wrong oar write,
It shows me strait a weigh.
As soon as a mist ache is maid,
It nose bee fore two long
And eye can put the error rite.
Its rare lea ever wrong.
Eye have run this poem threw it and
I am shore your pleased two no
Its letter perfect awl the weigh.
My chequer tolled me sew.

forgotten the challenge of recognizing a symbol as meaningful until we undertake learning a new language.

Today's preschool and elementary age children are taught reading using an approach called balanced literacy (Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland, 1997). Balanced literacy incorporates elements from the earlier phonics and whole language approaches. These elements are all found in the Montessori approach to reading. The term balanced literacy refers to both reading and writing. In this article, we are concerned with reading. However, as Dr. Montessori discovered over 100 years ago, learning one assists learning the other.

Compared to other western languages, English has fewer grammatical and syntactical rules for how to represent the phonemes. However, these rules are often inconsistently applied, and this makes it difficult to learn to read English. Spanish and Italian, for example, are phonetic languages. English is minimally phonetic. The word *cat*, for example, is a phonetic word. It is portrayed by written symbols that represent each of the separate and specific sounds (phonemes) of the word (*c*, *a*, *t* or *cat*). But English is more than a phonetic language. *The* and *said* are not phonetic words. They're (not *their* or *there*) sight (not *site*) words. Readers of

English must also learn a complex set of diphthong – or vowel - combinations. The long *a* sound, for example, is represented in words such as *pare*, *pear*, *pair* as well as in *play*, *their*, and *they're*. Beginning readers may be frustrated by the *ai* used in *pair*, which is pronounced with a long *a* sound while the same *ai* spelling used in *said* does not. *Pear* and *pair* are also called homonyms and have different meanings. So too (*to* and *two*) are *scent*, *sent*, and *cent*.

While other languages require pronouncing all letters, English challenges beginning readers with learning to read silent letters. A silent *e* usually, but not always, indicates a long vowel sound as in *kite* or *write* (not to be confused with *right*). The silent *e* in *love* is silent, but the *o* sound is not long. Then there are the silent *k* and *g* words as in *knew* which should not to be confused with *gnu*. Other words sound the same but are spelled differently such as *aisle* which (but not *witch*) should not be confused with *isle*. And, to make it still more challenging, English offers the beginning reader words that are spelled the same, but are pronounced differently: *read* (not *red*) and *read*; *wind* and *wind*; *combine* and *combine*.

English has 1,100 different combinations to spell its 44 basic sounds due in part to the numbers of words adopted from other language (Say-it-in-English, 2008). Comprehension is yet another challenge requiring readers understand grammar, punctuation, and context. Even when we can accurately read all the words and markings, certain technical usages can render familiar words almost incomprehensible:

Given the complexities of any language, and that we don't naturally learn to read, a child's brain wires itself for literacy through an amazing complex of experiences. MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) studies show that we use different parts of the brain to comprehend words we hear and words we read (Restak, 2003). Further, when children learn to read, they use more of their brains than adults. Later, as children become fluent readers, visual and memory signals shift from passing through the occipital, temporal, and parietal regions of both brain hemispheres to moving directly into the left hemisphere. This is how the brain learns to read efficiently.

Children develop the ability to read by comprehending spoken language, grouping and sequencing objects, hearing stories, and understanding rhyme and alliteration. Neurological development throughout childhood also requires movement. Children need ample time to walk, run, skip, jump, climb, slide, roll, and use their hands for all kinds of fine-motor activities.

Learning to read does not occur spontaneously. Adults



must show children various purposes for written materials such as story books, calendars, telephone books, newspapers, menus, letters, biographies, folktales, and shopping lists. Identifying functional purposes with these materials increases a child's motivation to learn to read.

Children must also learn a set of conventions about print. English is read from left to right, and from top to bottom. Words in print are separated by spaces. There are punctuation marks. Children must also learn how English associates symbol (letters) with sound, groups sounds into words, words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and so on.

There are many learning-to-read activities throughout the Montessori curriculum. These are grouped into categories called:

- √ Exposure to Language
- √ Phonemic Awareness
- √ Phonics Development
- √ Phonological Awareness
- √ Word Identification
- √ Word Study
- √ Comprehension
- √ Composition
- √ Fluency

These components are not sequential; they overlap. As described in the next issue of VOICES, the Montessori curriculum engages children in numerous learning activities for each one.

References

Bryan, Martin. (1997). SGML and HTML explained. Retrieved from <http://www.is-thought.co.uk/book/sgml-9.htm>

Galda, L., Cullinan, B. E., & Strickland, D. (1997). *Language, literacy, and the child*. NY: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Restak, R. (2003.) *The new brain. How the modern age is re-wiring your mind*. NY: Rodale Press.

Say-it-in-english. Retrieved from <http://www.say-it-in-english.com/SpellHome.html>

Wolf, M. (2007). *Proust and the squid. The story and science of the reading brain*. NY: HarperCollins Publications.

How parents can help their children learn to read

- √ Talk with your children!
 - During daily routines.
 - At special events.
 - When they are upset.
 - About movies, TV, video games.
- √ Read often (to/with children of all ages).
- √ Ask prediction and imagination questions.
- √ Check for understanding while reading:
 - Go over new vocabulary.
 - Talk about the sequence of events.
 - Review characters and settings.



Children in the Lower Elementary classrooms read literature as well as information in all subjects. The materials shown here offer a study of rocks and minerals and use a format called three-part cards: Children read the first card part (the name of the rock or mineral), match the information to a picture (the second part), and then check their reading accuracy by locating a third card which has both the picture and text.

