

# Reading Readiness - the

A 2007 study by the National Endowment for the Arts entitled *To Read or Not to Read* found that little more than one-third of high school seniors now read proficiently. Even among college graduates, reading proficiency has declined by 20%–23%.

These dismal statistics have not only alerted us to the problems, but they have also incited a heated debate over reading “readiness.”

**The “Early Starters”** advocate instruction in reading as soon as a child can hold a pencil. Pressure from friends, family, and educational “experts” compel concerned parents to start teaching phonics early—even to their two- or three-year-olds. Parents are urged to read books such as *How to Teach Your Preschooler to Read in Ten Minutes a Day*. In response parents attach labels to their furniture, play phonics CDs while their infants nap, and spend hours instructing toddlers on how to write their ABCs.

On the other side of the controversy are the **“Late Starters.”** These folks are more relaxed. They urge parents to read to their children, teach them to cook, garden, and fix the car. They advocate waiting on instruction in reading until a child shows a desire to read, even if that child is eight years old or older.

**So who’s right?** Like ‘most everything, there’s a balance. God has made each of our children unique and has given them different gifts and callings. 1 Peter 4:10 (NAS) says, “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” (See also the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-28.)

Because each child is unique, with different skills, gifts, and callings, each one learns at a different rate. Skills that develop early in one child may develop later on for another. Talents that develop in one child may never develop in another. Einstein was four before he could speak and seven before he could

read. Woodrow Wilson, our twenty-eighth president, couldn’t read until he was ten years old. Tom Cruise was functionally illiterate until adulthood. Tommy Hilfiger still has problems reading. However, these late bloomers eventually discovered their gifts, pursued them, and became the successful people we know today.

“Waiting helps children develop maturity and logic skills and prevents frustration and discouragement,” says Dr. Raymond Moore in his book *Better Late Than Early*. He continues, “Most children’s eyes are not fully developed



until at least age eight. Too much close work, watching TV, or playing video games can lead to near-sightedness . . . Children’s readiness for academic achievement such as reading, writing, arithmetic, and language arts depends a great deal on the maturity of their sensory systems—vision, hearing, taste, touch, smell—on their motor coordination or ability to handle a pencil or chalk and to manipulate small things. It depends also on the development of their brains and central nervous systems, and on their ability to reason consistently from cause to effect—such as to be able to answer ‘why’; to make judgments of distance, time, and space; and to evaluate motives.”

In her book, *A Home Start in Reading*, Ruth Beechick describes a study that was done with regard to readiness. “A school district studied two groups of children from K- 3rd grade. One group received extensive instruction in reading. The other group

spent the same amount of time learning science. They melted ice. They observed thermometers in hot and cold places. They played with magnets, grew plants, learned about animal life, and so on. Books and pictures were available, but no formal lessons in reading were held. What did the school district learn? By third grade the ‘science’ children were far ahead of the ‘reading’ children in their reading scores. The reason? Their vocabularies and thinking skills were more advanced. They could read on more topics and understand higher-level materials. The ‘reading’ children, by starting earlier, used up a lot of learning time on the skills of reading, while the ‘science’ children spent the time learning real stuff. And when they did begin reading, they were older and knew more and learned in a fraction of the time that the others took.”

On the other side, reading skills and other talents *do* show up early for some children. For example, Mozart was playing the keyboard at age four and composing music at age five. William Cullen Bryant published his first piece of literature at age ten, and Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher, began his study of Latin at age three. Delaying instruction in reading for these children would have been most inappropriate.

So, the answer to the “Early Starters” vs. “Late Starters” controversy is—it depends on *your* child. You should start formal reading instruction when *your child* is ready, not when someone else is ready.

For those who delay reading instruction, what do you do while waiting?

During the waiting period, learning can and still goes on. Consider Thomas Edison. He lasted only three months in school because he was “addled,” another term for

# Controversy

by Cindy Downes

"learning disabled." So, his mother taught him at home. Her method was to read to him every day and allow him time to pursue his own interests. Her reading consisted of the newspaper and books such as *David Copperfield* and *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. She encouraged his interest in science by allowing him to create a science laboratory in their basement. Consequently, even before he could read well himself, he not only developed an excellent vocabulary, but he also acquired knowledge and reasoning skills equivalent to many college graduates today.

Because schools rely so heavily on textbooks, we tend to forget there are other ways to acquire knowledge. Here are some suggestions:

Give your child time to play outdoors, play with friends and family members, play games, do art projects, "pretend," listen to music, and garden.

Give them time to see, touch, feel, taste, and hear the things that God created. Read books to them—all kinds of books, on all subjects and at all reading levels. As Barbara Bush says, "Reading aloud is one of the best-kept secrets of good parenting."

Play and listen to all types of music and musical instruments. Attend concerts, plays, and other cultural events.

Put together puzzles and play games such as Candyland, Cariboo, and dominoes.

Visit the zoo as well as art, science, and history museums. Visit historical landmarks in your state, the U.S., and, if you can afford it, all over the world!

Do science together—build a volcano, collect rocks, and create a weather map.

Visit the county courthouse and watch a trial being conducted. Visit your state legislature and watch your legislators in action.

Let your children work with you

around the house. Let them go with you as you minister to a friend, neighbor, and in a church or community outreach program. Let them be involved in what you do.

Introduce the letters of the alphabet and simple phonics as part of your everyday life, naturally, not with a formal curriculum.

Then when your child is ready for a formal reading program, this real-life learning will not only prevent your child from becoming a statistic, but the process of learning to read will go much faster!



MORE IDEAS FOR TEACHING READING CAN BE FOUND ON CINDY'S WEBSITE AT: [WWW.OKLAHOMAHOMESCHOOL.COM/3RS.HTML](http://WWW.OKLAHOMAHOMESCHOOL.COM/3RS.HTML) COPYRIGHT © 2008 BY CINDY DOWNES.

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