



TOP

Tips on Parenting

September 1999
Vol. 1 No. 3

Utah State
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From the Editor

We have had two exciting additions to *TOP* since the last issue. We are adding a new feature called "Question Corner." It will consist of questions posed by parents to early childhood experts who will provide brief responses in the newsletter. If you have any questions you would like answered, please send them to:

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We have also decided to put each issue on-line to make the newsletter available to more parents. We hope you will encourage other parents to receive our newsletter or read it on-line at <http://www.coe.usu.edu/ecc/top/index.html>.

Love, Letters and Literacy Learning by Michael Killeen

I first tried the idea when my oldest daughter, Amanda, was 6 and I was in graduate school. By day, I was immersed in the study of reading and writing development. At night, I was anxious to test out my new found knowledge in addition to spending time with my children. Amanda was a beginning reader, and I wanted to help her develop a love and appreciation for reading and writing. Using my idea with Amanda helped show us that reading and writing could be a natural part of family life.

The idea was simple enough—I would write a short love note to Amanda and leave it by her bed after she had fallen asleep. When she awoke I hoped she would see the note, read it, and come running to find me. The

first message I left read, "Come hug me, love Daddy." To my dismay there was no enthusiastic visitor the next day to greet me. A valuable lesson was learned when I was told by Amanda that it was fun to get a note but that it was too hard to read. In my excitement, I had used cursive to write my note. Amanda asked me to, "Print the letters neatly Daddy because I can't read that 'scribble stuff' yet."

Easily rectified, the next few notes were printed and also contained symbols such as the heart shape for love or a smiley face for happy. Our communication developed into a treasure hunt of sorts where one note would give clues as to where to look for the next one. For example, note #1 might say, "Look in the bath tub." A note in the tub would say, "Look for a treat where the milk is." It was not long before Amanda starting imitating me by putting notes under my pillow or on the bathroom mirror. It was at this point that Amanda was learning to write anything and participate more fully in the world of reading and writing. Our paper, tape and pencil consumption went up, but that was a small price for our daughter acquiring skills and learning to love reading. Over the course of a year, notes from Amanda began to appear in both cursive and creative writing forms. By creative I mean phonetic spelling and substitutions of symbols for words or letters.

I tried the same tact with my subsequent children. I found it was possible to start writing notes when they were much younger by using pictures, symbols and even stickers. Notes were not written every night; however, when a special occasion arose or my wife and I wanted our children to be aware of a change of plans, we would write a note. It was exciting to see our children embrace written language, and the increased communication in our home was an unexpected pleasure.

During story time our children would read words familiar to them and use some of those words in their note writing. When one child received a note, the others wanted to read it as well. Often one child would ask someone else what a word was or what it meant. I have found this idea to be a wonderful way to introduce new vocabulary or to demonstrate the order that tasks should be performed. My children find it rather natural now to write thank you notes to grandparents or to make their own birthday invitations. If someone calls when my wife and I are away or someone drops by and we missed them, there is a note giving that information. Writing serves a real life purpose for my children, yet also holds a sense of joy and personal accomplishment.

Learning about reading and writing has been extended into our car travel. We like to play the "I spy" game with signs and billboards. For example, as we drive from place to place we ask the children, "Can you spy with your little eye the word 'stop'?" As the children have grown older, we have increased the difficulty of the game. For instance, we ask them if they can spy the word "pots," which is stop backwards. We play the same game with other signs and symbols. We have found signs to be a great way to pick out similarities and differences in the shape and size of letters.

Our older children have begun to ask the younger ones if they can pick out buildings or vehicles with writing on them. We then ask the younger children if they could guess what the writing said, given the accompanying picture on the side of the truck or wherever. The older ones are eager to fill in whatever information is needed to model for their younger siblings.

These ideas were not intended to be academic exercises. The fact is, we tried to encourage writing and reading in as natural a way as possible. By asking if we had already

Activity Corner

Crayon Etching

Completely cover a piece of construction paper with heavy crayon markings using a variety of colors. Then, mix black tempera with a few drops of liquid soap or a bit of soap powder and paint over the crayon markings. (The soap helps the tempera adhere to the waxy crayon surface.) After the tempera is completely dry, use the tip end of a paint brush handle to scratch a design.

written "eggs" on the grocery list or could they leave a note to Mommy, our children began to see the usefulness and real-life application of their newly developing skill. What started as a gesture of love helped our children develop an appreciation for reading and writing alike.

Michael F. Killeen is a doctoral candidate at Utah State University in curriculum and instruction. He and his wife Heather are parents of six wonderful children ranging in age from 12 years to 14 months.

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Mathematics is Child's Play

By Jim Barta

The way that mathematics is taught has changed dramatically over the past decade. Rigid drill and practice has been replaced with children discussing various solutions to pertinent problems as they use manipulatives (blocks, chips, counters, etc.) to help them model their thinking. With the changes in teaching styles, you may be asking: How do children learn mathematics? How can I encourage my child's mathematical development?

Children are natural mathematicians; in fact, for them math may be considered child's play. Think of your own children, and reflect on the times that they divided their snack to share with a friend or when they counted the spots on two ladybugs. These activities are certainly mathematical. The ability to think mathematically to solve problems that arise in their young lives appears to be nearly effortless and a challenge children seem to enjoy.

From experiences with my own two children and many of their friends, I have concluded that there are few mathematical concepts taught in the elementary curriculum (grades K-5) that young ones have not already explored before they ever begin school! One only has to listen to children's conversations to hear them constantly estimating and counting, measuring and calculating.

Rather than believing that children learn best when they are taught to follow traditional mathematical rules and procedures, many educators believe children learn by creating and testing rules of their own as they try to make sense of what takes place around them. Our children benefit when we encourage them to find ways to solve their own problems.

When exploring mathematics, we need to first involve children with actual objects. Young children need to see and touch the items they are counting. Later, they can use drawings, written numerals, and number symbols with the objects to help explain what it is they are doing. Eventually, when children have had ample experience with the real objects and drawings, they can successfully use and understand the number symbols that they see older children and adults using.

There is much we can do to help our children expand their mathematical experience and understandings.

The following are suggestions:

Look for and describe patterns. Mathematics is the understanding of patterns and relationships. You may find patterns at home and in nature. Examples are in the number of hands, fingers, or toes we have and geometrical shapes and designs in our clothing, on buildings, on wallpaper, on flowers, etc.

Talk about how you use math in your everyday life.

What things do you count and measure? Scoops of cereal or the time it takes to brush your teeth are just two of the many examples possible. As the dinner table is set, count the plates, cups, and napkins. Ask your children to place one napkin by each plate and then tell you the number of napkins they have put out. If each fork has four tines, how many tines are there if your family uses six forks? You may both be surprised how almost everything you do in one way or another involves math!

Play simple mathematical games. A favorite game of mine is, "What is the question?" To play, a number is selected. Let's say we chose the number six. The challenge would be to come up with as many problems as possible where the answer is six. Our questions may be, "What is $5+1$?" "What is $4+2$?" or "What is $7-1$?" With younger children, have objects (pennies, beans, etc.) handy to manipulate. Older children may enjoy trying to do these in their head. The fun of this is that everyone can successfully play. Additionally, children learn that there are many right ways to solve a problem.

Question Corner

My two year old son threw a tantrum because I told him he couldn't have any juice unless he wore his bib. What can I do to stay away from these power struggles?

Debbie Day, Boulder, CO

When your child asks you for juice, try responding with, "Yes you can have some juice. Would you like to wear your green bib or your yellow one?" This empowers your child with choice; and for you, either alternative is acceptable.

Martha Dever, Associate Professor, Early Childhood Education, USU

Graph. Graphing is a wonderful way to sort and classify, count, and make sense of groups of things around us. Graph the number and types of shoes worn by family members by lining them up in similar groups and counting them. Children can create picture graphs of the same data. Picture graphs are drawings of the real objects and are appropriate for children who have had ample experience with the physical objects first. When you are finished, talk with each other about what your graph tells you.

Create and act out mathematical stories. Have your child create his or her own mathematical story. It might go something like this: “Louisa ate three peas with her fork and then ate two more with her fingers (of course when Mom wasn’t looking). How many peas did she eat altogether?” Again, young children

need peas to work with while older children can draw pictures to solve the problem. If your child still seems interested, discuss how a number sentence could be used to describe the actions taking place, for example $3+2=5$.

These are but a few suggestions for exploring mathematics with your child. As you engage your children in mathematical conversations, you are helping to support their natural development. Mathematics, approached in this fashion, certainly is child’s play from which both parents and children will benefit.

Jim Barta is an elementary education professor at Utah State University. A specific area of interest for him is mathematics education related to young children.

Fostering Resiliency in Young Children

by Renée C. Falconer

Into each life a little rain must fall. Unfortunately, sometimes it is not a little rain but a great downpour. As parents, we hope that our children will be spared any of life’s downpours; but just in case, we would like to equip them with a sturdy umbrella of resilience. A friend of mine and her husband have just become foster parents to two young children whose mother and father have both been jailed for four years after being convicted of embezzling money from the company they managed. These children’s lives have undergone a drastic change in the space of one week; in four years their lives will change radically once again when they return to parents they will hardly know or remember. My friend asked for advice on how best to help these children rebound from their present trauma and how to prepare them for the inevitable future difficulties. Our children may not face such a challenging situation; but accidents, personal loss, difficult relationships, and disappointments can be part of any life experience.

How can we equip our children so that they thrive in spite of stressful situations?

The life experiences of resilient children have three factors in common that seem to protect them from the harmful effects of stressful circumstances or experiences.

Activity Corner

Stick Puppets

Create characters on construction paper, cut them out, and tape or staple them to popsicle sticks. Use the puppets to create stories with your children.

1. They have care and support, not only from family, but also from people involved in their lives who are not family members.
2. They have high expectations for themselves, inspired by the confidence others have in them.
3. They are involved in experiences and achievements that have purpose, such as raising funds for the local humane society, mowing the lawn for an elderly neighbor, or developing an avid interest in a hobby or sport.

My friend and her husband were relieved to hear that parents and other care givers can help children to become resilient by guiding and encouraging them during bad times and good, providing hope, and teaching coping skills. In this way, children are encouraged to believe in their ability to survive and succeed. A reasonably well structured home-life will also foster resiliency, as will helping them to become socially competent by encouraging interaction with other people. A sense of competence and worth, which is essential for overcoming difficulties, can be

developed by giving children responsibilities and encouraging them to explore their world and share activities with others. All of this will help them to become self-reliant and optimistic about the future.

What specific things can parents do to help children adapt to stressful situations?

- Promote situations in which children will meet and become involved with a variety of adults and peers. This could be through church, school activities, clubs, sports activities, and family gatherings.
- Teach your children appropriate social skills for a variety of situations. For example, teach them how to behave in the grocery store or in someone else's home.
- Emphasize your children's abilities, and watch for those that aren't usually recognized as important. A child who can build fantastic structures out of Legos™ or plays well with a younger sibling should get as much attention and praise for that skill as a child who reads early, sings well, or runs fast.
- Encourage effort. Invite your children to do things that are difficult for them. It is important to learn that personal effort can change outcomes.
- Remind your children that when bad situations happen they can think for ways to change the situation or look at it differently. If they miss a friend or relative who is away, suggest a phone call or making something to send to that person.
- Give your children responsibilities that have some importance such as setting the table, tidying the house, raking the grass, or planning a meal. You may have to give a lot of direction and assistance, but your child will feel valued and competent.
- Help your children solve problems by discussing what else could be done in certain situations. Ask, "What can we do to solve this?" Let them think of many ways even if they may seem far-fetched at first. More sensible ideas will eventually emerge.
- Give your children a chance to discuss a stressful situation or concern. Listen to and acknowledge their stresses. Don't tell them that there isn't a problem or that they should ignore the situation. Let them know that you also see it as a problem, and help them think

of ways to cope.

- Be a good role model by discussing some of your daily hassles and explaining how you deal with them. Set a good example by remaining calm and solving problems thoughtfully.
- Provide your children with many opportunities for imaginative and creative play. This provides them with opportunities to practice negotiating with friends and dealing with stresses which mirror those they have met in real life. This helps them develop problem-solving skills.
- Teach children relaxation techniques or ways to control emotions. For example, count to ten or sing a certain song.

The new foster parents mentioned earlier are putting these suggestions into action as they are determined to help the two young children now in their care. Every parent can rest assured that they can do much to foster resiliency in their children. Such efforts now will pay great dividends far into the future as children learn to survive and overcome the many challenges they will face in their lives.

Renée C. Falconer is Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Southern Mississippi, where she teaches courses in multicultural education and early childhood education. She has taught in England, Canada, Australia, Kenya, and Utah.

Question Corner

My six-year-old counts on his fingers when he does math? How do I get him to quit?

Karen Randall, Newton, UT

Please don't discourage your child from counting. The fact that he counts on his fingers shows that he still benefits from working with concrete objects and isn't as comfortable with abstract thinking. Work with him on his level by playing counting games with buttons or beans. Adding and subtracting real objects and writing "number sentences" are great extensions. He'll move on when he's ready.

Jim Barta, Assistant Professor, Elementary Education, USU

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Question Corner

As a new mother of a 4-month-old girl, I am concerned that my quickness to comfort my daughter reinforces poor behavior. When she screams or throws a tantrum, I always feed her or pick her up, thus teaching her to cry often. How do I discipline her at this young age to reinforce good behavior?

Shawna Morrissey, Logan, UT

Infants initially have a limited means of communicating their needs and discomforts to you. Crying is a natural response to alert parents to their needs. It is the way your daughter tells you that she is hungry, tired, overwhelmed, cold, wet, in pain, afraid, or just needs some cuddling and closeness. Picking up a crying infant will not spoil them.

When you respond promptly, consistently, and lovingly to your daughter's cries (and other cues), she will learn to trust that her needs will be met. The best way to stop your daughter from crying is to pick her up and find out what she needs. As a result, she will cry less by the end of her first year than babies whose needs aren't met.

When your daughter is older, she will be able to communicate by smiling, making eye contact, laughing, cooing, using gestures, and eventually by using words. As she starts making efforts at other types of communication, react and imitate her expressions and sounds. By supporting other means of expressing needs and feelings, you help her move from crying to other types of communication.

Lisa Newland, Doctoral Student, Family & Human Development, USU

Activity Corner

Sponge Painting

Create stamps by cutting an old sponge into various shapes. Dip your shapes into paint and have fun stamping construction paper or newsprint. By cutting up a paper grocery bag and stamping the inside, you can make great wrapping paper with your children.