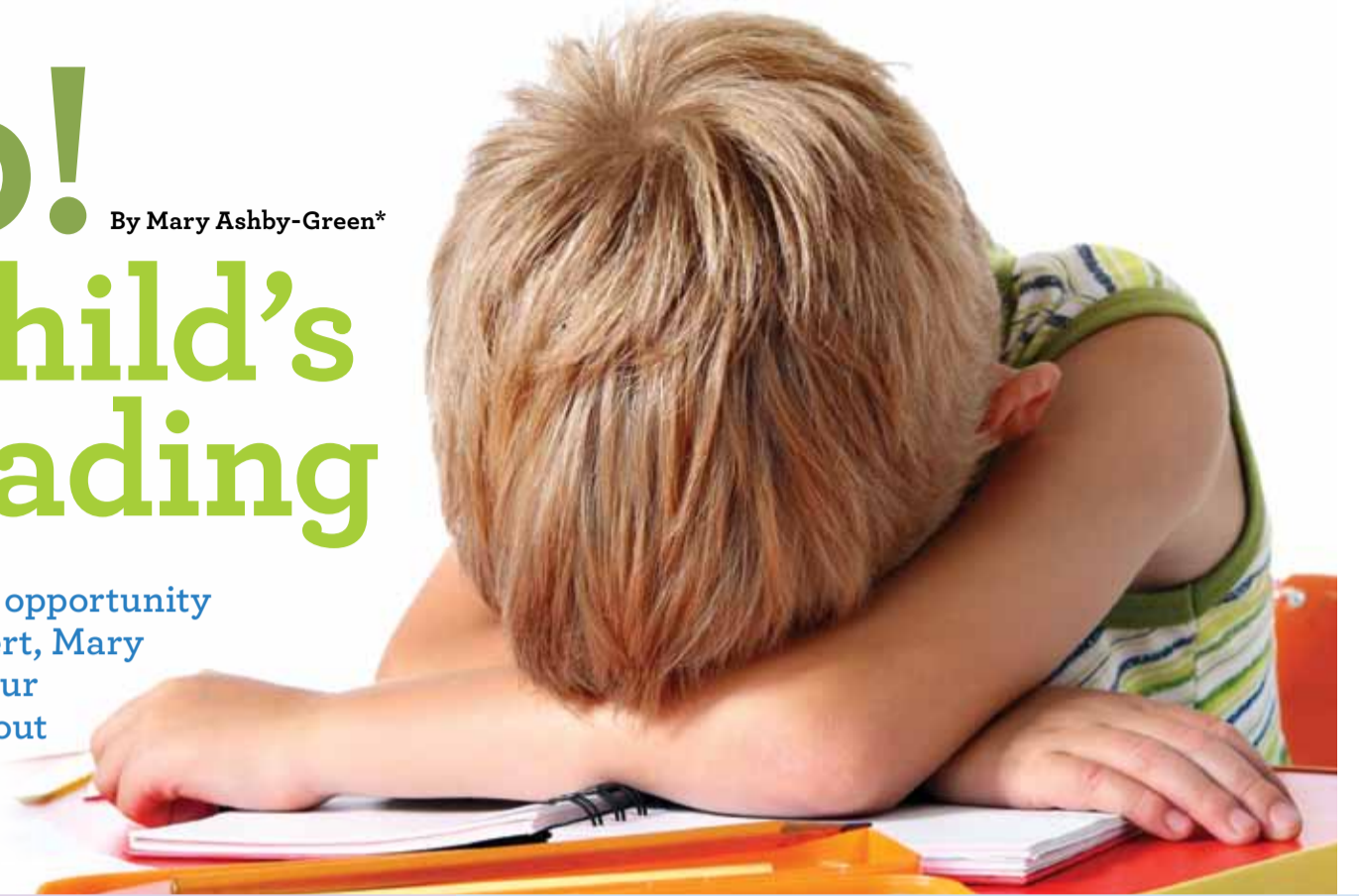


help!

By Mary Ashby-Green*

my child's not reading

Here we've given you an opportunity to have our reading expert, Mary Ashby-Green, answer your queries and concerns about your child's reading.



question 1

I have a nearly 3-year-old who has always preferred looking at books etc, upside-down and she even places her name tag at crèche upside-down. Olivia also seems to prefer all other activities over reading. She fills her day with dancing, singing, playing instruments, art-work, gym, playing, TV, and the computer for nursery rhymes. I also read to her most nights at bedtime. Should I be concerned at this point?

Theresa

answer

The most important skills a preschooler can develop are the age-appropriate ones. These are called the Perceptual Motor Skills and they include hand-eye co-ordination, auditory language skills, and postural adjustment. Young children practise these vital motor skills through active play, manipulating objects, drawing, using blocks and toys, and all free forms of physical activity where they are learning through exploring their environment. When these skills are firmly established, they lay the pathways for the formal learning skills later. Reading is a formal learning activity and all the activities Olivia is engaged in are preparing her for this. Even children who are vitally interested in books will often not show the disposition to formally read until after 4 years of age.

To you, the fact that she is looking at things upside-down is important, but what I am seeing is all the other age-appropriate things that she is fully involved in. I can't give you a definite answer as to why she is preferring to look at everything upside-down, however none of your other observations about her point to any sort of difficulty. Keep in mind that when there is a real difficulty, you will generally observe other 'troublesome' behaviours that go with it.

In terms of what else to do, I would keep reading to her, as you are doing – and aim for enjoyment and engagement, rather than signs of learning to read. She is not yet 3 and, in terms of brain development, she has not reached that stage yet.

question 2

My 6-year-old can read the words in a book really well, but when you ask him questions about the story, he doesn't know any of the answers. How can I help him remember and take in what he is reading.

Angela

answer

It's a good question – and one that others ask. He is only 6 and it sounds like his main focus is getting the words right, so he is not really thinking about the story itself at the same time. Children become more skilled with that as they progress. At this age in the classroom, children will read the story more than once, each time with a different focus. The teacher usually begins with a guided preview of the book, and they discuss pictures and concepts together before they read the book.

A fun way to help develop a better understanding of the story is to read it through once (for the actual words), then read it again using a different type of voice (and it works best if you, the parent, take your part in this). It could be in an excited voice or a bossy voice, or a man's deep voice. It makes it playful, but it also unconsciously changes the child's focus - now they have to read with an eye and an ear for the meaning. Most importantly, it seems to relax children, and gives them a different perspective about the process of reading itself.

question 3

My 2-year-old son has never been very interested in books. I can get him to sit through simple books by asking him to point out things in the pictures; and if there are additional aids like buttons or stickers he is more keen, but involved only in that part. How can I get him to sit through a book with more than one sentence per page?

Sam

answer

The things you have said tell me your son actually is interested in books and reading, and he is doing a lot of age-appropriate things in response to books. Firstly, he is sitting with you and looking and touching the book and, most importantly, he is engaging with your questions and responding (by pointing to objects etc). One sentence on a page is perfect for this age-group. If he is turning the pages to get to the next question you have for him then that's good, because it shows he has already learnt to turn pages to get through the story. This is a very important pre-reading skill, and he is showing curiosity about what happens next. Pre-reading skills are things like attentiveness, sitting with the reader, responding.

It sounds like you have chosen age-appropriate books, and the best way to make reading fun is with those buttons and stickers. Wait until he's closer to age 4 to be interested in long stories, and in the meantime, start to see that his interactions with the books are all positive signs. Keep up the good work of having fun with books.

question 4

I'd like some help with reading for 6-year-olds where the children can't sit still and focus on the book. I help with extra one-on-one reading and a number of the children stand up/sit down/move around the whole time. They are often the children who are good at asking or predicting what is happening next in the story, but not so interested in actually reading the word on the page. Is there a way to help those who have difficulty sitting still?

Sarah

answer

Many children need to keep moving to keep their brains engaged, and often a lot of effort goes into keeping still and sitting up straight, effort that could otherwise go into reading; so I suggest giving them something to do while they are reading with you. This is called kinesthetic learning. Check with the class teacher first if she is happy for you to try these ideas.

Before you start, pick a sentence from the book and write each word on a separate piece of paper. Make it quite big, and set it out (preferably on the floor as it changes the child's physical position), then ask the child to read the sentence. Next, mix the words up and say, "Let's work together and see if we can put the sentence back together." This is called 'Make and Break' and many junior school teachers use this technique.

Secondly, you could use the Lettermat (see my Reading article in our last issue for more details) – make one out of plastic or even cardboard. Take note of the family of words that are causing the children difficulty. Stepping out those words on the Lettermat does more than just spelling; it engages them in a positive way, and now they are moving and learning at the same time.

Please remember this is my opinion, so if you have any concerns, do seek out someone to consult.

* Mary is a former Acting Principal, who specialised in teaching children with learning and behavioural difficulties. Today, she trains teachers in Jolly Phonics, and she works individually with children who have anxiety about learning, using her NLP training. For more information, go to www.breakfreephonics.co.nz