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Mrs. Greenwald follows her husband's advice. She first read to their son Evan at five months.

Start Reading to Your Child—Now!

Don't wait till Baby utters his first words—you and he will be

missing a key time in learning and enjoyment

By **HOWARD M. GREENWALD**

IN MARSHALLTOWN, Iowa, two young mothers were enjoying a neighborly chat when the sound of a passing train drew their two-year-old boys to the window.

Little Greg pointed and said: "Choo-choo." David said: "Look at the locomotive, Mommy."

In New Shrewsbury, N. J., accountant Bill Grossman proudly showed his guests the accomplishment of his 17-month-old daughter. He flashed a set of alphabet cards and called off the letters one by one. With only one error, Frannie named the object pictured on each card.

David and Frannie have this in common: they have been read to regularly by their parents since they were nine months old. Child-development authorities believe their early facility with words may have been a direct result of this reading. Research indicates that exposing children to pictures and words on a systematic basis, starting long before they seem able to understand or are ready to talk, can have a dramatic impact on their speech development.

This advice comes from Dr. Orvis Irwin, research professor at Wichita's Institute of Logopedics and formerly with the University of Iowa child-welfare research station. "Don't wait until your child utters his first words or sentences before you begin reading," he says. "As early as the sixth or seventh month, start showing him pictures of things he sees around him. Recite rhymes. Get illustrated storybooks and pictorial magazines splashed with color. Mail-order catalogs are excellent; they contain pictures or drawings of almost every article used in our civilization. But whatever materials you choose to use, make an early start. Then stick to it."

Dr. Irwin has measured the effects of systematic reading to infants. He selected two groups of 13-month-old babies from nonprofessional families. The mothers of 24 infants, the experimental group, were instructed to spend 15 to 20 minutes each day reading stories and describing pictures from children's books which Dr. Irwin supplied. The second group of infants was not read to systematically. The result: several months after the program started and for a year thereafter until it ended, the speaking ability of those children who had been read to regularly consistently exceeded that of the second group.

"We often consider," says Dr. Dorothea McCarthy, professor of psychology at Fordham University, "that children who talk and read very early are specially gifted. But many other children may have similar abilities which go undeveloped because no one bothers to present a stimulating environment soon enough. Reading to children in the

very early months and years of their lives is an important part of that environment."

Even if exposure to words and pictures does speed an infant's speech development, why push him? What's the rush? some parents ask. Child-development authorities do not think this constitutes "pushing." They say that bright pictures and simple words are fun for children, not work; that the sooner a child can understand and communicate with the world around him, the greater will be his capacity to enjoy it and learn from it; that children will be better able to get across their needs to their elders.

Parents may also ask what reading can do that talking cannot. Spontaneous conversation lacks visual aids. It is subject to a mother's moods, her work schedule, the demands of other children; a father's time with his youngsters generally is limited.

What time of day to read to a child and for how long are matters of choice. Some parents may set aside a few minutes early in the morning, before the entire family awakens. Others will convert a morning or afternoon play period into reading time. Most parents, however, will find it convenient to read to their children at bedtime.

THE LENGTH of each session will vary widely with a child's attention span. Quit when he gets restless or stops looking. If you don't, he may soon consider the whole business a chore. How you read also matters.

"If you mumble the words or speak shrilly," says C. K. Thomas, speech professor at the University of Florida, "your child may imitate that when he begins to talk. If you read pleasantly, distinctly, and are relaxed, his voice will pattern itself after yours."

A final suggestion from the experts: don't arbitrarily reject reading material because it seems "too advanced." Researchers have found that when they returned to "advanced" books which children had been exposed to before they were verbal, the children recognized and were able to identify material they had not seen or heard since.

When you begin reading to your infant, don't expect an immediate reaction. There may be none. But very soon—much sooner than you expect—you will know that your time has been well-invested. Your child's hands and feet will move excitedly. He will mimic a facial expression of yours or of a storybook character. Some pictures and word rhythms will provoke delight, others puzzled frowns.

Before you know it, your child will point excitedly to the picture of a saucy little terrier, you will be saying delightedly—"Doggie, bow-wow," and the wonderful process of learning will be under way.