

Sahakarini hosts “Preparing my child to read”

Stephanie is a Camrose resident and the mother of two. She came to the library on a rainy September evening because she wanted her children to love books as much as she did. “I want my children to love to read because the more you read, the more you know,” she said. “You can access every place in this world when you can read a book.” Stephanie had come to hear University of Alberta professor Paula Marentette speak on the topic: *How can I prepare my preschooler to read?* The event was co-sponsored by the Library and Sahakarini, a locally based NGO which has promoted international literacy efforts since 1979.

Whether you are a woman in a developing nation or a child in Camrose, the ability to read is a huge plus in your quest for a secure and healthy life. Good reading skills translate into good grades, university and college admissions, and jobs. Yet, the benefits of reading go far beyond their practical application. There is a kind of magic in books. They draw us beyond ourselves. They tickle our imaginations and inspire our creativity. It is no wonder that parents want to prepare their children to read!

Although preschoolers’ brains have not yet developed to the point of learning the technical skills of reading and writing, there is still much a parent can do to prepare children to succeed as readers. In fact, the sooner one starts, the better. “Children become readers in their parent’s lap,” Marentette told her audience. “As Mom or Dad holds their children and read to them, they give their child the one thing that children desire most: their undivided attention.” Children learn how to hold a book, turn the pages, look at the pictures, talk about the story, and anticipate what comes next. This positive interaction with Mom or Dad is also a positive interaction with books, a first encounter that will bear fruit when, in a few short years, the child will begin to learn letters and write words.

Even books with no words help prepare a child to read. Questions such as, “What happened here?” or “How does he feel?” help children learn how stories work, to make up their own stories, and to engage with the stories they read. As children learn how stories work, they are better equipped to tell their own stories as they grow older.

Conversation is also a tool by which parents and grandparents can prepare young children to read. Children will learn new words from what they hear and derive the meaning of words from their context. The more conversations children have the more words they will learn. The more “word rich” a child becomes, the easier time he or she will have as a reader. What do we talk to children about? “Anything,” Marentette advised. Everyday events such as taking a walk or cooking a meal are opportunities to talk with children.

Parents like Stephanie were advised to resist the pressure to push their preschoolers to read before they are ready. Preschooler’s brains are busy developing in those early years of life. There will be time later for them to master the technicalities of coding and decoding words and sentences. There is nothing to be gained from pushing the process and everything to be gained by playful and loving exposure to picture books, story books, and conversation.

- Deborah Ann Taylor