Lay the Groundwork for Reading, with Concepts About Print

by Lawren Allphin

Want to start teaching your child to read, but don’t know where to start? Begin at the beginning, with something teachers call "concepts about print". If you can get your kindergartner or soon-to-be-kindergartener comfortable with this ever-important skill set, she’ll be ready to roll when reading begins in earnest.

Concepts about print probably sounds pretty dry. And it probably sounds pretty vague, too. True enough, because these aren’t reading essentials that are easy to explain, like word families or phonics. In fact, they’re things that are so automatic for adult readers that we don’t even think about them—things like which way words flow on a page, or the fact that reading happens from left to right. But as obvious as they may be to grownups, according to Emily Rogers, Associate Professor at Ohio State University, an awareness of these concepts “is not information we’re born with. We have to learn them.” We have to discover “how print operates,” Rogers says.

So grab your child’s favorite book for reference, and get ready to tackle this important skill set. Not sure where to begin? Here are the concepts, or building blocks, of print that beginning readers need to know in order to make the jump to reading:

1. **Title Location**: Whether they can read it or not, beginning readers should know where to find the title of a book. Instead of just reading the title, say, “The title of this book is…” and point to it as you read it. After you model where to find the title a few times, your budding reader will go straight to it when asked to find it.

2. **Author and Illustrator**: Talk to your child about the jobs of both an author and an illustrator. Your definitions can be simple: An author writes the words in a story and an illustrator draws the pictures. Model where to find each name on the cover of a book, and offer your child praise if she can point to each.

3. **Directionality**: This is a big one! When you hand your child a book, does he know that the spine should be on the left? Does he know to begin reading at the top left, and continue to the right and downward? These are concepts of directionality. Children that are ready to read pick up directionality by watching you read. If you point to the words as you read aloud, your child’s concept of directionality will be reinforced each time you read together.

4. **Letter vs. Word, Word vs. Sentence**: It’s important for young readers to learn how we organize letters into words and words into sentences. The best way to teach your child about these concepts is something we teachers call “framing”. Start by asking your child to frame a
letter by placing her pointer fingers on either side of that letter. Do the same for words and sentences. Practicing this concept of print will help her isolate the different elements of a story, and improve her grasp of the other concepts of print.

5. **Return Sweep:** When reading multiple lines of text, children need to know where to continue reading once they finish the first line. Sweeping back to the left on the next line of text is called the *return sweep*. Like teaching directionality, modeling by using your finger to point to the words as you read to your child is the best way to teach this skill.

6. **Spoken Word to Written Word Matching:** Read a simple line of text to your child. Then ask if he can read it back to you and point to each word as he says it. For beginning readers, it's often a difficult task to match spoken words to written words. A great way to work on this skill, which is sometimes referred to as one-to-one matching, one-to-one correspondence, or tracking, is to ask your child to echo each line that you read. When you are the reader, you’ll point to each word. When your child is the reader, ask *him* to point to each word.

7. **Punctuation Has Meaning:** While kindergarteners won’t be expected to know the uses of all punctuation, simple punctuation such as periods, commas, question marks and exclamation points are important for understanding the nuances of text. This will be reinforced and solidified when your child begins using simple punctuation in her own writing. For now, explain to your child what each punctuation mark means, and point them out when they show up in the text that you are reading together. Using lots of expression in your voice when you read can also help your child understand the meanings of certain punctuation marks.

8. **First Letter/Last Letter, First Word/Last Word:** Ordinal numbers are a kindergarten math concept that will come up once the year is in full swing. But knowing *first* and *last* are valuable concepts when learning to read. Use the framing activity discussed in the *Letter vs. Word, Word vs. Sentence* section to practice finding first and last letters in words, and first and last words in sentences.

Since comfort with the concepts of print is one of the first hurdles in your child’s reading career, it’s important to tackle these skills early. Knowing these concepts can be a predictor of reading success. "Research does show that print awareness is connected to reading achievement," Rogers says. "Children who figure out how print operates are able to read more than children who are still sorting out directionality."

How to do it? Well for one, by modeling. That means one-on-one reading time with your kindergartener, with lots of showing and telling. According to Rogers, "The main thing is that parents not just read to their children but interact with them while they are reading. Give support when needed and just be aware that children need to learn how print operates."

Another great way to sharpen your child’s awareness of print concepts? Pick up a pencil! "Writing is a very powerful way to learn these concepts, because writing makes the concepts more concrete. Having the child draw a picture and then either dictating a story to the parent who writes it, or getting help from the parent to write the message— all of this is very helpful," Rogers says, even if the only thing the child can contribute is one letter.

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reading success. "Research does show that print awareness is connected to reading achievement. Children who figure out how print operates are able to read more than children who are still sorting out directionality," she says. Your child’s kindergarten teacher is certain to re-teach concepts about print, but giving your child a head start will increase her confidence as a reader.

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