

Reading before age 5 makes all the difference

Learning to read is an amazing achievement. Children enter the world with no knowledge of language, and within six or seven years, they are readers. For most children, the process begins long before kindergarten or primary school as they learn language, gain verbal skills, and build basic knowledge about words, sentences and the alphabet.

A large body of research confirms positive correlations between language development during the first five years of life and reading success later in life. A recent study at Stanford found that toddlers with more vocabulary – those who could immediately point to the correct item when asked – developed brains that literally processed information faster. It is easy to imagine a compounding impact. When a child hears more language and recognizes more words, her brain begins to process information faster and her learning accelerates. Similar studies have shown that children in low-verbal households can enter school two years behind in their language development, and that this lack of language starts to harm the child's IQ.

Reading preparation begins at birth through positive verbal interaction with an emotionally invested parent or caregiver. A babbling child quickly discovers that utterances elicit a response from a parent, that communication reinforces emotional connections, that words identify things. Soon there is an understanding of simple concepts, activities, relationships and even an early awareness of self with the realization that “someone is responding to me.”

With these interactions, the brain builds neurological pathways that form the foundation for all future learning. From birth to age 5, the brain grows from 25 percent to 92 percent of adult size. It is the most rapid period of brain growth – a time when the brain is most receptive to new information. This helps explain why a 3-year-old child can learn a second language more readily than a 40-year-old. It also is the reason children struggle with reading and early success in school when they haven't heard enough language in their first five years. As brain growth slows, it becomes more difficult to build those foundational pathways.

The path to success is both complex and simple. Children are born social and hard wired to crave positive interaction with their caregivers. A secure home environment with an abundance of verbal engagement is a key ingredient for language

acquisition, healthy brain development and reading readiness. This environment is full of conversations, stories, songs, explorations, questions and books. It is simply finding the time to enjoy natural parent-child bonds.

But too often, it doesn't happen. Some parents never had this behavior modeled for them as children. Others may be struggling due to economic hardships that allow little time or energy to engage their children often enough. Screens and technology have also

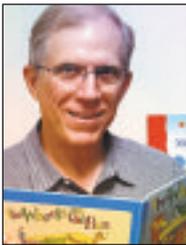
distracted us and reduced direct engagement. There is nothing inherently wrong with TV or smartphones or tablets – except when they begin to significantly reduce a parent's direct interaction with their 2-, 3- or 4-year-old. There is no substitute for positive parent interaction during these early years.

These are the issues we address at Raising A Reader Aspen to Parachute. We provide a weekly book bag and four storybooks to more than 2,000 local children through partnerships with preschool and kindergarten classrooms, Head Start, Yampah teen parent program, Preschool on Wheels and other child-care providers. Children take the books home for read-aloud time with family. At the end of each week, the books are returned and exchanged for another set.

For highly engaged families, the books strengthen home-school connections, provide parents with a friendly read-aloud reminder and reinforce a child's excitement about books and learning. For families where verbal engagement is low or where books are unaffordable, Raising A Reader can become a lifeline to school readiness. Last year, the organization facilitated 50 small group sessions to help parents strengthen engagement activities at home.

When an 18-month-old is listening and responding to a story, she is absorbing the information required for communication and reading success. So is a 4-year-old cuddled up with Dad for another story, especially when there is time to laugh about a picture, guess the story's ending or discuss a character's feelings. It's the same with singing, preparing a meal together and sitting down to talk about the child's day. Homes full of language and love nurture a child's brain connections, verbal skills and emotional health. It's how great readers are made.

Rick Blauvelt is executive director of Raising A Reader Aspen to Parachute.



Rick Blauvelt
Guest Opinion



YOUR LETTERS

'They only want to win'

I just watched “Confirmation” on HBO. I was riveted by the re-enactment of the proceedings that I still remember quite well from 1991 of the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill Senate Hearings. The question at the time was “Who did you believe?” I know that I believed Anita Hill, and could not believe that the Senate could confirm a man to the Supreme Court after the very credible allegations made against him.

But now, with 25 years more of watching the political situation in this country I understand why the Senate did. It was stated in the show. “They don't care. They only want to win.” The party who nominated Thomas continued to support him only because he was their guy. It had nothing to do with whether he was fit for the position of a Supreme Court justice. Instead they looked for ways to discredit the victim – someone who didn't want to come forward to begin with and had no agenda.

I am not giving the other side of the aisle a pass on this, either – they didn't want to address this issue for their own reasons, which did not include addressing the truth of the matter or the integrity of the nominee.

We need people in government who will do the right thing – not the right thing for their party, or what is politically expedient for themselves. I hope we all can agree on that, liberal or conservative.

Donna Yost
Glenwood Springs

Heck of a prom gift

Last Friday evening, my son and his date decided to drive from Rifle to Glenwood for dinner at The Pullman before his senior prom. When he returned home, he shared the story of a couple who gifted him and his date with paying for their dinner.

I just want to express my sincere thank you for contributing to my son's senior prom with a generous and kind gesture that you did. It made his memorable evening more special, and I sincerely am grateful to you for that.

Jeff Krebill
Rifle

A NOTE ON LETTERS

We welcome emailed letters. Letters deemed libelous, not factual or in bad taste will not be printed. We reserve the right to edit all letters for readability and language usage, and to shorten those longer than 350 words.

Email: letters@postindependent.com

Please include your real name, town of residence, daytime phone and email address. By submitting a letter for publication, you are consenting for it to be posted on our website.

RFTA's future with Garfield County

Soon-to-be gone Roaring Fork Transportation Authority board member and Carbondale Trustee John Hoffman's outburst against Garfield County Board of Commissioners (“Official: Cut off Garfield County,” Post Independent and Aspen Times, April 15) along Aspen Mayor Steve Skadron's belligerence in stoking the hot coals hotter just wasn't my cup of tea as other RFTA board members lost control of their ids.

When I had my chance to speak to the RFTA board members on the issue I excoriated them in defense of the Garfield County Board of County Commissioners. Also I explained to them the principles of reasonable initial negotiating at the table and viewing and accepting things from the Garfield County official stance.

Of course, I foresee the possibility of the RFTA board, if they are wise enough, shifting substantial power and influence from the Aspen socialist collective to the deserving and fiscally prudent board of Garfield County commissioners led by the erudite John “Wyatt” Martin.

Why? Any academic can note the signs of the Aspen-Pitkin County axis waning sustainability as the region's power, money influence and vigorous business capital formation shift in favor of Garfield County.

Garfield County is the undeniable regional start-up engine for dynamic economic and cultural growth for tomorrow.

RFTA's future is with Garfield County, not Pitkin County.

Emzy Veazy III
Aspen

THIS WEEK'S QUESTION

Would you use We-Cycle if it came to Glenwood Springs?

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