



## The Fourth "R"—Parental Responsibility

By Oralie McAfee, Ed.D.

*Will Johnny learn to read?*

*Will Joannie learn to write?*

*Will they learn to count, add, and subtract? Or have lowered school standards, television, calculators, and computers made the traditional Three R's a thing of the past?*

These and other questions relating to children's success in school concern most parents of preschoolers at one time or another. Should we teach our child to read at home, as some books suggest? Or should we conscientiously avoid anything relating to school learning, so we don't pressure or "hurry" the child? What is our responsibility as parents?

If we think of the three R's—reading, writing, and arithmetic—as the basic tools for learning, we can add to them a fourth R—our responsibility to help our children with things that are basic to learning the Basics. Most schools do certain things well, such as systematically teaching reading and arithmetic. But learning seems to come easier to children from homes in which the parents have taken the responsibility for laying the groundwork for academic success.

Our responsibility for such a foundation begins long before first grade or kindergarten, and involves far more than teaching a youngster the alphabet or how to count to 100. Many of the same things that we want children to have for happiness and satisfaction in life are those that will also help them in school: good health; strong, well-developed bodies; the ability to work and play independently as well as cooperatively; to get along with other people; to follow through on tasks; to have confidence in their own abilities.

Success in school, in mastering those basic tools of learning that make it possible for youngsters to continue their academic development, is made up of a wide variety of factors. Home and family are much better at helping youngsters learn some of these than school.

Before we look at those more specifically, and suggest what parents can do to fulfill their responsibilities, let us look at a few cautions.

- Each child is different—a unique individual who will respond in different ways to different types of encouragement and suggestions. Our responsibility as parents is to "tune in" to our children, to sense what they like and don't like, and to respond accordingly. A suggestion to read and look at some library books will be welcomed at bedtime, but ignored if it interferes with a favorite television program or outdoor play.

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- The line between "pushing" youngsters and nurturing their growth and learning is a fine one. Drilling a preschool youngster in "letter sounds" or writing the letters of the alphabet is likely to be pushing, and may have exactly the opposite effect of what we intend. On the other hand, casually explaining that M-a-r-k spells "your name", and having plenty of paper, crayons, and pencils around for scribbling, drawing, and eventually writing is very helpful. So is valuing your child's gradual mastery of hand and arm muscles to make "marks" on the paper.

- Many of the skills essential to mastering the Three R's are not directly related to reading, writing, and arithmetic, as we usually think of them. They are more like approaches to accomplishing and successfully completing any task.

Examples of these are the ability to follow directions; to plan what you are going to do, how you are going to do it, and then doing it; to concentrate on the task at hand; to see how one thing learned or experienced relates to another. These ways of approaching a task not only help children learn, they help them apply what they have learned.

- Helping children get along with other people is another task basic to success in school and in life. We can coach children and show them how to ask questions, listen, get other people's attention in an acceptable way, negotiate compromises when there are conflicts, and how to express pleasure, joy, gratitude, and need.

- Each child's development proceeds in an orderly fashion. She walks before she runs; he says one or two words before he says a sentence; she believes size is always related to age and calls a medium-sized animal a "teen-ager", before learning that size has many aspects, and age is one only for a relatively short time.

They accomplish these tasks at different ages, though. Although most children say their first words when they are about a year old, some say them earlier than that, and some later. They lose baby teeth at different ages, and acquire certain thinking skills at different ages, too.

No one can say for certain exactly what we can do at home to assure children's success in the Three R's. If we were certain, outlining the Fourth R—*Parental Responsibility*—would be relatively easy. We know many things that parents can do that seem to be associated with school success, but these apply to large numbers of children and large numbers of homes, not to individual children. Each of us knows families in which one child has problems, even though he or she comes from the same home, with the same parents, and more or less the same environment.

The following suggestions seem to work with most children and most families. Few of them require that a lot of time be set aside. Most of them require patience, a willingness to do things with your children, and the knowledge that although helping your child learn and develop is both joyous and satisfying, it can also be somewhat boring and exasperating—as when he asks for the same poem to be read 10 times in a row or she wants to know “what’s that?” yet again.

*Encourage Your Child’s Interests.* These may be in “buggy-beetles”, outer space, music, rocks, art, learning all the names of prehistoric animals, or the newest sports cars. But respond—get the books to find out more, help them learn the names, descriptions, and classifications, as appropriate to their age. The 4 year old who recognizes, names, and then sings all his favorite “country-western” songs from hearing the first chord has developed useful powers of recognizing, associating, and remembering what he hears—because he was interested and someone gave him encouragement and support.

*Help Your Child Know and Love Books and Reading.* Have reading material of all kinds around—newspapers, adult and children’s magazines, and many types of books. Let the children see you read for pleasure, to find information, and for inspiration. Read to your children, allowing plenty of time for explaining and elaborating as needed.

*Give Them Many Appropriate Experiences.* Such experiences broaden their knowledge, understanding, and vocabulary. Special trips to the zoo, museum, park, outdoor center, or other attractions are always in order, but the whole world is new and special to a preschooler: store windows, ants on a sidewalk, the changing seasons, or busy city streets. Name the things they see, hear, feel, and smell; explain what’s happening; show how this experience relates to others they have had. Be sure to let your youngster explain to you his or her understanding, too.

*Encourage Your Child to Experiment and Explore.* This should be done within the bounds of safety for themselves and the things around them, of course. Consider the youngster walking on a shiny, sunlit floor. He gingerly steps back and forth from sunlight to shadow, plays hide and seek with both his shadow and reflection, and laughs with delight at what he discovers.

*Share Both Work and Play with Your Child.* Through being

involved in preparation for a picnic, for example, a child begins to learn how to plan ahead, organize materials and time, follow directions, work cooperatively, and carry out tasks to achieve a goal. Playing “pat-a-cake”, “hide and seek”, “ring around the rosy”, and other traditional games are not only great fun for all concerned, but they also help children learn to follow directions; grasp important concepts such as rhyme, rhythm, and repetition; and abide by simple rules in cooperating with other people.

*Provide Play Material for Your Child to Use on His Own.* Although there are many durable and well-designed “educational” toys for children, they certainly don’t need them all. Kitchen tools and utensils; empty cartons of all sizes; “dress-ups”; water; sand; fabric; wood; and styrofoam scraps are suitable playthings, often more appropriate, and they certainly stimulate a child’s imagination more than realistic replicas.

*Talk with Your Child.* Name objects, actions, relationships; describe and explain everyday events. They won’t understand everything at first—that is a long process. Understanding will grow as the children do, and as parents, teachers, and children’s own experiences help those words take on meaning. What about teaching the alphabet, counting, the names of shapes and colors? Of course. As with many other learnings, children will not fully understand what they are saying, but being able to recognize and talk about the shapes and symbols we use in the Three R’s will be useful.

*Provide for Your Child’s Physical Well-Being.* Nutritious food; adequate rest and exercise; and strong, well-coordinated bodies are as important as numbers and letters in school. Children need to be alert, hear and see well, and have good feelings about their bodies. Children need to run, jump, swing by their arms and legs, throw and catch balls, as well as use small tools, such as scissors, crayons, and pencils.

*Build Your Child’s Confidence and Self-Esteem.* “You can do it. I’ll help you if you need help.” “Go ahead and try.” “You almost finished that puzzle—good job!” Children are not born with confidence. Rather, they acquire it through their day to day interactions with the people who mean the most to them. Children who are happy with who and what they are, who have the confidence and courage to try new things, who have a zest for life and learning, have what is most essential for success in school and life. It is this that may be our most important Parental Responsibility.

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