

Nurture Your Children's Language Development

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Parents—whether or not they homeschool their children—are in the best position to give their children a solid foundation in English. Here are some things they can do.

General

- Recognize that each child is an individual. Avoid comparing one child's language abilities with another's.
- Talk to your children about a variety of things. This will help them begin to develop an awareness of how things work in the world.
- Encourage your children to talk with you—to share ideas, to ask questions. Ask follow-up questions that prompt your children to probe more deeply or to clarify their thinking.
- Listen to your children.
- Help your children find relationships between ideas—similarities, opposites, sequence, cause, examples, etc. If your children can find such relationships in the real world, they will be better able to recognize them in textbooks and in compositions.
- Model paraphrasing for your children. Occasionally ask them to convey an idea in different words.
- Involve your whole family in children's vocabulary study. Know which words your children are learning. Occasionally work some of those words into conversations. Share with your children sentences in which you saw or heard the words used. As a family you might target a word a day for addition to vocabularies.

Listening

- Let your children see that you give your full attention to people who are talking to you. Let them know that you expect the same attention when you are talking. If you do not have a child's attention when you are talking to him or her about something important, stop the conversation and get attention—with eye contact—before proceeding.

Reading

- Read to your children daily—whether a child is too young to understand you or old enough to read independently. This can be a good opportunity to expose children to more difficult reading material or to concepts that you would like to explore together.

- While you are reading with a child, pause occasionally to ask questions about the story: Why do you think [a character] did this? What do you think will happen next? Do not limit your questions to those that have right and wrong answers.
- Help your children connect what is read with their own experiences. If you're reading about an animal, for example, remind your children of your observations of that animal in your back yard or at a zoo. Look for differences as well as similarities between print and experience.
- Do not push young children to read. They may learn to read using a part of the brain that will stunt reading ability forever.
- Let your children see that you value reading both for the information you gain and for the enjoyment you derive.
- If a child enjoys being read to but doesn't like to read, have him or her evaluated by a developmental optometrist to see if a physical problem is making the reading process uncomfortable.
- Do not force children to read books that you think they should read (and enjoy!). If a child is a reluctant reader, start by reading about topics in which he or she is interested. One book (or author) is likely to lead to others.
- If a child does not like a book, do not force him or her to finish it. You might read a portion of the book to or with the child to attempt to spark interest, but if the child remains uninterested, set the book aside. You might revisit it at a later time.
- If a child is reading aloud and miscalls a word but has the correct meaning, do not mention the error. Most of life's reading is done silently for comprehension, not orally for perfection.
- If a child misreads something while reading aloud and seems oblivious to an error that totally changes or destroys the meaning, ask at the end of the sentence, "Did that make sense?" You are teaching your child to expect meaning from what is read.
- Read some of the books your children read so that you can discuss them. Sometimes read different books on the same topics that your children are reading about.
- Provide a variety of experiences for your children (these do not all need to cost money). Many reading comprehension problems occur because children lack background information that would give meaning to words on a page.
- If a child is browsing through a book looking at pictures and other graphics but reading little, recognize that he or she is developing good previewing techniques. Don't require that every word be read.
- When a child is reading for information, encourage him or her to have a question in mind so that the reading has a focused purpose.

- Take your children to the library regularly. Also be sure that each of your children owns some books or magazines.

Reading/Writing

- Provide practical reading experiences for your children, such as reading assembly directions or a recipe. Ask your children to critique the reading material. Was everything clear? How could the message have been improved?
- Help your children recognize that things are not equally important.

Speaking/Writing

- If a child will be giving an oral presentation (even a very short one), have him or her practice in front of a few family members.
- Encourage children to express opinions, support them, describe things, tell about events, explain things. You will be helping them to develop fluency and organization.
- If a child tends to ramble without focus, occasionally have him or her stop, think about the main point, and deliver it in one or two sentences.
- Be more concerned with the content of a child's message than with whether or not the message has usage errors.
- Encourage your children to put on puppet shows or plays, perhaps with their friends.

Writing

- Let your children see the many ways in which you use written language.
- When a child is assigned a composition, ask questions or give suggestions to help him or her narrow the topic. Ask open-ended questions that will require the child to rehearse what he or she will later write.
- When a child wants your reaction to something he or she has written, respond to the content before you comment on mechanical things, such as capitalization, punctuation, or usage. Give a compliment before—and after—you give a suggestion.
- Encourage your children to write letters—thank you notes, letters to friends who live in different cities, perhaps letters to pen pals. If this seems too much for some children, have them write a brief note at the end of your own letter to a relative or friend.
- Recognize writing as a process. Do not expect every example of a child's writing to be corrected to perfection. Point out to your child the things he or she has done well.

- Provide your children with tools for writing: different kinds of paper (some of it colorful), a variety of writing implements, an appropriate dictionary, a thesaurus, an English handbook.

Whenever you show that you value communication, you will encourage your children to value it, too.

Biographical Information

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Fran Santoro Hamilton's thirty-five years as teacher, writer, and editor have enabled her to distill the English language to its essentials. Fran is the author of Hands-On English, an English handbook that makes grammar visual, and she co-sponsors The Grannie Annie Family Story Celebration. Fran provides many free resources at www.GrammarAndMore.com.