
READY for SCHOOL Parent News: **Building the Reading Brain**

In *Building the Reading Brain*, Wolfe and Nevills discuss the idea of neuroplasticity, the amazing ability of the human brain to build itself based upon the individual's experiences. If the brain is built on early experiences, then the quality of these experiences during the first five years of life are critical.

Experiences related to vocabulary development, both spoken and understanding, are key during the early years. The quality of language development directly relates to the later development of reading skills. By age four, the brain is 90% of the final adult size and weight, but without the functioning level of an adult brain. Spoken language interactions continue to be crucial in ongoing brain development. We all know that three- and four-year-olds ask constant questions. The key is not just answering the questions, but engaging children in the process of discussion and finding answers. A few tips follow:

- Respond to children's questions in a conversational way, rather than using every question as an opportunity to tell or teach. Use questions as a chance to continue the discussion ("What do you think?" "Why do you think that?" "How could we find out more?") rather than telling your child, "This is how it works."
- Use opportunities to give your child your full and patient attention as he describes his thoughts to you, rather than being quick to solve the problem for him. We know this is not always possible, but fully use the opportunity whenever you can.
- Let your child direct the conversation. Don't be quick to finish sentences or fill in words.
- When a child uses incorrect grammar, model the appropriate grammar in your response instead of correcting her errors. (If your child says, "I knowed that the kitty was going to run away;" you can respond "Yes, you knew that the kitty would run.")
- Expand on and extend what your child has said. For example, your child says "I saw a kitty." And you respond, "Yes, that white and black kitty just ran up the tall tree." Or you can ask, "What is the kitty doing now?"
- Model new vocabulary and new sentence structures. Your child says, "There's a red truck" and you respond, "The red truck is stopping in front of that tall building because the driver needs to make a delivery."
- Ask open-ended questions. "What did you like about that story?" "Why do you think so many birds are out today?"
- You can also ask "curiosity questions" like "Where do you think this cheese came from?"

The length of these conversations with children matters as well as the quality of the conversations. Look for ways to extend the conversation and keep your child talking. All of these skills are important for later success in reading.

Wolfe, P. & Nevills, P. (2004). *Building the Reading Brain, PreK – 3*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.