Learning to Read

The ten most asked questions about learning to read answered by Geraldine Taylor, author of Help your Child Learn to Read, in conjunction with Southend on Sea Borough Libraries:

1. Can babies really be taught to read?

Every so often, we hear accounts of babies who are very advanced developmentally. However, if we're talking about reading, there are a few things to bear in mind:

First of all - what do we mean by baby? I've heard baby used for newborn to three years old! Also, educationalists sometimes use the term reading to apply to what we could call reading behaviours. Reading behaviours include such skills as holding the book the right way up, turning the pages and reacting to the pictures. These are all essential pre-reading skills - but if we're talking about reading in the sense most parents understand it - the getting of meaning from print - then this is not usually acquired much before the age of three.

Of course, there are exceptions - but please remember, if you're hearing about these exceptions from people whose children are grown-up or long past the primary school age - then their memories may not always be entirely accurate!

It's great to use books with babies to make their lives more interesting and to show how much fun comes from books. Board or cloth books are ideal. It's good for babies to realise that these things called books come with important people in their lives, too, and that the important people are happy to make all kinds of funny noises when they read the books. It's great to sing nursery rhymes, too. Nursery rhymes boost just about every kind of early learning.

2. At what age should a child be reading?

Children vary so much and they all progress at different rates. Having said that, I think that most of us would expect to see reading beginning to develop after a child's third term at school - and we would certainly hope that they had made reasonable progress by the age of seven.

What to do if this isn't happening? It's best to start by discussing the specific difficulties your child is having with his teacher. Is it that he doesn't understand the meaning of what he reads? Would more work on letters and their sounds help? Does he find it hard to
concentrate? Does he seem bored and unenthusiastic about the books he's being given to read? Accept his teacher's advice and ask her what you can do to help. It's useful to agree to keep in touch and to make a firm appointment to see her again in, say, a month. If no progress at all is being made after three months - then this may be the time to talk to the school about extra, specialist help.

By the way, it's also useful to look at the example of reading you're giving your child. Are you a reading family? Your example of enjoying reading and doing lots of it is very powerful. Research shows us, too, that it's valuable if boys see their fathers reading as well as their mothers. With writing, too (and writing is important for reading), some boys grow up believing that writing is something women do but not men - because they never see their father writing anything!

3. Do I teach my child the alphabet?

And what do I do about letter sounds? Letter names and sounds - phonic knowledge - are very important for early reading, spelling and writing. Children need to know both the alphabet and the sound made by each letter. The letter names are the letters as we say them in the alphabet (ABC etc) and their sounds are d as in duck etc.

A great way to teach the alphabet is to sing it! Try it out to different tunes - and keep an ABC chart in front of you to point to as you sing. Teach the letter sounds by games (I-spy something beginning with b...), by looking together at alphabet and activity books which show lots of objects beginning with the same sound, and by going on a sound hunt. Go on a t hunt in the bedroom, an s hunt in the kitchen etc.) Some letters have more than one sound - for example a as in apple and a as in apricot. Don't worry. When you need to, simply explain that yes, words can make more than one sound.

4. If I teach my daughter to read using a different method from school will this confuse her?

A lot of parents worry about this; we certainly don't want to feel we've done anything wrong or harmful to our children's learning! It's unlikely that you will confuse your daughter because teachers understand that children learn in different ways. Schools are now incorporating a number of different approaches, including phonics, into the way they teach to read.

5. My son is four and a half and he likes books. How do I actually start to teach him to read? What do I do?
Choose a short book with lots of pictures and a few words or a simple sentence on each page. A familiar book is fine. Talk about the book together - what's happening in the pictures. Then read the words or the story to him. After this, ask him if he would like to read the story to you. Help him with any words he can't remember by either giving the word or pointing to the letter at the beginning of the word and saying its sound. Give him lots of praise and show how pleased you are. Next day, ask him if he would like to read it again. Enjoyable repetition is vital for learning to read.

6. My son recites the words in his picture book from memory and he isn't really reading. What should I do?

Encourage him and show how pleased you are! Please understand that a good memory is vital for reading and remembering words by heart like this is an important step on the way to actual reading. Don't cover up the pictures to prove he can read.

7. My son doesn't want to read to me after school. Should I try to make him?

I know it can be maddening, but some children prefer to keep home and school life separate and perhaps your son feels that reading aloud 'belongs' to school! Support his learning by reading stories to him and talking about them. If his teacher wants the children to read at home, tell her what's happening and explain you'll be encouraging reading in other ways just for the moment.

8. What are the best books for children to read?

This is a huge subject and I know your library would be happy to help. I would say that it is helpful if you know the kind of books which are most appealing and valuable to children at their particular age and stage of reading development. Your child's teacher, your library and my guide Help Your Child Learn to Read can help you here. Try your own childhood favourites, too. And when children are reading independently, then it's great if they can choose their own books, too.

9. Should I buy a reading scheme for use at home?

If you like the feeling of structure and progress a scheme gives, then there's no reason not to buy one, so long as you read other story books together as well. The worry about schemes is that they teach children to read at the risk of putting children off reading itself in the long term. My feeling is that schemes can be extremely valuable for reinforcing aspects of reading skills - boosting children's knowledge of the important (key) words, or phonics. These days
you can purchase schemes which offer structure and progress and also have lots of variety, fun and real stories. Check out the new Ladybird scheme - Read with Ladybird.

Just make sure schemes are only a part of your child's diet of reading at home.

10. How can I get more information about children and reading?

I'm sure your library can help you - and it's worth asking at your child's school. I wrote Help your Child Learn to Read to give you the kind of information I know you need and to tell you some of the latest research findings.

Geraldine Taylor MA is the author of Help your Child Learn to Read (Ladybird £1.99) and Educational Consultant to Ladybird Books Ltd

*All libraries in Southend stock a wide range of titles including Board and Picture books for the very young - remember your child can join the library at any age*