



Bellevue Discovery Preschool

Reading with Highly Capable Preschoolers: Ideas for Parents

When parents of highly capable preschoolers have asked me, “What’s the best way to teach my child to read?” I’ve always responded, “Read to them.” I realize that parents of potentially gifted young children need better advice: if our children have high potential, shouldn’t we do more than just read to them? Should we push a little (not in a bad way, of course, just with a bit of acceleration - a few worksheets, maybe)?

Some young gifted children teach themselves to read, not uncommonly before the age of three. Others love listening to stories, but reading doesn’t click for them until after they start school. Meanwhile, parenting books and magazines stress the importance of children learning to read early - some come with lesson plans for three year olds. What is the best method for a parent of a highly capable preschooler to support the development of reading?

We’re all familiar with the traditional building blocks of reading:

- A child learns to say the alphabet
- The child begins to identify letters - often starting with the first letter of his or her name
- The child understands that words are made up of letters, and begins to match sounds with letters
- The child begins to read high frequency words such as his or her own name and “stop”
- The child begins to sound out simple consonant-vowel-consonant words such as “cat”
- The child continues to develop letter-sound (phonemic) awareness and to build a sight-word vocabulary
- Traditional teaching stresses the repetition of phonics and other reading sub-skills as a basis for reading development.

When it comes to learning to read, highly capable children often go through a different process:

- High-ability children often leap over simpler pre-reading tasks
- They often need very little (or no) repetition to learn new reading skills and concepts
- They may go from “zero to sixty” with their reading: seemingly unable to sound out the simplest words one week, and reading a Dr. Seuss book cover to cover the next (with expression!)
- They seem to teach themselves to read: growing up in a literature-rich environment (in which children are read to daily, are surrounded with books to explore, and see people reading for information and pleasure), highly capable children may require no direct reading instruction, or may need direct instruction only to fill in the gaps. For example, one young gifted child, while lying on the couch reading Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone, called out to her mother, “Mama, you know what I learned in kindergarten today? TH spells thhhhhh!”

The average age range for normally developing children to learn to read is four to nine; the average age range for gifted children is two to seven. That means that it is well within normal gifted development for a potentially gifted child to not be reading when he or she starts school. In fact, several studies have found that only half of all gifted children know how to read when they enter kindergarten. When highly capable children reach school-age, direct instruction in reading may be warranted, but during the preschool years direct instruction (meaning repetition of sub-skills, worksheets, flashcards, and enforced practice) is not necessary or helpful. When high ability children are raised in a language- and literature-rich environment, reading often develops naturally, without formal instruction.

Supporting your child's early reading is vastly different from pushing your child. Pushing involves external motivation and creates stress for your child. It's true that you can force your child to learn reading sub-skills, but you cannot force your child to enjoy and thrive at reading. Supporting early reading means creating an environment at home where reading together is a joyful part of every day. My research in gifted education and literacy, as well as experience teaching (and raising) gifted children, leads me to offer the following advice to parents who want to support the reading development of their young highly capable children.

1. Read with your child: read throughout the day, read with expression, keep books in every room of your home. Read picture books, chapter books, websites, magazines, comic strips, instruction manuals, emails, and personal notes. Choose reading that exposes your child to a variety of subjects (fiction and non-fiction), promotes an advanced vocabulary, and furthers your child's interests. The King County Library System has several recommended book lists for children, including "100 Books Every Child Should Hear Before Starting School."
2. Balance what you want to share with your child with what your child wants to read - or reread. One option is to let your child choose every other story book (even if it's the same book about dump trucks 20 times in a row).
3. As hard as it can be, hold your questions about a story until after you have finished reading it. Although parenting magazines often recommend that we ask our children questions about the pictures, or point out phonetic patterns while we are reading, this can be too disruptive for gifted children who become immersed in the stories they are listening to. A request to, "Find all the words starting with B," disrupts the narrative flow. (You'll know this is happening when your child tells you with exasperation, "Just read, Daddy!")
4. Keep basic skills questions (about letters, colors, numbers, and shapes) to a minimum. High ability children shouldn't have to prove again and again that they can count to four or can identify the color blue.
5. Set a guideline for yourself that you will ask only one reading sub-skill question per story. For example, after reading The Cat in the Hat: "What words rhyme with cat?" Many high ability children seem to absorb reading sub-skills through reading alphabet books, rhyming books, and pattern books with their parents, needing little or no direct instruction.
6. Focus your post-reading questions on higher-level thinking, creative thinking, critical thinking, imaginative thinking, and open-ended thinking. Highly capable children thrive on complexity. (Why do you think ...? What might happen if ...? How would you have ...?)

7. Begin reading high-interest, age-appropriate chapter books (such as Charlotte's Web) to your preschooler. Some parents read ten minutes of a chapter book each day at snack time or dinner time (when their preschooler is relatively still). In addition, some parents play audio book tapes in the car (the King County Library System has hundreds of children's audio tapes and CDs available). Both methods encourage children to imagine the story in their heads instead of relying on pictures. (But don't stop reading picture books!)
8. Don't worry if your child seems to be reading whole words instead of sounding them out. Many gifted readers either learn to read by first memorizing hundreds of sight words (and later grow in their phonemic awareness), or read phonetically so quickly that it appears they are reading whole words. It's not that highly capable children don't need to learn phonics, it's just that many gifted readers learn the higher level concepts of reading before the lower level sub-skills. For example, my daughter was fluently reading early chapter books before she could identify all of the letters of the alphabet.
9. If your preschooler asks you what a word is, quickly give the answer instead of telling him or her to sound it out - if your child could sound it out easily, s/he would, and if it takes too long to sound out the word, the narrative flow of the story is lost.
10. When your child is on the verge of reading, choose one word per story that will be your child's word to read. Write the word in big letters on an index card and read it with your child. When you come to the word in the story, stop and wait for your child to read it. Refer to the index card if needed. Save the index cards and allow your child to read several words in each story (let your child choose as many cards as he or she wants to read - no need to push your child to read all of them).
11. When your child is on the verge of reading, place the Sentence Puzzle game once a week or so. Ask your child, "What was the best thing about today?" Edit the sentence down to five to eight words and write them on a sentence strip (a long narrow strip of paper). Read the sentence with your child, then cut the words apart. Mix them around on the table and help your child reform the sentence. After playing with the words, save them in a baggie (it helps to label the baggie with the sentence). Every few weeks, review your child's Sentence Puzzles.
12. Add journaling to your reading time. In a journal (you can buy one, or make one by stapling 20 sheets of blank paper together) have your child draw one picture a day and tell you about it. Record your child's words and date the journal entry. Periodically read your child's journal aloud. Encourage your child to label his or her pictures: your child's writing may start off as scribbling, then progress to random letters, sounding out the first letter of a word, consonants, and finally invented spelling of the whole word. Invented spelling (where your child tries to sound out the word) is the key: there's something about children trying to figure out how to write words that opens a window into how to read words. (No need to correct your child's spelling - that's a subject for grade school.)
13. Keep reading with your child after she or he begins reading. You can read at a higher level, you can introduce your child to new topics, and you can encourage the love of reading.

It's easy to buy a workbook. It's easy to bribe your child to do flashcards. But if you want to help your highly capable preschooler grow into reading, the best thing you can do is to make joyful reading part of your family's daily life. It takes more time than flashcards, but it's also more effective, and truthfully, way more fun.

Recommended Reading for Parents

Fox, Mem. Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever, 2001

Halsted, Judith. Some of My Best Friends are Books: Guiding Gifted Readers from Preschool to High School, 2002

King County Library System. "100 Books Every Child Should Hear Before Starting School," www.kcls.org/readytoread