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# CHILDREN WHO READ BEFORE SIX

SOH KAY CHENG

Needless to say, learning to read is not the only purpose parents send their children to school, but you will agree that it is one of the very essential skills children need to develop while in school, especially during the early years of their schooling. What a child can or cannot do in his schoolwork depends very much on his ability to read, though other factors are also at work.

Generally speaking, most children begin learning to read at the age of six when they go to school. This does not mean that every child will certainly be able to read once he has passed his sixth birthday. Also, this does not mean that a child who has not reached the age of six cannot learn to read at all. As a matter of fact, children differ very widely in this regard. Some eight- or nine-year-olds may not read as well as six-year-olds, while some four- or five-year-olds match the six-year-olds in reading. Children who read before six are the so-called *early readers* – a term that tells nothing anyway. What then are some of the facts about early readers?

## **More Boys Than Girls Among Early Readers?**

Generally speaking, girls are better readers than boys, at least at the primary school level.\* Meanwhile, there are more boys who have reading difficulties of one kind or another and need special help. These facts easily lead us to expect more girls than boys among the early readers.

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\*The information on which this article is based is drawn extensively from a longitudinal study of 32 British children carried out by Margaret M. Clark as reported in her book, *Young Fluent Readers* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

On the contrary, this is not the case. Among early readers, there are more boys than girls. This seemingly unexpected situation is not entirely unexplainable. Studies comparing males and females in various physical and psychological characteristics show greater individual differences among males as a group than among females as a group. Thus, when the two sexes are compared, more males are to be found at both ends. That is to say, in many aspects, there are more outstanding males than outstanding females and, at the same time, more problematic males than problematic females, too. That being so, although there are more boys than girls with reading difficulties, there are also more boys than girls who are early readers.

### **Are Early Readers Bright?**

As language ability is related to the level of intelligence, early readers can be expected to be bright. There are early readers who are very bright and there are also early readers of average or normal intelligence, though most early readers have above-average intelligence.

On verbal intelligence tests, early readers show themselves to be knowledgeable, to have a rich vocabulary, able to give accurate answers to questions involving numbers, to be accurate in judging similarities and differences and, not surprisingly, to comprehend better. However, they do only slightly better than other children when tested with non-verbal intelligence tests (that is, intelligence tests using pictures, figures, shapes, etc.)

What is more important is that, when taking the intelligence tests, early readers show a keen interest in the questions, especially the more challenging ones. Meanwhile, they show the ability to attend to the matter at hand for a longer period of time and are less easily distracted. Besides, they are more confident in the presence of strangers and show no signs of being overpowered. These are in fact the psychological characteristics of people with higher intelligence.

### **Their Interests**

As expected, they are most interested in reading. What then do they read?

Newspapers are the most common reading materials among early readers. This, perhaps, is due to the omnipresence of newspapers. Which columns do they prefer to read? Early readers generally read TV programmes and cartoons. Beyond these, the interests vary from one child to another, the readers' forum, price lists, shopping guides, sports news, advertisements, weather reports, jokes, etc.

Besides newspapers, books are of course their main diet. Again, except for some common interests, anything that can be read has its readers. Many early readers read fiction and mysteries, some even read classics. Believe it or not, some early readers read recipes, the telephone directory, bus schedules, road directories, maps, dictionaries and even yearbooks. In short, early readers have a tremendous appetite for reading materials; they read almost anything they find readable.

This being the case, it is no surprise if some early readers find the readers they use in class uninteresting. They have more varied interests and are more mature in their tastes. They like to use their brains (such as playing a game of chess) and derive pleasure in doing so. Moreover, they are able to concentrate for a long time. All these make them look too old for their age.

Early readers' keen interest in reading naturally prompts their parents to take them to public libraries. At the beginning, the parents accompany them. Later on, they make their own way there. Their choices are not limited to the children's section; some prefer adult books and are given special permission to borrow books from the adult section.

## **Their Families**

Most early readers come from small families of one to three children. It is significant that many early readers were born when their mothers were not younger than twenty and most were between twenty-five and thirty-five. This seems to indicate that when the early readers were born they had mothers who were mature and could spend much time with them.

Early readers have a good relationship with their mothers. The mothers are willing to talk to, and play with, them and even to drop what they are doing in order to answer the children's

questions. These mothers derive psychological satisfaction from dealing with their children, yet they are rather humble about their children's unusual ability – they do not show off.

In the families of the early readers, education and reading are valued. Although some of the parents left school early, they still like to read (some even read their children's books) and have the habit of regular reading. This obviously creates an atmosphere for reading in the family and provides the child with a model.

How did the early readers come to be interested in reading in the first place? Some became interested after having listened to stories, some liked to ask about words on signboards or advertisements they saw on the road. Some liked to play word games. Some were attracted by road names, brand names of cars, TV subtitles, names of goods in supermarkets, etc. The parents could not pinpoint what had made their children take an interest in reading; they did not deliberately make an attempt to interest them, though they always responded to the children's queries. There is one difference between the early readers and their siblings in their family environment when they were young. That is, when the early readers first became interested in words, they had an adult around who had the time and the patience to answer their questions and was keen to tell them stories. Of course, this may not be the only cause of early reading, but there is no denial that it encourages as well as provides the opportunity to develop a reading interest and ability at an early age.

Some early readers like to play with adults, but some prefer children. On the whole, the play patterns of early readers are not obviously different from those of other children. However, when playmates are not around, the early readers show self-sufficiency and know how to keep themselves occupied. Where TV is concerned, early readers watch programmes of their own choice and not indiscriminately. When TV programmes not of their choice are on, they either walk away or quietly read or play by themselves.

All in all, it seems that to develop interest and ability in reading early, children need an environment which is rich in language and reading materials – one in which reading is an on-going leisure pursuit, one in which the adults have time for, and an interest in, talking to children about what they have read.