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Critical Moments in the Life of a Parent

By John Wright
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Every parent faces critical moments. These moments call for a commitment, a strengthened resolve to hang in there, to be tough, to continue on in the so-called worthwhile roles of mother and father. One such moment is bath time. It’s not easy to remain calm and cool, let alone dry, while trying to bathe four children. Each child wants to wash his or her own hair. After failing to divert their attention from the shampoo bottle, I pour a little soapy dab into the palm of each outstretched hand: the two-year-old’s, the twin four-year-old’s, and the six-year-old’s. Washcloths are made ready to rinse any straying bubbles that might find their way into the eyes of these children. Another critical moment is when a two year-old begins to feed herself or to drink from a cup, or when a five-year-old rides solo down the street on a two-wheeler, scraped knees and all, insisting that the third time will be the charm.

My wife and I are not experiencing another critical moment. This fall our oldest child began kindergarten. The Monday before school started, my wife and I, along with our apprehensive son Jonathan, attended an open house at the elementary school. We walked through the hallways, drank from the short drinking fountains, and found our son’s name on the brightly colored bulletin board and on his desk. He’s the only Jonathan in the class. (I’m glad; I didn’t enjoy being one of three Johns in my kindergarten class.) We also met Miss Sampson, our son’s teacher.

Each event such as this one represents a child’s attempt to gain independence, an attempt to learn about himself or herself as a person. Each of these events also represents a parent’s attempt to recognize and encourage the child’s autonomy: this in turn develops the adult’s own self-awareness.

To explore this idea further, I will return to the current critical moment in my life, the kindergarten orientation. As I mentioned, we met with Miss Sampson. She was able to share with us some information that allowed us to allay some of Jonathan’s fears. During our orientation we were given a packet of materials that included Miss Sampson’s "Disclosure Document." In this document, Miss Sampson outlined her expectations. I read with interest the
following: "I also request that parents read with their child for an hour and thirty minutes each week. . . . I cannot stress how important it is for a child to be reading every day" (2).

Reading Together

I’m pleased that Miss Sampson encourages parents to participate in their children’s learning. However, I am also finding it hard to accept that someone else is concerned with his education and growth. For almost six years, my wife and I have been our son’s main teachers. Now we’re giving some of that responsibility to someone else. It truly is a difficult transition.

During the past week I’ve frequently thought about Miss Sampson’s request. We’ve been reading to our children since they were born, but sending our son to school has caused me to evaluate myself as a father and to ask a few questions: "Why do I read to my children?" "Why should I read to my children?" "How will my children benefit from my reading to them?" "How will I benefit from the experience?" The first question is easy to answer: I love to read. I find it thoroughly enjoyable, and I want to share my enjoyment with my children. However, I’m not always motivated to read to my children, especially when it’s late, or when I feel I have something more important to do. Because of this I’ve turned to some scholarly literature to help me explore the remaining three questions.

The Research

A growing body of research reports that although some parents are reluctant to read to their children, this activity is critical because it aids in the development of children’s language and literacy. David Doake, in "Learning to Read: It Starts in the Home," explores briefly the reasons why parents are reluctant to teach their children to read: according to Doake, the chief reason is that parents feel inadequate. They don’t perceive themselves as having the necessary tools to teach reading. In fact, Doake suggests that some teachers even encourage this perception in order to keep the learning-to-read program firmly in their hands. He believes this is wrong. Instead, he encourages parents (and teachers) to "view learning to read [like oral language development] as an outcome of the child’s natural experiences . . . in the home, which the school then extends and develops" (2). Using a case study, Doake also illustrates that children typically exhibit an inner drive to become readers before they reach the age of one. Exposing children to written language fosters their ability to read, just as exposing them to oral language fosters their ability to speak. The parents’ roles as readers becomes critical, because for Doake, reading is viewed as implicit language learning and not just the acquisition of skills.
In "Let's Read Another One," Diane Chapman discusses the preschooler's emergent literacy and the importance of parents in facilitating the child's growth toward literacy. She suggests that parents naturally relate to the child according to the child's level of language development. She explains that during book reading, children grow towards literacy because parents (1) relate events in books to the child's life, (2) use books to expand the child's world, (3) provide the child with information about books and about reading, (4) help the child get meaning from pictures, (5) help the child get meaning from text, and (6) encourage the child to behave like a reader (10-25).

In the article, "Family Influences on Language and Cognitive Development," Gene Brody and Zolinda Stoneman echo the ideas of Doake and Chapman and provide a thorough review of the scholarly literature on the influence of the home. They say that the ability of children to receive and process verbal information and to express their thoughts effectively underlies most elementary school curriculums. These important language skills are not learned primarily in schools. The prime teacher of this sophisticated set of rule-based information is the family. Although some parental language training may be deliberate, most occurs in spontaneous interactions that involve neither systematic planning nor conscious effort. Parents do not sit down with their children for set periods of time each day and "teach" them the rules and vocabulary of their native language. Instead children must derive these rules from their ongoing interactions with family members. (323)

Besides providing a general overview of the scholarly literature, Brody and Stoneman also examine the roles of mother, father, and siblings on the language and cognitive development of children. Of course, I'm particularly interested in the role of fathers in the development of children. Brody and Stoneman admit that "the role of fathers in children's development of language has received much less study than that of mothers" (329). A careful reading of the literature does show that "although fathers spend significantly less time talking to their children than do mothers, they are quite aware of their children's level of language development" (332).

In examining the father's influence on the cognitive development of his children, Brody and Stoneman cite research in which nurturing by the father is found to facilitate a son's identification with his father, as well as to improve intellectual ability in sons when they are young. However, the research can find no significant correspondence between a father's nurturing and the cognitive development of daughters (340). The article also indicates that a significant
factor in a child's cognitive development is the presence or absence of a father. The presence of a father positively influences a child's cognitive development, but more significant are the negative effects when the father is absent. Brody and Stoneman conclude by restating that "most of what children abstract from the family environment occurs during the flow of natural exchanges. In other words, families rarely set a child down with the intention of teaching a specific skill" (352).

By reviewing the scholarly literature, I gained a greater appreciation for why I should read to my children. I also began to understand the importance of my role as a parent, specifically as a father, in encouraging the language and cognitive development of my children. However, what does the scholarly literature mean to me personally? I will explore first what the readings mean to me, and then reflect on the benefits that we (my children and I) gain through reading.

The Natural Environment

Much of the literature indicates that children develop language and cognitive skills by interacting in an unrehearsed environment. What is this "natural" environment? What is it about a family that facilitates a child's language and conceptual development? It's the normal activities of a family. My wife and I have found that to be effective parents we have had to establish a daily routine. An important part of that routine is the bedtime story. Like many families, reading stories is part of our nightly ritual. After brushing teeth and so forth, the stories begin. I usually take two children and my wife takes two children; whoever is laziest reads to the two upstairs, while the most energetic walks downstairs to read to the others. Our collection of children's literature can best be described as eclectic and outdated. I am not a children's literature expert. In fact, I can only think of a few children's books that might be considered classics. Our children occasionally receive packages from various book clubs; these packages usually contain at least one free book. We keep the free book and send the others back! My wife and I also have books that we received when we were children. This makes up the collection from which we read to our children.

Our reading time together tends to be similar to the reading experience outlined in Diane Chapman's article, "Let's Read Another One," mentioned earlier. In particular, when we read we try to help our children learn how a book works and understand both pictures and text. Chapman suggests that one way parents naturally do this is by reading a story over and over again until the child knows it. The child learns that he or she can expect certain things: that certain events follow each other, that the end cannot come before the beginning,
and so forth. Then when the reader changed certain words or the sequence of events, the child recognizes the change; this promotes the child’s comprehension and book literacy. I do this with my children. One of the books that I read quite frequently is Baby Goofy Catches a Fish. I’ve read it so many times that I have it memorized. "It is a bright sunny day. The Disney babies go out to play. Baby Donald swings a bat. Baby Daisy pats a cat." The book shows each of the Disney babies participating in a different activity, and of course it all rhymes. My children are familiar with the story, so they expect certain things. For example, they know that Donald swings a bat and that Daisy pats a cat. They even learn that certain blocks of text are associated with certain pictures and pages. I find it interesting to change the words so that Donald swings a tennis racket or Daisy pats a monkey. My kids instantly voice their objection, giggling the whole time because they like it when Daddy "reads funny words." According to Chapman, this type of story variation occurs naturally; I’ve found this to be true. I change the words or sequence of events in a familiar story not to increase the literacy level of my children, but simply to keep from being bored with the same story. The result, however, is that my children are beginning to understand how books work. They are becoming literate. They are learning to read.

In one of my favorite Calvin and Hobbes cartoons, the first frame shows Calvin’s father kneeling on the floor trying to select a book from Calvin’s bookshelf. He says, "What story would you like tonight? We can read anything except . . ." To which the anxiously awaiting Calvin yells, "'Hamster Huey and the Gooey Kablooie'!" The second frame shows Calvin’s father with his hands on his forehead and a look anguish on his face. He says, "No! No Hamster Huey tonight! We’ve read that book a million times!" Calvin, in an act of independence, shouts, "I want Hamster Huey!" The third frame shows the father trying to reason with Calvin: "Look, you know how the story goes! You’ve memorized the whole thing! It’s the same story every day!" But Calvin again defiantly shouts, "I want Hamster Huey." The last frame shows Calvin in bed with his stuffed tiger Hobbes, the covers clutched tightly under their chins and their eyes wide. Calvin comments, "Wow, the story was different that time!" Hobbes replies, "Do you think the townsfolk will ever find Hamster Huey’s head?"

In the cartoon, Calvin’s father changes the ending of the story, and this affects Calvin’s perceptions. Calvin begins to realize how a book works. He, too, is learning how the reading process works.

Benefits for the Children
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Is learning to read the only thing that children gain when their parents read to them? Helping my children learn to read is not the primary advantage of our book sharing. More important is the fact that through reading, my children are developing a sense of self. They are learning to become independent. They also learn that I value them as people and that I enjoy spending time with them.

Chapman asserts that, "in order to begin the development of literacy during the preschool years children need experiences with print and the guidance of adults who can give them access to the meaning that the print represents" (12). As I discuss the meaning of both text and pictures with my children, I believe I am helping them grow and expand. I view the time I spend reading with my children as invaluable. Reading allows me to be intimately involved in their lives, and to do so in a nonthreatening way. Books become a vehicle through which we discuss things that help the child become independent.

Benefits for the Parent

One of the more obvious benefits gained from reading with my children is that we get to snuggle up and enjoy sharing time with each other. Another benefit is watching them discover things that are important. It is especially enjoyable when they discover things that are also important to me. For example, my second child, Emilie, has fallen in love with a set of books that I enjoy. She loves to carry them around.

One night about 10:30 p.m. I heard a noise coming from her room. I immediately assumed that she was playing. I went to her room, expecting to catch her right in the middle of a somersault. However, when I opened the door, I was amazed at how normal and quiet everything appeared. Then I saw them: stacked neatly on Emilie’s bed were several volumes from this set of books. As I walked over to her bed to retrieve them, I noticed Emilie’s fingers wrapped tightly around the edge of the blankets, which she had pulled up over her head. I lowered the covers, only to find a big grin on her face. "What are you doing, Emilie?" I asked. She replied, "I just want to look at your books." Because we read together, she has developed a love for books that I couldn’t have instilled in her simply by telling her that I like to read.

Although these are wonderful benefits, I find that the greatest benefit of reading to my children is that I am learning about myself. As I mentioned, reading books with them gives me the opportunity to discuss things in a nonthreatening way. I can encourage and assist them in their search for autonomy; this in turn helps me learn about myself. I didn’t really consider this before, but I find that right now, as I struggle with the critical moments in my life and in the lives of my children, it is becoming increasingly important. As
I learn to encourage my children’s independence, I am learning how much I depend on them—I need them as much as they need me.

Conclusion

Reading to our children is an important aspect of our daily life—our routine. The language development and cognitive development of our children are natural consequences of the nurturing atmosphere of our home.

I am pleased that my wife and I met Jonathan’s teacher. I am especially thrilled that Miss Sampson is encouraging us to read to our son every day. My family’s ability to share critical moments has helped me to understand what John Snarey suggests in How Fathers Care for the Next Generation: "The responsive participation of fathers in their children’s lives, both when they were young and when they were adolescents, not only had a significant impact on these children’s lives, but also was of significant influence on the fathers" (xii). Reading to my children provides me with just such an opportunity to get to know myself as I get to know them.


