

Teaching Aidan to Read

By Nancy Wagner

In my last "Letter from the President", I mentioned that I would like to try to teach my grandson to read before he started school. I also promised that I would report back on this endeavor. So, with his parents on board and Malkin's assurance that this was not only a relatively easy exercise but a pleasurable and rewarding one as well, we began.

Malkin lent me a book called *How to Teach Your Child to Read in 10 Minutes a Day* by Sidney Ledson. This author had taught his own preschoolers to read and, through trial and error, developed a simple step-by-step program using systematic phonics.

We began just before Aidan turned three. All started easily enough. Aidan enjoyed learning the letter sounds and the first game that was introduced to emphasize and practice the lessons learned. But after a few weeks, just as he was starting to put letters together to make simple words – pup, cup – his parents noticed that he was doing a lot of squinting and, when I worked with him, his letter and word recognition often depended on the medium used (and, looking back, at the size of the letters).

After a visit to the doctor and subsequently, an optometrist, Aidan was outfitted with glasses that he must wear all the time. His eyesight was so bad that the optometrist said he should have had glasses "years ago". The vision problems are relevant only in that the timeline for this learning to read experiment was greatly extended until we sorted out Aidan's vision. Also, by now there was a new baby in the house.

Lessons began again. Other families more organized than ours would probably have accomplished more in far less time. However, by winter of this past year Aidan was starting to sound out simple words – words he hadn't memorized.

About this time we bought Aidan *The Leap Frog* {learn-to-read} videos. They were a great tool for an emergent reader. The first one is called *The Letter Factory*, and it teaches the alphabet and the most common sound of each letter. You know how children can sit and watch the same movie or TV show over and over? Well that's what Aidan did with these. For him they felt just like entertainment: colourful characters, simple songs, happy endings.

All the while, the basic rules of phonetic reading were being reinforced. The second video, *The Word Factory*, starts putting the sounds into simple three letter words, and the third introduces silent 'e' and more complex letter combinations like 'th', 'ch', and 'sh'.

I asked Malkin if she had any basic phonetic readers we could borrow, and she loaned us a series called *Primary Phonics* by Barbara Makar, published by Educators Publishing Service. Almost immediately, Aidan

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was tackling these simple books successfully. He couldn't get enough of them! The readers build the child's reading skills through repetition and the gradual introduction of new phonetic elements as each skill is embedded.

Soon we were in a routine where Aidan would read a book to me or his parents and then we would read the next one to him. Very quickly, he was self-correcting. As he progressed through each reader, he was making very few mistakes. One day he was helping me make supper and noted the word "bake" on the digital readout on my oven. He told me that the oven said "bake" because the word had the silent "e" on the end. Then he explained that if the silent "e" wasn't there the oven would say "back", and wouldn't that be silly.

Aidan reads with inflection, which I admit surprises me. He still loves to be read to, so his bedtime routine now involves being read to from a chapter book, followed by him reading a few of his phonics readers to his doggie.

Aidan is now four years old. He began to read on his own just before his fourth birthday. As his grandmother, I am comforted that he will start junior kindergarten this fall a confident and enthusiastic reader who is able to easily decode new words he encounters.

The most remarkable (and slightly embarrassing) part of this exercise is that Aidan learned to read without much adult effort. We read to him and encouraged his own reading, but for the most part he learned on his own. The simple rules of phonics in a fun 'kid-friendly' presentation were all it took.

I think many people have the idea that learning to read is a monumental task best left to professionals. What this experience has taught us is that learning to read can be incredibly simple for some kids when taught the right way.

(Mrs. Wagner is the former president of the Society for Quality Education, and the proud grandmother of two.)