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Parents Need to Encourage Thirst for Learning

by Jacob Azerrad, Ph.D.

"Psychoneurogenic dysfunction," "minimal brain damage," "learning disability," "hyperactivity" and the latest addition to this long list of labels for the same old behaviors is "attention deficit disorder."

Every five to ten years a new label is attached to children who are bright but who have difficulty learning to read. Since reading is so basic a skill and so essential in order to function in our society, there is increasing concern about children who do not know how to read up to grade level, and rightly so.

The question is why do children have difficulty learning to read? The answer is unfortunately uncertain. Is it neurological, minimal brain damage; food colorings, additives, sugar? Nobody seems to know, but many have what they think are answers. Though I do not believe I have the answer to this perplexing problem, I have what I think are some interesting ideas.

Wanting to learn

Learning, or a lack of it, is a behavior like any other, and positive learning-related behaviors, from wanting to or being able to read, to paying attention in the classroom, are ways of acting that a child is taught. Parents have as much responsibility to encourage and nourish thirst-for-learning behaviors as they do sibling caring, making-friends behaviors and others.

Where does a thirst for learning come from? What makes a child want to read? How much a child learns depends greatly on his ability to read. The inability to read well is at the root of most learning difficulties.

Parents are often heard to say, "She never stops talking," or "We can hardly shut him up." Not too many say, "That child never stops reading."

Talking of course, is fun and it gets an immediate response. While many children do find reading fun, it seldom gets a similar response from the world around them, certainly not in the same immediate way and often not until long after the habit of reading is well established.

The truth is that the consequences of learning to speak words and the consequences of learning to read are quite different. These two kinds of learned behavior are given different responses by parents.

Just learning to say "Mama" provokes a lot of attention, hugs, smiles, encouragement to say it again, to say new words. The day a child of 4 or 5 first figures out what those black squiggles on a page mean is not the same kind of red-letter day in most households. There are few immediate consequences. In fact, the major consequences come somewhat later, when people start paying attention because a child cannot read, or doesn't like to learn in school.

"We read all the time," a parent will say. "There are books all over the house."

But imitation is not a reliable way to encourage behavior. Teaching by

example, communicating the value of learning simply by being a learning-oriented parent, may not have much effect on a child. The best it can do is to give a little extra encouragement.

On the other hand, parents can do for learning – and we are really speaking of the most fundamental learning skill, reading – what we normally do for speaking (immediate positive consequences). They can give a child a thirst for learning before he reaches the highly complex process of formal education.

It must be pointed out that there is a distinction between teaching behaviors such as being a better friend, being independent and grown-up, and teaching thirst-for-learning behaviors. A winning-friends behavior, for example, is relatively isolated. It exists (or doesn't) within comparatively narrow limits, and while a lack of friends may have an effect on the child's life, parents can encourage or discourage actions within that class of behavior without much difficulty.

Making learning "sweet"

However, the basis for a thirst for learning rests with the parents, who can make it worthwhile – set the stage, as it were, for the formal process that begins when a child enters school.

The tradition of learning the Hebrew alphabet give us an example of how parents can instill a thirst for learning early by giving rewards for such behavior. Jewish boys in the 18th century were given slates with the Hebrew alphabet written on them, each letter coated with honey. The boy licked off the honey and learned the letters – learning was made "sweet" in a concrete fashion.

We already make speaking "sweet" by rewarding it. The parent who wishes to instill an eagerness to learn in a child must remember that reading must also be made "sweet" with encouragement.

Praise for making sense out of the black marks on a page in a book – "that means cat!" – deserves as much attention as the first spoken word, "Mama." The value of being able to understand what words written down mean has to be communicated, and not when the child is already in the midst of a school situation but during pre-school years. Teaching this essential tool of education is, I think, the one way parents have of giving a child a taste of honey and the sweetness of learning.

So many learning problems arise because a child sees no value in reading; there are few rewards in the early years, and when the time comes when rewards are granted by grades on papers, the child who doesn't do well is likely to be burdened with a label that defines his learning abilities for all time to come. In short, high value must be placed early on the behaviors that school will reward – the honey has to be there.

[Learn more about Dr. Azerrad](#)

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