

Straight from the Heart

It is possible for at-risk children to become fluent readers painlessly and happily.

By Donna Garner

One of my family's dearest treasures is our 6½-year-old grandson Weston. Lest the reader think that I am just another proud grandmother talking, Weston's story involves much more than family pride. In fact, it goes right to the heart of the debate on reading and education policy that is taking place all over North America.

Weston had bad allergies and frequent ear infections as a small child. As a result, he developed hearing problems that led to a hearing loss, and he was speech-delayed. Learning disabilities have been documented among Weston's close family members and, on top of everything else, he is a typical active young boy.

Had he continued down this all-too-familiar path, he undoubtedly would have been labeled 'learning-disabled' and placed in special education by grade 1. From there, Weston probably would have started down the same path that so many of my high school students have trod.

Because I have taught secondary students for more than 28 years, I have seen thousands of students come and go. Many Westons have passed through my classroom doors. These Westons cannot read or write well. They have a very low opinion of themselves, and they generate negative attention by acting out in class.

When I have conferences with their parents, the inevitable story has unfolded. The student had health problems in early childhood, lacked success as an early reader, hated to read and write. Later, he developed a tendency toward depression and became a discipline problem.

So why do I think that Weston will not follow this sad scenario? First of all, my son and his wife have chosen to home-school Weston.

My daughter-in-law Kerry has never taken an education course, has never taught anyone how to read, and has two other small children to contend with.

Using the Phono-Graphix program, which she acquired for \$12.80 US from amazon.com, Kerry taught Weston to target phonemes, segment sounds, blend syllables and read decodable text.

Weston had a sleepover at our house a few days ago, and he brought along two books that he had checked out of the community library on his way to visit us. We were amazed at the rapidity with which he could read and, from the discussion that followed each page, it was obvious that he understood exactly what he had read.

He didn't pause at all as he read off such words as 'delighted,' 'museum,' 'million,' 'balloons,' 'everybody,' 'furniture,' 'birthday,' 'candles,' and 'together.'

One of the books was based on common idiomatic expressions which often stymie learning-disabled children, since they tend to be literal learners. Weston, however, understood each expression and grasped the humour immediately.

My purpose is neither to acclaim my grandson nor his dedicated parents, but rather to share a real-life success story. Here we have a reading program that cost \$12.80, a mother with no training in reading instruction, a speech-delayed child with an early hearing loss, and a history of learning disabilities in the family.

What could be a better recipe for surefire failure? Instead, Weston is experiencing rousing success.

By the way, Weston's younger brother Riley is 4½, and he can already target, segment, and blend phonemes and then map them to letters. Weston better watch out! Little brother is nipping at his academic heels.

(Mrs. Garner is completing her first year of teaching English and Spanish at Central Texas Christian High School in Temple, Texas, after having taught for more than 27 years in the public schools of Texas.)

Selected Resources

READING

Preschoolers

→*Teach Your Child to Read in Just Ten Minutes a Day*, Sidney Ledson, \$24.95

→*Primary Phonics Storybooks*, Barbara Makar, \$20.20 per set of 10, 5 sets of readers in all. Educators Publishing Service, 877-471-8123

Kindergarten

→*The Phonics Handbook: A Handbook for Teaching Reading, Writing and Spelling*, Sue Lloyd and Lib Steven, \$39.95

Primary & Remedial

→*Reading Reflex: The Phono-Graphix Method of Teaching Your Child to Read*, Carmen McGuinness and Geoffrey McGuinness, \$22.00

→*Open Court* readers, 1989 edition, from \$25 to \$70 per reader. McGraw Hill Ryerson, 800-565-5758

→*Recipe for Reading*. Nina Traub. \$52.40 for complete set. Educators Publishing Service, 877-471-8123

→*Goodman's Five-Star Stories*, Burton Goodman, \$20.50 per reader. Gripping stories for every grade level. McGraw Hill Ryerson, 800-565-5758

SPELLING

→*Prescriptive Spelling*, \$16.80 per workbook. McGraw Hill Ryerson, 800-565-5758

GRAMMAR

→*Prescriptive English*, \$16.80 per workbook. McGraw Hill Ryerson, 800-565-5758

VOCABULARY

→*Wordly Wise 3000*, Kenneth Hodkinson and Sandra Adams, \$9.85-\$14.20 per workbook. Educators Publishing Service, 877-471-8123

MATHEMATICS

→*Saxon Math*, John Saxon, Placement tests at www.saxonmath.com. Kits range from US\$49.95 to \$156.50. If no source is listed, the resource is available in bookstores.