

CREATING LITERACY OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG BLIND CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

Literacy in the broadest sense is reading, writing, speaking and listening. As a learned process, literacy comes from all experiences beginning at birth and continuing throughout a person's lifetime. For the preschool child, literacy begins with doing what other family members do already; responding to signs, logos, and labels; sharing books; scribbling notes (Goodman 1986). As an observer and imitator, the young child tries out and practices reading and writing in fun, meaningful play situations. The importance of meaningfulness cannot be over stressed (Taylor, 1986). For print to have meaning, it must be functional and the child allowed to use print for a purpose. Then the young child is able to gain "print awareness" for why people read and write and what people do when they read and write. This is a step towards literacy that comes before attention to letters and letter-sounds (Kontes 1986).

Kontes states "Several researchers believe that young children's literacy ought not be left to chance. They suggest many ways that the home and school can stimulate literacy in preschool age children." The parent and /or teacher must engineer this environment to promote the development of understanding literacy (Taylor 1986).

If beginning literacy is a topic of interest for sighted children, it should become a topic of interest and concern in the education of visually impaired and blind children. Educators and parents of visually impaired children know that it is impossible to provide the braille student with the diverse quantity of braille material and writing tools that are afforded the sighted child. Then how do we create a braille rich environment? Or do we? How can parents model "functional use" with limited braille materials and writing tools? How can you "scribble write" in braille? Is the trip to the library meaningful without braille books available? Parents and teachers can look at creative ways of turning daily experiences into opportunities for literacy. It is my hope that the following activities will serve to stimulate new ideas and create enjoyment between you and your child. The time spent listening and responding in concrete ways to your-child's view of the world will provide the experiences necessary for building literacy.

ENCOURAGING BRAILLE AWARENESS IN THE HOME

1. Some educators may question the practice of attaching braille labels to objects around the home for fear children would be expected to read independently. For a three to four year old child, running his fingers over a braille word will not lead to reading independently, but it will help to explain about reading and develop braille awareness.
 - Start with simple, familiar everyday objects that the child is in contact with daily (bed, chair, table, window, cup, door, cereal boxes, TN.).
 - Personalize the child's belongings with his name.
 - Place labels in the direction your child will most easily reach for them.
 - Snip off the right upper corner of a braille label to avoid reading upside down.

- Use grade 2 braille (with contractions) since that is what your child will be using in school.
- Gently guide your child's fingers across the new word in a relaxed, fun way.
- Your child's teacher can help you with the braille by using either braille paper, a braille label maker, or Brailles from American Thermaform.

2. Braille awareness will become more meaningful if the child has a reason for using braille.
This is the fun part!

- Braille family jobs on 3x5 index cards i.e., feed the dog, water the plant, dust the tables, pick up your toys, put dirty clothes in the washing machine (I knew you would like this!). Have your child draw one card out of a box and read the message with you, then carry out the job in a fun way to reinforce the "reading". Create another box with special family activities i.e., walk the dog with Dad, read a story with Mom, play in the sprinklers with brother. Your child will begin to hook braille with action and meaning. This is a step towards literacy!

3. Point out braille in the environment. Some restaurants have braille menus. Find out which ones do and pick one up for pretend play. Many elevators and restrooms are also labeled in braille.

MODELING LITERACY IN THE HOME

The functional use of print can be shown by example, or modeled, to sighted children by writing lists, bills, special cards, letters, notes, reading books, menus, telephone books, maps and recipes. Your blind child will miss seeing you use print for real purposes unless an effort is made to tactually show and tell him. It is true that print may not be as meaningful to the blind child (unless he has low vision) but hopefully the purpose and activity surrounding print will help to build literacy connections.

- Before you go to the grocery store, *show* and tell your child about the list you are making. Include something he would like on your list. Have him hold the list at the store and re-read it to him from time to time.
- When you are baking cookies, show and tell your child about the print recipe. Your child needs to know this information doesn't come from thin air!
- When you are reading a magazine, book or newspaper, *show* and tell your child about them. It can be as simple as "I'm reading the newspaper right now and it tells me that tomorrow it will rain"- or "The Glendale swimming pool will open tomorrow, we will soon be able to swim."
- When ordering dinner at McDonalds, let your child know there is a menu you are reading that gives you food choices. Ask for a braille menu. Take a print menu home and add braille strips to use for pretend play.
- Sighted children practice pretend reading and writing through play. They will scribble notes, lists, and letters after watching other adults. If you can purchase a braille writer when your child is around four years old, he too can enter into pretend reading and writing activities. Now when it is time to make up a grocery list, the two of you can also "scribble write" one on the braille writer. He will enjoy checking his pretend braille list at the store and telling you what to find next!

- Give your child the chance to become a message carrier. When you have a message for the school, tell your child about it and have him be responsible for handing the note to the teacher.
- Share the trip to the mailbox with your child. He can help sort and deliver mail to family members! You might encourage Grandma to send a monthly card through the mail with a special sticker and note! Suggest to your child that he write a letter to Grandpa. He can "scribble write" and you can add the appropriate print using your child's exact words. What a great learning experience when your child mails the letter and receives a phone call from Grandpa saying "I just got your letter!"
- Our blind children at the preschool have enjoyed pretend print writing using a chalkboard. I think they like the sound and feel of the chalk. We also put braille paper on a small piece of carpet and let the child punch holes using a long golf tee, or a stylus. When you turn over the braille paper, there is a tactual picture! This could quickly turn into a secret note. Sometimes I will encourage a child to write ("braille scribble") on the braille writer and then ask the child to tell me about his story. I add the print and sometimes the correct braille, then we can read the stories over and over again. A child's early writing comes from his own experiences!
- A Jiffy slate can be another motivating tool for pretend writing. It is a small 6 inch slate with 3 closed sides and one open side. A 3 inch by 5 inch index card slips into one side and the child can begin scribble writing. When finished, the card is removed and turned over for reading. This has been a fun addition to our writing center! After fourth grade a student is usually introduced to the process of slate and stylus and its advantages for portable note taking.
- Tactile graphics can be introduced! I keep a tracing wheel close by in the event a child asks for a picture of a balloon from a story, or a road that has been built earlier. I can draw, co-actively with the child's hand over mine, and then outline the drawing with a tracing wheel. Place a magazine under the drawing while you use the tracing wheel to produce crisp lines. It seems like magic when the child turns the page over to explore the picture! When a child has developed basic concepts about objects and events, by the age of 4 1/2 to 5, then he can begin to enjoy and make sense out of tactile representations.

READING ALOUD

Read to your children regularly - it familiarizes them with the language of books, develops vocabulary, and it is pleasurable for both parent and child (Strickland, Morrow 1989). Durkin's study (1966), among others, finds that learning to read naturally begins when parents read to young children and let them handle and experience books.

- Select books that your child will like. Sunpath Children's Bookshop suggests the following:

Cumulative- one item builds on another

Patterning-easy predictable patterns

Giraffe and a Half Napping House Brown Bear, Brown Bear

There Was an Old Lady Red is Best

A **Rose** In My Garden Rain Makes Applesauce

House That Jack Built Dark Dark Tale

I Unpacked My Grandmother's Trunk It Looked Like Spilt Milk

There Was an Old Woman Would You Rather?

The Important Book

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