Editorial

What’s the rush?

Kevin Wheldall

Parents of young children, perhaps especially first-time parents, can sometimes become overly concerned with their children’s developmental milestones and general progress. Well-meaning relatives and friends can add to parental concerns by asking, “Is he walking yet?”, “Does she sleep through the night?”, and so on. More experienced parents and grandparents are generally more relaxed about when baby begins to crawl or utters their first discernible words. And for most children it is true that they will generally get there in their own good time. (This is not to say, of course, that parents should not be vigilant if key developmental milestones are not reached within reasonable timeframes.) But, in general, there really is no need to rush these things.

And so it is, later on in the child’s life, with learning to read. We all want children to be reading well after their first few years in school but is there really any need for parents to attempt to teach their children to read before they start school? What’s the rush?

I guess I can understand the argument mounted by some parents, and even reading tutors, that reading is so poorly taught in some of our schools that they simply do not wish to take the risk of their child becoming the victim of inadequate instruction and ending up a low-progress reader or even a non-reader. Others will argue that little Sarah was ‘ready to read’ and so why would we not offer to help her learn?

Clearly, we all want the best for our children but let’s examine the implications of this more closely. Who might these concerned parents typically be? Are they likely to be single parents struggling to make ends meet by working long hours with little time left over for teaching their children? Are they likely to be parents with limited reading skills themselves by virtue of a poor education or being a second language learner? Are they likely, in fact, to be from less advantaged homes generally? No; they are far more likely to be from advantaged middle-class homes with the time and literacy skills available to make teaching their children to read themselves a viable option or have the resources to buy it in.

So what’s wrong with this? Nothing – if you are that child or that parent. But if you are an educator committed to ensuring that all children learn to read you are simply compounding the problem. We already know that children from middle-class families typically have an enormous advantage when starting school by virtue of their greater facility with some of the key building blocks for learning to read. Their oral language skills, their vocabulary, their phonological awareness, and their general knowledge are likely to be far in advance of those of their less socially advantaged peers. The seminal work of Betty Hart and Todd Risley demonstrated this clearly, in terms of the amount and quality of the verbal interactions between parents and pre-school children from different socio-economic backgrounds. One of their most startling findings was that the variety of different words used by the most advantaged children was greater than
that typically used by the parents of the least advantaged children when conversing with them.

The implication of this is that these advantaged children will already have a head start in learning to read anyway. If they have also been taught to read, the gap at school entry will be even greater. I cling to the old-fashioned view that maybe, just maybe, three-year-olds have more important things to do than learning to read; principally the business of enjoying being three. That’s one reason why you won’t find MultiLit programs aimed at teaching your toddler to read. Have fun with phonological, and even phonemic, awareness activities during the preschool years, by all means. We even have a MultiLit program (known as PreLit) for preschool children in their year before commencing school that focuses on these prerequisite skills, especially for those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. But let’s leave learning to read until they start school. What’s the rush?

A similar but different preoccupation with speed may sometimes extend to the initial teaching of reading when children begin school. In England, children start school earlier than in Australia. Some may even be as young as four years old. Nevertheless, some reading pundits advocate phonics ‘fast and first’, rushing through letter-sound correspondences like an express train during the first few terms. At MultiLit, we take a more leisurely approach, travelling at a reasonable pace but enjoying the view.

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