Preparing the pre-school child for school

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By O. EVANS SCOTT

Home "teaching" can cause a child to be confused and unhappy when he first starts school, says Mrs. Scott in this article which tells how to give young children a sound basis for a happy and successful start at school.

MANY parents are sure that by teaching their pre-school children to count and read before starting school they are making it easier for the children when they do go to school.

This is not so. Teachers with whom this topic has been discussed agree on this point.

Teaching methods are continually changing and improving and home teaching quite often causes the child to be confused and unhappy at school. A child must also be mentally mature—(about seven years mental age) before teaching can make progress. This readiness varies for different subjects—he may be ready for simple number work several months before he is ready to learn to read.

However, parents can help children to absorb gradually facts and ideas and good habits which will be helpful to them when they first start school. These things are not taught consciously—they are merely absorbed incidentally during everyday play, conversation and experience.

Numbers

A two through two-and-a-half years old child is learning to distinguish between one thing and two things—one block and two blocks, one apple and two apples, and so on.

This idea of two things can be consolidated in his mind in many little ways.

When walking up steps, count "one step, two steps." Have him bring you two apples ("one for Mummy and one for you") or two pegs.

Leave him on "two things" for two or three months or more. Rushing him on to three and four before he has thoroughly grasped the concept of "two" will confuse the child and undo any good you have done. Parental impatience causes the wrong learning atmosphere and, perhaps, complications ever after.

When he is absolutely sure of the idea of "two" and never makes a mistake, watch for an opportune time to gradually introduce the idea of three things. He may ask what comes after two, perhaps by putting down two blocks and handling a third—when he seems to want to go on, then and only then, help. (At no time should parents actually sit down and try to teach numbers); the child should never sense that he is being taught or tested. Count three forks (one for Daddy, one for Mummy, one for you, makes one, two, three "forks"). Count walking up or down three steps, three apples, and so on.

Allow "three things" to become consolidated in his mind for another two or three
months as for "two". Do not hurry on to higher numbers, nor try to teach him to count. It is far more important that the child knows the application of each number, that is, how many things each number means.

Parents of two-and-a-half years old children are often heard to say "He can count up to 10, but he just will not say eleven". The futility of this is quite obvious—a child of this age can have no understanding of 10 or 11, or even five and six. There is no value in his reciting a string of, to him, meaningless sounds. These parents would do much more good if they helped him to grasp and thoroughly understand the idea of "two things" and "three things," as described above. This understanding should come about through play, conversation and everyday happenings, not forced teaching.

As a child reaches four and five he will be able to learn more as he is maturing and becoming more ready to grasp ideas. Parents should remember, too, that children are all individuals, with differing interests and maturing at different rates. Where one child has a good understanding of three and four things another child of the same age may still be learning one and two—but do not hurry the slower one.

By the time a child is of school age he probably understands four and five things. Do not try to force him further than this, nor despair if he has not yet grasped four—this he will when he is sufficiently mature to be able to do so. (This is called "Readiness for Formal Learning" in the schools.)

Sometimes a child in grade one at school does not seem to make any progress in numberwork (or any other subject) for the first few months, then all of a sudden he catches up with the leaders in only a few weeks as he becomes ready for it.

**Colours**

As with numbers, help children to learn colours incidentally. Starting with only one or two colours, comment on such things as a red dress or blue car, whenever the opportunity arises.

Help him to recognise the primary colours (red, yellow, blue) first, then, later, add orange, green, pink, and others. As before do not try to teach more tints and shades until the child asks "What colour is this?" Consolidate as before with comments like "Isn't Susan's red dress pretty?" or "Tell Daddy the colour of your tractor," or "My jelly bean is yellow, what's yours?"

Sometime during his first school year he should know yellow, red, blue, black, white, pink, orange, brown, and light and dark green, as these are the colours of the Cuisenaire blocks. (The Cuisenaire blocks are a teaching aid or a system of teaching arithmetic. This method is being used in an increasing number of schools). Later, he can be helped with alternative colour names such as lemon, gold, scarlet, crimson or tan, and the more difficult colours and mixtures of colours when he asks questions about them.

A packet of small chocolate sweets sugar-coated in multi-colours, is a very handy colour teaching aid.

**Books**

The real aim of children's books is to make the child eager to learn to read. Books should delight him.

Look at his picture books with him, picking up small details such as "the bells on her toes". Talk about this and encourage the child to think about it. Say "she might find it hard to walk with bells on her toes, don't you think?" Often, children will make their own quite astute comments. Have him tell you some of the colours; how many horses are in the picture and so on.

It is important to see that the books are suited to the child's age. A book for an eight-year-old would have pictures too detailed and with more odd colours than the ideal type of book for a three-year-old. The reading of bedtime stories, or making up a simple story about a picture will help him to follow a sequence, concentrate for the length of the story, and encourage him to want to read for himself.

Teach a child to respect books and handle them properly. Wash hands before using books, and turn over pages in the right direction, one at a time, quietly and carefully. These will form good habits for later on. Try to sit with him and talk about a picture in one of his books every day. These little picture-story times should be only a few minutes and, within reason, at the child's suggestion. If they
are too prolonged he may feel forced, or become bored, and take a dislike to books and the idea of reading. Encourage "oral expression"—in other words, let him talk about the picture, or even make up a story of his own about it.

For the five-year-old, or for children doing correspondence lessons at home, there are some very good "getting ready to read" books available. (No attempt is yet made to teach reading.) These preparatory books have series of small pictures which lead the eyes from left to right as in reading. Some of the pictures are slightly different from the others (such as a girl with a bow in her hair, having the bow on the left in two pictures and on the right in the third picture). This is an exercise—the child is asked to spot the difference. This type of picture series trains the child to identify slight differences in words and letters when he does start reading.

Exercises such as these can be improvised in many instances in the home, such as having him pick out the shortest or the longest word on a food tin label (avoid the fine print). Ask which word has a letter that goes up, and have him point to one with letters that go down, and so on, but make no attempt to teach individual letters. It is not necessary to know the alphabet to recognise a word—many a small boy recognises the word "aeroplane" before he knows "a" from "p."

The Alphabet

If a child asks about letters in simple words (as on a street sign or food label) tell him the sound of the letter ("a" as in "cat," not "ay" as in hay).

The way adults say the alphabet ("aye," "bee," "cee," etc.) is no help at all to children—it can often be a hindrance. This way, "bus" as in "bus stop" would sound like "bee-you-ess," not "bus." Saying each letter as it sounds, however, means that the separate letters can be sounded together to make a word—"b," "u," and "s" says "bus."

A grade one child came to me absolutely thrilled because he could read a new word, one he'd never seen before. When asked how he knew, he sounded each letter separately ("b," "e," "n," "t") then sounded them quickly to say "bent". At the same time, a child in grade two was struggling over the same word. His mother had "helped" him by teaching him the names of the letters as said by adults, and try as he might he could not get "bee-ee-en-tee" to make a word. Similarly, sounding the letters "c," "a," "t" makes "cat," but naming them as adults say the alphabet produces a peculiar-sounding "cee-aye-tee."

If a child asks about a letter, tell him its sound, but do not attempt to teach any further (actually, grade one children do not start learning "phonics" until the middle of the year). Some children may want to write their own names. If your pre-school child asks about this, show him just the initial—let him copy the capital "A" or "B" or whichever it is, and help him to identify it on labels, in books and so on. Then lead his attention away from writing to colouring and drawing.

**Colouring and Drawing**

Most children like to paint and draw. Supply them with thick-handled, easy to hold brushes, crayons and pencils in preference to the ordinary thin lead pencil. (The narrow pencil or brush handle may lead to the child developing a wrong pencil hold). Wind some paper or cloth strips around a favourite pencil if necessary, and secure with sticky tape.

For painting, newspaper or white butcher's paper is suitable and poster paints which are mixed with water and wash out easily are recommended. A young child should be given large pieces of paper—small sheets or small pictures to colour with thin pencils are too difficult for him.

Never disparage a child's drawings—don't say "That doesn't look like a dog". When he has drawn a dog, whether or not you recognise it as such, have him draw another animal for you. ENCOURAGE his efforts.

**Fine Muscle and Finger Control**

Give a very small child your finger or a pencil, and he will grab it with the whole hand, four fingers one side and thumb the other.

If he attempts to use a pencil he will hold it far too tightly and will use it as a dagger, with the whole hand and arm guiding it. Gradually, as he grows older, the fingers are used more and the arm
less, but as he is continually growing he must not be expected to use his fingers as effectively as an adult does. (Also, let him use whichever hand he prefers). Using a thin pencil to colour a small picture, or threading a needle, taxes a small child's fine muscle control to the limit.

Children's toys should be such that they can use their hands and gradually develop better muscle control and eye-and-hand co-ordination. A baby has large, soft, easily grasped toys; a two-year-old can place one building block next to another, and the older he grows the better he is able to fit things together, build and balance. The four-year-old gets valuable practice in threading cotton reels on string, making clumsy plasticine models, building stacks of blocks and so on, while a five-year-old can fit together the “poppet”-type detachable toys that he could only pull apart as a two-year-old. Children's play in this manner is not a waste of time, but valuable exercise for fingers and muscles.

If a little girl wants to sew, give her a really thick bodkin and thread, and thread it for her. (In school needlework, which starts with wool work on hessian in grade three, the needles are threaded for the girls for the first term—so a girl may not thread needles until aged about eight to eight and a half.)

Self Reliance

In the last few months before school, try to make children as self-reliant as possible, so that school is not a shock to them. Some children spend the first few days at school crying—they have been over-protected until then and school is a nasty experience.

Wherever possible, let your pre-school child have plenty of play with other children, particularly if he is an only child. Make sure he knows his own full name and address, and birthday, by the time he starts school. Allow him to take part in and contribute to a conversation, though never to dominate it.

He should be able to put on his shoes (and on the correct feet!) and to do up and undo shoe laces. Coat buttons should be easily fastened or undone, and he should be able to dress himself. (Imagine a rainy day at school, with twenty or thirty children needing coats and shoes done up by the teacher!)

Sew name tags or mark his name on all his school clothing and teach him to recognise his own property before he starts school. He will be required to have a mug, hand towel and soap, and a toilet bag in which to keep them. He should know points of hygiene such as having a handkerchief or tissue, and how to blow his nose; going to the toilet as soon as necessary, washing hands immediately after; washing hands before eating lunch, and so on.

He should also know to “stop, look and listen,” how to cross a street, to walk on the footpath or where to walk if there is no path. If he has to walk to school, take him that way several times so that it will be familiar to him.

Where possible, dress him in the school uniform. Avoid making him “different,” as children can cruelly tease him if he differs markedly in any way. This may be more difficult, but try to teach young children to be kind to unfortunate children—do not let them criticise a child with a limp or deformity or any other “difference.”

He should also learn to respect other people's property, and to “do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” Simple good manners will be helpful to him throughout life and should be taught as soon as possible and at every opportunity.

Teach him also to recognise his own name by its shape and length, printed in the lower case lettering that he will learn at school, thus:

Dick, Peggy

It will be too much to expect him to know the letters, but he should know its shape, thus:

Dick  Mary

Print his name this way in the same position on all his school books. Do not use block printing, nor mixtures of small and large style letters.

If a child is prepared for school in this manner and helped to become independent he will be ready to enjoy school from his first day.