

It's A Generational Story

My personal testimony involves three generations (and a college roommate to boot): (1) my mother, Rita D. Newman contributing author and early childhood educator whose preschool my daughter attended; (2) my (NJD, author) personal story of struggling to learn to read in elementary school; and (3) my daughter mentioned above whose desire to learn to read in kindergarten led to the development of this program.

For my part, I remember a teacher looking over my shoulder - in early elementary school, with the unspoken thought, "Can't you just get this?" [reading thing]. I remember feeling like, "Can't you just break this down for me, please?" You see phonics [the building blocks of reading] is really just two steps: (1) knowing the sounds the letters make, & (2) putting those sounds together. And, boy, did I struggle back then - even going to summer school.

Honestly, I never even heard of phonics until I got to college. My college roommate and I were both mildly dyslexic. I remember looking at him, with the thought "how did you become a valedictorian?" He caught my skepticism and replied, "phonics" - giving me a clue into his successes. I had no idea what phonics was - at that juncture.

So, why wasn't I taught phonics in New Jersey? Decades later I ran into a retired certified reading specialist from New Jersey, who explained. I happened to be showing my newly minted reading program around. She was a friend of a family member on my wife's side. She looked at my book and said, "The pictures are gorgeous. This is great..." Her comment confused me. So I asked, "Wendy, why of all things are you commenting about the pictures?" She told me that when phonics first came out the publishers didn't put pictures in the books so it didn't keep the children's interest. At that point, the schools dropped it.

The third and final piece of this generational story is mentioned above and detailed a bit on the copyright page. My daughter - having attended my mom's preschool got a taste for reading, but wasn't learning it in kindergarten. About a month into kindergarten she came to me and said "Dad I want to learn to read". So I bought two books from Amazon to remain nameless. One was making it too difficult and the other wasn't doing enough.

So, I asked a friend of mine from the preschool whose son was reading on a second grade level the year before in their preschool class. (He happened to be a close friend of my daughters.) When I asked how she taught Jason she said, "With three letter words". My daughter and I also happened to have a letter sound tape in the car. Well, at that point it dawned on me - that if they knew three letter-sounds they could read a three letter word. So I started putting pages together: letter sound page, letter sound page, reading page. Note: it wasn't without a bump or two. For instance, in going from short vowel /a/ words: "bat", "cat", "hat", "sat", "mat", to short vowel /i/, my daughter wasn't quite ready. I needed to put in a review page. And, I still remember the look on her face when she saw it. A smile crept over her face, and you could see the wheels turning. It worked: by the end of the semester she was reading.

Note: my mom, Rita, was a very successful preschool director. She always had a waiting list and got rave reviews from parents and students alike. On one of our required parental volunteer days (~one per month), I observed my mom in the front of the four-year class pointing to the alphabet letters and singing the alphabet song, herself. While this may be considered "old-school", this can be an important pre-learning step, introducing letters - while keeping a certain high-tone of fun (in both singing the alphabet song, and seeing that it represents something)! It really is fun to see non-readers become readers.