



A Cunning Plan for Reading

Chris N French

I have a cunning plan, my readers ... for reading. But, yes, unfortunately it will not suit every child. They are all different. Although of course in another sense they are all the same! This is a story about one child... maybe about ADHD... about reading... about a scheme which has clearly worked well for him. Maybe there is something here for you... or yours. Of course, if your child is naturally a budding J K Rowling, writing their own stories and reading for hours on end unprompted then maybe not!

SINS OF THE PARENT

Like most parents I have always been keen that my children should learn from their parents' mistakes. So fruit and veg are pushed forward with enthusiasm - usually to be rejected with equal vigour. My being brought up on a diet of chips fried in the very best healthy dripping and its detrimental effects haven't stopped the children from demanding regular takeaways and trips to McDonald's. The thought that they use pure vegetable oil these days has eased our conscience just a little whenever we succumb. Talk of mechanically-recovered 'meat' and aggressive farming methods do not appear to have had the deterrent effect that we would have wished.

I am ashamed to say that, growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, my literary diet wasn't much better! At age 11 I was given a copy of Dickens' Tale of Two Cities by an uncle. I picked it up and perused the closely-printed text with suspicion. It looked gloomy and old, and I found a space at the top of a cupboard alongside Tom Sawyer and Captain Hornblower (*other subversive works to be carefully avoided*) where I could safely shield myself from its baleful influence. You shouldn't deduce from this that I wasn't a good reader. "Quite the contrary", I was told. I had a nice collection of Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedia and loads of aircraft magazines but the Dickens saga pointed to huge gaps and weaknesses.

I did have a First Dictionary but I very rarely looked up the meanings of words. If someone was around I would ask them what a word meant (*often they didn't know*), otherwise I would attempt to guess the rough drift of the text and struggle on. It was a poor habit I retained until I was 20 when my university course demanded that I take remedial measures or fail. But there was worse. I had a special little carpentered bookshelf for my favourite fiction

books - a hazard of the era. It contained all of Enid Blyton's Famous Five books which originated in 1942.

Now you might suppose that this appalling litany of inconspicuous bookish consumption must have left no scars. Here I am at this very moment managing, now and then, to put two words together with help from the PC, and I did get a good degree where 90 per cent of the examinations were in the form of essays! Surely this proves that all this stuff on the importance of early learning (*eg 'Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man!'*) is just guff. It's never too late for learning... one can always catch up. We should follow other countries and send our children to school later. Early childhood is exclusively for play, school can be delayed until 6 or even 7 years of age.

Mmmmm... I wonder. My view is a little different. I look back on my secondary school reports and there *is* occasionally a little praise for my maths and my science, but English, history, and anything involving words is distinctly compromised! 'Could have done better' is the impression I come away with. I was the only child in my class to refuse to take English Literature O-Level. I knew I would have failed.

So pondering history, six years ago, I decided that with our third child I would try a little harder. As I implied at the beginning it can be difficult to influence one's children's behaviour - despite providing splendid models for them to imitate and despite introducing subtle rewards and operant conditioning to shape their behaviour when it moves in the desirable directions. Leaving aside our dietary failures we have had the odd success with all our children. One child has become a fan of Star Trek and another an enthusiast for Heavy Metal - notable accomplishments in the field of child **brainwashing** - I mean nurturing!

BEGINNING TO READ

It ain't necessarily so what you sometimes read. Gifted children don't necessarily manifest behaviours earlier than others. They don't have to be early toilet trainers, early walkers, early talkers or even early readers. Our youngest was quite normal in his early years - the Bayley Scales of Infant Development¹ (*suitable for two to 30 months, a sort of infant IQ test with DQs, Development Quotients*) indicated a good degree of advancement. The BSID has three tools: the Mental Scale, the Motor Scale and the Infant Behaviour Record. Despite this, our youngest was, if anything, a

late talker. And, of more concern as our health visitor confirmed, had a rather short attention span and was hyperactive. Had we lived in the US he might well have been diagnosed as having a modest degree of ADHD (*Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*) and been prescribed Ritalin but here things are different. His behaviour at nursery was a source of some problems, and such struggles continued into early primary school. We decided to do what we could at home to shape his behaviour in desirable directions and trust in the teachers' positive ethos and expertise at school, appreciating at the same time that it could well be a slow process of change. Maybe 'growing out of it' would play a role. (*It took a few years.*)

We looked upon teaching him to read in particular as the vanguard of our attempts at home to improve his poor attention.

There are people who imagine that children teach themselves to read. Rubbish! Romulus and Remus must have had help from the wolves. There are those who feel we shouldn't burden teachers by sending children to school already being able to read. Nuts! There are those who feel one should wait until the children ask to be taught to read. Balderdash! Each child is different and I would never lay down fixed rules but a bright child has the potential to learn to read at an early age if encouraged and helped.

Obviously one shouldn't force things. Obviously one shouldn't flog a dead horse. Some children take to reading naturally and voraciously without any encouragement but others need to be enticed.

With our youngest it was clearly impossible to teach him to read before he could talk properly⁵. He said his first word 'car' at 2½ years, maybe a little earlier, but it wasn't until he was 3¼ that we felt he was talking properly. We had consulted a speech therapist at age 2¾ who had the notion that we should severely restrict his supply of model cars and simultaneously broaden the variety of his toys. She suggested that his slow speech development was aggravated by a surfeit of TV, videos and computing. After careful consideration we ruthlessly decided that this theory was merely 'flavour of the month' - particularly in the Manchester area and not a major factor - an opinion since backed by others. 'Evidence is minimal that ADHD arises from purely social factors like poor parenting (child management), family stress, divorce,

excessive TV viewing or video game playing, or diet' has opined one expert recently.

Our child's poor attention meant that it was difficult to get him to focus on words on a page. On top of that his attention span meant he very quickly became bored with a task. We taught him to read initially, as we have our other children, with flash cards and an essentially phonetic approach², although his attention deficits meant that this probably played a more significant role for him. All you need for flash cards are an empty cornflakes packet, a nice thick felt-tip pen, and lots of enthusiasm and good humour. But, to save time and make the process more efficient, I wrote a computer program to present single letters, single words and sentences nice and huge on a computer screen. This wasn't essential (*you can even use a wordprocessor or presentation program*) but it certainly made my life very much easier and was excellent at getting going what attention there was! In this day and age, time and efficiency are paramount.

Initially, I presented words for just a few minutes every other day, only extending this when he grew used to the task and was able to attend for longer. After six months he could read 250 words. By age four his vocabulary had risen to 500 words and his attention had improved significantly. Slowly we were able to spend more time on the tasks and the rate of learning continued to increase. I dropped the flash card presentations at age 4¾, after eighteen months, by which time we had covered the pronunciation of important English words like 'Cadillac', 'Daewoo', 'Hyundai', 'Skoda' and 'Lamborghini', and over 4,000 other minor words contained in the Ladybird Dictionary,

learning at an aggregate rate of the order of one word per minute. As it happened, in time for year one at school.

It goes without saying that in all this time we had also read to him daily. He wasn't always good at listening but we persevered. At age 4¼ with his reading well-established by the flash-card style presentations and as his attention improved we encouraged he himself to read the nicely illustrated books he had been listening to - again, initially, just for a few minutes per day. By 4½ he had begun his first proper 100+ page children's novel, Dick King-Smith's *The Terrible Trins*, which he completed in just over a month at around 500 words per day.

BOOK WORMING

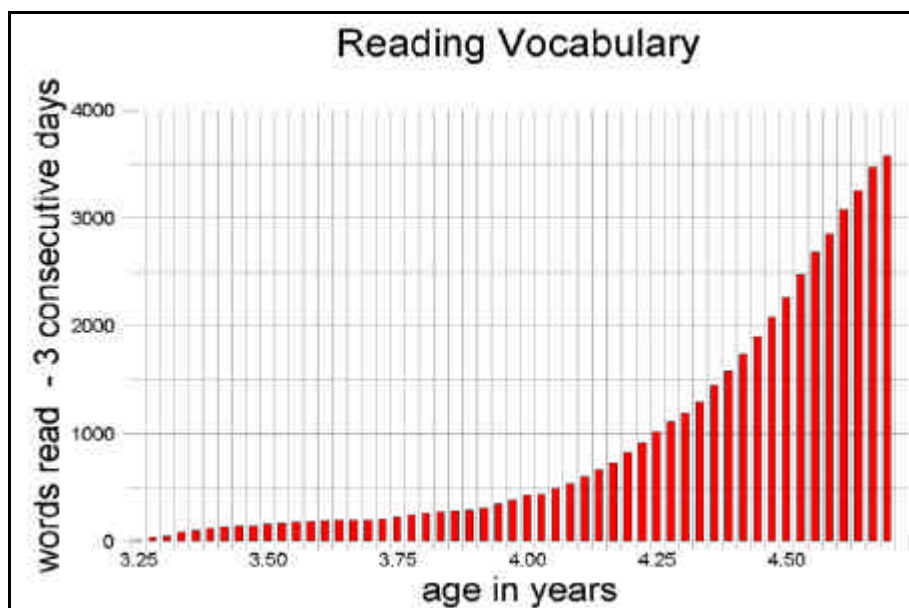
By the time of his 9th birthday we had read 159 novels together - some small, some large. With the early books I exclusively listened to him read, helping him with the difficult words. Later my listening and assistance were directed more towards his expression and finally it became silent reading with us both reading simultaneously and one or other of us asking whether the other had finished at the end of two pages. There were a few science fiction books that I had read before in my late teens and early twenties, like John Wyndham's *the Day of the Triffids*, *the Kraken Wakes* and *the Midwich Cuckoos*, but most of the rest were new to me. I have to admit that this has probably influenced our choice of books and has made the process an easy one. Also the children's books we have read are undoubtedly ones that have appealed to me. But, of course, we never knowingly choose a book that we do not feel will not appeal to the other. We have avoided over-sexed novels because they would be boring.

Where a book has looked rather too daunting, as with the 1552 pages of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, I have put this to one side as one of our I-read/he-listens books, but length and complexity are not usually an obstacle. So far he has read 7 by Charles Dickens. *Nicholas Nickleby*, for example, is almost 800 pages long and contains perhaps 300,000 words. At age 8 it took 21 hours to read, at an aggregate 240 wpm including some discussion time (*probably more than 400 wpm excluding the chat*). Such books represent quite an achievement for a child who once had a very short attention span. But importantly an enjoyable one rewarded with the video of the book at the end.

We both found that we particular enjoyed Terry Pratchett so we have read almost all of his novels - 35 to date. Philip Pullman has been another tremendous author with 16 read, and one mustn't forget Dick King-Smith (6), David Almond (2) and Roald Dahl (15). But we've enjoyed many modern standards and old classics together - by Robert Louis Stevenson, Jonathan Swift, H G Wells, C S Lewis, Lewis Carroll, Douglas Adams, George Orwell, Alexander Dumas, Aldous Huxley, Arthur C Clarke, Bernard Cornwell and Bram Stoker. No doubt many of these represent boy, rather than girl, books, but the principle should be clear. There have been books we have abandoned for one reason or another - eg Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* and Dicken's *Pickwick Papers*, both out of sheer boredom, and one Roald Dahl short story because I found the violence too much - too much for me, that is!

READING TECHNOLOGY

It is clear that here we are taking advantage of social facilitation in reading together. It is easier to read together than alone - particularly if you are young. It becomes a social event and one can compare notes, share opinions and discuss. Practising a musical instrument on your own, watching the TV on your own, even going to a football match on your own (*even if you are surrounded by 67,999 people*) can each be a lonely process. How much better to do it with someone else. No doubt eventually, with continued reinforcement and rewards, good habits will be established without the need for external maintenance. Of course, this is another reason why teachers recommend parents read with their children. And of course you are useful technology, there to rapidly explain the meaning of difficult words, sentences or chapters. Even a computer can be no substitute.



Early growth in reading vocabulary.
Criterion of success is correct reading of a word on three consecutive days.

Web pages - particularly those on <http://www.amazon.co.uk> - are helpful for finding what books are in print and how much they cost. And often there



Rincewind in the school-run reading room.

are reviews by frustrated journalists to give you an insight into what unknown books are all about. There is plenty of advice out there - search on <http://www.google.co.uk>. For example, with Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels you can find pages that advise you on



Bog-standard approach to literature dreams.

the order in which the books should be read - an important consideration for an orderly mind!

TV, film and video can also provide a useful accompaniment. You've read the book now let's watch the TV series, borrow the video or DVD, or go and see the film. And then there is the local book-signing to look forward to! Go to the Internet to find when your author is next in town.

Traditionally the venue for reading is the book at bedtime and it must remain the favourite with cuddles leading naturally onto the yawn and eventually peaceful sleep. But one should not reject other opportunities. Look around for other solutions that might suit your particular circumstances. We have found two alternatives particularly

successful - the early morning alarm call, and the school run. In the first case there is often then less competition from important TV - like Horizon, Manchester United football and Top Gear - although propping eyelids open can be a problem. With the second, the idea is first to get to school early in the car. (*Obviously, this doesn't work so well if you live within walking distance of your school or you are on a good bus route as then it is an unhealthy option.*) You arrive early at school and then sit there, both of you captive in the car away from innumerable distractions (*apart from Terry Wogan*), reading the book together until school opens.

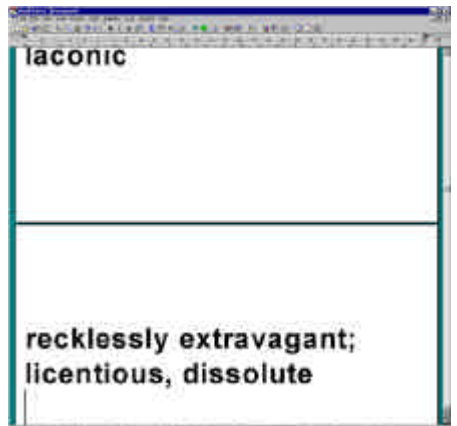
Another under-used facility is the smallest room in the house. Although not suitable for joint reading it can be an un-tapped tool to encourage literacy. It was first recommended to me 40-odd years ago as a venue for homework (*fewer jiggles than on the school bus*) and if you have a child who is keen on hiding away in there for hours on end why not stipulate that they leave their dolls or construction toys elsewhere and always take a book with them. It probably won't shorten the visit but perhaps they will have more to show for their investment in time. Since the 1980s, time is at a premium more than ever. There will also be the added bonus that others will be less keen on borrowing your child's books.

COMPREHENSION & SPELLING

Much has been written about how a musician needs to spend a substantial amount of time practising - according to Howe 3,000 hours to become just a 'good amateur player' (*equivalent to over 8 years at an hour per day with more than treble that to reach a professional standard*). If you practise twice as long you don't become twice as good - unfortunately, it is more complicated than that and there is a law of diminishing returns. Other skills respond in a similar manner. Reading is no exception, but extra effective practice will lead to improved performances.³

I was brought up to look after my Enid Blyton books in their own little bookshelf, despite their only ever having been read once! At school we were required to cover our books with brown paper. No book was to be in anyway marked! It goes therefore against the grain to recommend a rather different approach. Of course, no one should deface anyone else's property - be it a friend's, library's or a school's - but I would suggest that it is a good idea to learn to discriminate book ownership and mark your own books. Unless they are J K Rowling signed first editions! What we do is to use a highlighter pen to mark any difficult words - words that

cannot be spelled or words with unknown meanings. Nobody wants to faff about with an old-fashioned dictionary - it takes too long. So, once a day, you type the highlighted words into a simple text document - one word per line - and save them. I prefer to do this in (ANSI) Windows text mode but you



Wordprocessor as primitive learning program.

could use that of your favourite word-processor. You then call up your free copy of the Oxford Reference Shelf for 1994 program and in particular its Pocket Oxford Dictionary. (*We obtained this free some aeons ago with PCFormat computer magazine.*) With your mouse you then highlight and copy each word in turn. As you copy each word it is automatically called up in the dictionary from whence you highlight and copy its definition, before returning to your ANSI word list and pasting this as a line above or below each word, depending upon your chosen presentation mode. You edit the definitions by cutting out text and embroidering as you feel appropriate for the pupil's age, experience and personality.

Once you get into this routine it doesn't take long. And you end up with a personalised list of new words suitable for learning spellings and definitions. Of course not everyone will have availed themselves of the PC Format free ORS offer but you can see here that the methodology is simple. Maybe your own computer dictionary is suitable. If you have broadband you already have very rapid online access to numerous dictionaries and encyclopaedias for those tricky old, new, rude and slang words!

One can use a wordprocessor as a primitive flash-card learning device by replacing newline in your list with newpage characters after each word or definition, or even use a presentation program, but I preferred to write our own second computer program to automate the process and save time. We have used this since he was 5.

Maybe learning word meanings is more

difficult than learning spellings or maybe it is the technique which is more challenging. Whatever criterion you adopt in a learning task there will always be some degree of forgetting. The key to such learning, as all theories of learning tell you, is to appreciate that active is far superior to passive. The subject should be required to actively read the word in question or actively spell it out. If you follow that principle you won't go far wrong. Simply passively reciting "c-a-t spells cat" as you read the word won't get you very far unless it is accompanied by subsequent blind tests.

Probably one should do the same thing with word meanings but we haven't, so no doubt this learning process has been less effective than it might have been. This becomes clearer when the same words become highlighted once more in new books earlier than one would have wished.

Another shortcoming was not to use the words actively. 'Use it or lose it' is true of anything. But for us I felt there was not enough time after school to carry this principle further.

EVALUATION

The acid test is whether or not a process works. With a sample of one there can be no truly scientific proof but what evidence there is does seem to support the hypothesis that the procedures described here are worthwhile and effective in maximising potential..

Our youngest's reading (*reading of words and sentences, and comprehension*) and spelling ages were typically more than double his chronological ages at 4, 5 and 8 on the Spooner, and British Ability Scales (I and II) - better than his siblings with comparable IQs. By age 9 his reading speed was over 400 wpm - well above the adult average and faster than the average US college student's ⁴. His comprehension at that speed was at the expected adult level.

Of course, reading age should not be confused with writing ability, nor with intelligence, but quality reading is not a skill which should be dismissed as a mere middle-class preoccupation. Despite TV and computers it remains a major means by which people acquire knowledge.

Maybe such assessments, as those above, take a too clinical view - certainly if taken alone. They neglect the cultural gain that comes with reading works of literature. Also it needs to be mentioned that numerous other books have been read in the bog, in bed or at school - many more fiction as well as factual ones on science, history and... cars.

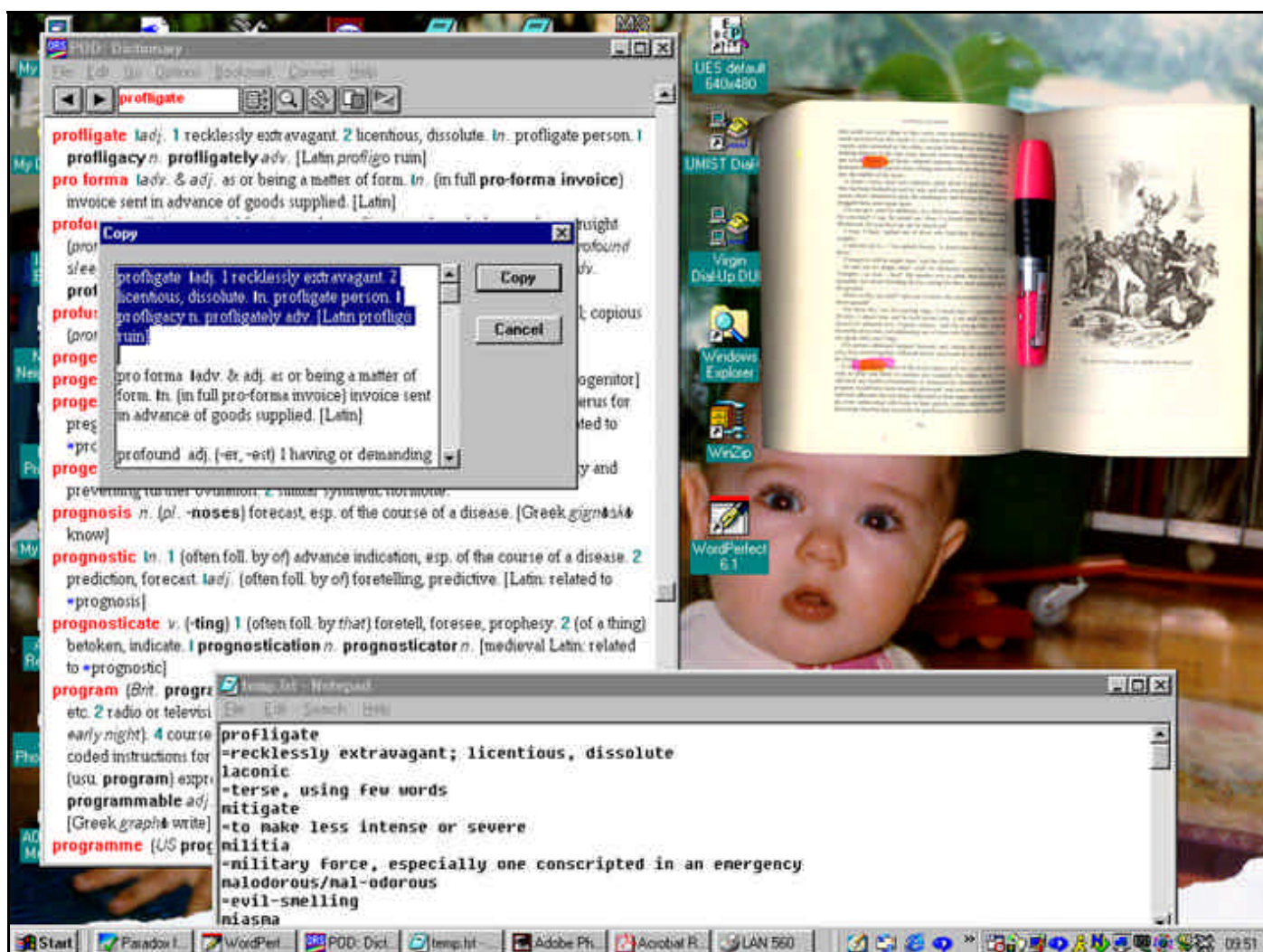
And then there is the benefit to the older reader - education is for life, for the old and inept, as well as the young and gifted. I have certainly benefited. I wonder how long we will be reading together...

KEY THOUGHTS

What then are the *key thoughts* that I would like to emphasise in maximising reading potential?

Book Choice

One of the secrets is to choose books that both young and old enjoy. Don't be afraid of *good adult books*. Good art can usually be appreciated on different levels. This is a point that the 2002 Whitbread award winner Phillip Pullman has often made. Just watch any top TV cartoon apparently aimed at



Highlighting Dickens's words, copying & pasting dictionary look-ups and editing in personal word list.

very young children (eg *Wild Thornberrys, Arthur, Rugrats, Simpsons, Mona the Vampire, etc...*) and ask yourself whether there is not a level that only older children and adults appreciate. Remember too that the 'teacher' needs rewards to maintain their contribution as much as the 'pupil'. But who is teaching who?

Schools Want Home Reading

Schools suggest that parents should read to their children and listen to their children reading to them every day, and all I have described above is little more than a *enthusiastic, rigorous and efficient* implementation of this standard school advice. How much time does your school recommend for reading? Never allot less. Allow 20 minutes at the very least. If you can afford more... do! Follow the usual recommendations and make sure it is *quality together-time*. In contrast to maths and writing, none of these things can realistically be expected to be carried out effectively at school.

Regularity

Read to, and listen to or read with your child every day. *Don't miss*. Playing hookey can be addictive. Maintain a *regular regime*, as with other nurturing processes, its advantages here can't be exaggerated. A little learning every day adds up - whether it be reading, spelling or comprehension - and develops a more general, healthy attitude to learning..

Efficiency

Of course if you are a single parent or have a demanding job or have lots of young children then finding time for anything can be difficult! The key is to be efficient! And a computer can help.

Active Learning Best

Remember that practice makes perfect and *active learning is best* - passive doesn't compare, vide Ebbinghaus as early as 1885.

Early Opportunities

One can always catch-up with learning in later life but time is always at a premium these days so *don't waste those early opportunities*.

Suitable for All

The above should enable you to maximise your child's reading potential. This is relevant to all children - not just the bright ones!

NOTES

¹ The BSID looks at the general intellectual level of pre-school children, although like any test (particularly early ones) as a predictor of later IQ its performance is only modest. The Mental Scale looks at things like perception, memory, learning, problem

solving, vocalisation early verbal communication and simple abstract thinking. The Motor Scale measures motor abilities like sitting, standing, walking, stair climbing, and manipulation skills of fingers and hands. The Infant Behaviour Record consists of a series of rating scales which the examiner completes after the two earlier scales have been administered. It attempts to assess 'personality' development - emotional and social behaviour, attention span, persistence and goal directiveness.

² eg Diane McGuinness & Steven Pinker *Why Children Can't Read*, 1998, London: Penguin Books, ISBN: 0140266976

³ William Fowler, *Early Stimulation and the Development of Verbal Talents* in Michael J A Howe (Editor), *Encouraging the Developments of Exceptional Skills and Talents*, 1990, Leicester: BPS Books, ISBN 1-85433-038-1

⁴ The average adult reads at a speed of 250 words per minute. The average US college student reads between 250 and 350 words per minute on fiction and non-technical materials. A 'good' reading speed for college students is said to be around 500 to 700 words per minute. And people are exhorted to achieve even higher speeds. The average comprehension for light material might be expected to be around 50 per cent. See, for example, http://www.turboread.com/read_checks.htm.

Author: Chris is a father of three, an experimental psychologist and retired university lecturer who taught psychology and computing. His PhD was on learning.

Hindsight Years Later

⁵ One mistake we probably made was waiting for speech before teaching reading. Recent studies suggest this is not necessary. Dr Robert Titzer argues that babies can be taught to read at just nine months old. Dr Titzer developed an interactive programme with his daughter Aleka: By nine months she could mime the meaning of a list of body parts as well as words such as "laughing" and "shouting". His technique uses actions and sound to help toddlers recognise a series of complex words. See: <http://www.infantlearning.com>

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