

Learning to Read: Taking the Pressure Off!

At what age should my child learn the alphabet? Of all the teaching tools on the market, which ones should I buy? Is technology helpful? What if my child is already in school but doesn't like to read? What can I do to help my children succeed as readers?

These questions were the focus of discussion at the Camrose Public Library as U of A professor Paula Marentette gathered with parents, grandparents, and interested adults on September 12. Co-sponsored by the Library and Sahakarini, a Camrose based international NGO, the event explored a concern that transcends cultural and international boundaries.

Like parents everywhere, moms and dads in Camrose want their children to succeed. Because the ability to read is central to that success, the pressure for children to read early and well can seem overwhelming. Marentette urged parents to resist that pressure.

She encouraged her audience *to prepare* young children to learn to read rather than to teach them to read before they are ready. By setting up a pathway to success, preschoolers will be more apt to excel when their brains have developed to the point where they can learn to code and decode letters and words and sentences. Rather than investing in educational products, she recommended picture books and story books that parents and children can experience together. The act of reading to a child builds a bond of love that children associate with books and sets up a love of reading that will bear fruit in the years ahead.

Preparing a preschooler for reading success need not be a chore! In fact, according to Marentette, the learning process at this stage of a child's life is far more about play than about study. Children learn by playing! Songs that play with words that rhyme are fun for children while introducing the idea that words have parts. Parents need not be concerned if their preschoolers don't understand that by changing one letter you get a new word. The repetition itself is preparation for the time when they do. "Sing the songs." Marentette advises, "They won't get it over and over again, but eventually, they will figure it out."

With exposure to stories, in conversations with the adults in their lives, and in play, preschoolers will learn words and become familiar with the way language works. In time, they will notice letters and connect the significance of letters to words. Learning letters, however, is the least significant thing parents can do to prepare their children to read. There will be plenty of time once a child enters school to learn the technical elements of reading. Letters are to be played with as children might play with refrigerator magnets, but parents can resist the pressure to teach them to their preschoolers.

What about older children who don't like to read or aren't reading as their parents hoped? "Give them anything they want to read: comic books, Captain Underpants, sports, Marentette suggests, "Read to them and never stop." And electronics? iPads and smartphones are a part of home life. The question parents must wrestle with is one of how they will be used. Psychologists recommend no exposure before the age of two and beyond that, parents should monitor use of electronics so that they do not take the place of play with real people or of the bond established when parents read to their children. This latter interaction should involve a real book rather than a book one reads on a screen.