



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“It has been estimated that across the age range from two to six years, children must be learning 8 to 10 new words per day to achieve the vocabulary they have at age six. The current estimate of a typical six-year-old’s receptive vocabulary (words they understand but may not say) is around 13, 000.”

-From Chapter 2 of
Growing a Reader from Birth by Diane
McGuinness

Many years ago I was the Family Literacy coordinator for Alameda County. When I first started the job, one of the hardest concepts for me to accept was that somehow I was supposed to teach or model reading to children. I was working with families who were involved in the adult literacy program, which meant they were working on their reading and writing skills. But just as I have trouble accepting that a pediatrician may offer parenting advice, I struggle with the idea that when someone joins a literacy program, they need or even want advice on raising their children.

I think part of my reluctance was simply my general resistance to anyone telling me what to do – so I assumed the parents might feel that way, too. But also there is something about the combination of experts and child rearing that I think requires a lot of caution. Since there is no one way to raise a child, the most impor-

tant part is the knowledge a parent brings to their role. I remember feeling the same way about the schools and my children – ask me, I would think, I could tell you about my child.

However, there is the other side of this, which is that most parents want to do the best they can for their child. And doing the best includes finding resources and people who can perhaps present new or different ideas. As long as a parent knows ultimately it is a family decision - not a teacher’s, not a doctor’s and not a librarian’s - then gathering book lists, parenting strategies, health tips and all the other information available to a parent seems like a good idea.

Part of being a children’s librarian, is not only reading, reading, reading – but also knowing something about child development and how it relates to age-appropriate materials. I am studying this topic in one of my classes this semester, and I am awed by some of the statis-

tics and facts. For instance, did you know that: “Developing fetuses create new brain cells at a rate of tens of millions each week such that, by the time babies are born, they have virtually all the brain cells they will ever have”? (C. Hertzman, 2004). Or that young children respond well to faces and 13 inches is the preferred distance for looking at a face or a picture of a face?

My favorite quote, though, is from the “The Case for an Early Childhood Development Strategy” by epidemiologist Clyde Hertzman (www.isuma.net). Hertzman draws on a 1958 British Cohort study, which followed one group from birth to age 33. Looking at the long-term effects of multiple factors, it turned out that whether or not the children were read to early on in their lives was one of the three most important predictors for long-term health: “Children who were not

read to early... were five times more likely to report poor health by age 33 than those who were read to.” What I love about this is that of all the resources available for children, books – particularly because of public libraries – are some of the easiest to come by. It is information like this that should inform all of us as we think about how our public money should be spent.