



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
April 7, 2006

“Public libraries have the ability to reach thousands of parents, caregivers and children and to greatly impact the early reading experiences of preschool children.”

-From “Overview of Every Child Ready to Read @ your library” by Elaine Meyers and Harriet Henderson, on the American Library Association website www.ala.org

One of the programs at the Public Library Association conference in Boston was on early literacy. This presentation, called “Leave No Preschooler or Toddler Behind,” focused on ways to encourage parents to interact with their young children so they can become readers. This is a popular topic for conferences – it seems like there are always programs that bring great ideas and new insights to this important issue.

This time it was particularly relevant to me since I followed the conference with a visit to my granddaughter, who is now 6 months old. When Maddie was born, I bought my daughter Mem Fox’s book *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever*, which encourages parents to begin reading to their children right at birth. Now, this is something I didn’t do – I don’t even remember when I started reading to my children. And although I thought it was a good idea – how could it hurt?

- I don’t think I actually believed you could sit down with a young baby and read the words of a book to her. So, while I was visiting, I tried it. My first impulse was to simply hold her in my lap and show her the pictures while pointing to them and talking about them. However, feeling somewhat foolish, I decided to go the whole way, by reading the text on each page. In this case, there were several sentences on each one – very unlikely to hold her attention, in my opinion.

And, of course – since I am telling you this – the result amazed me. As I read, she seemed to be listening. Part of the time, I lifted the flaps in the book, so she could see the animal hiding behind each one. When possible, I added the noise the animal makes, although there seemed to be a lot of silent animals in that particular book (what sound does a rabbit make?) But I also just read the text.

I know she didn't understand what I was saying. She did, however, seem to be grasping the idea that when someone puts you on their lap and opens a book, words – or sounds, anyway – are connected. And I can see that if this is a pleasant experience for babies – you are cuddling them, they can alternate between listening to the book and chewing on it – you are setting up a wonderful and positive connection to books.

I think the simplicity of this message may be the most difficult part of it. There is a huge market right now for materials that help parents make their child smart. There are DVDs, videos, books and tapes – all geared toward the idea that somehow by using them a child will have a higher I.Q. Some are beautifully packaged, with all sorts of research quoted on the back. And they are not a bad idea – especially if they encourage

interaction between parent and child.

To my mind, though, nothing beats spending time with a child – one-on-one, talking and interacting time – for nourishing his or her mind and soul. Taking the opportunity to read or talk about a book, for even 20 minutes a day – a few minutes here and there – is straightforward, inexpensive (especially if it's a library book) and almost guaranteed to produce a happy baby and a proud parent.