

## **Web-Based Radio Show**

### **Series on Learning Differences, Learning Challenges, and Learning Strengths:**

#### *Specific Academic Skills-Reading and Reading Comprehension*

**Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.**


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Good morning and welcome to our web-based radio show. This is Dr. Greenspan. Today's subject will be to finally to get to the branches and leaves of our learning tree. As you remember, we covered the tree trunk and the root system. Today we are going to actually talk about specific academic skills. Today's show will be a little bit briefer because we had some technical problems, but we'll get started. We won't meet next week but we'll continue this discussion in two weeks.

What we are going to begin with is probably the first thing that children begin with, and that's reading and reading comprehension. The key is to remember that if we have done our homework and have a good tree trunk and we've strengthened all the roots including our language and auditory processing roots and our visual spatial roots, the child is well positioned, now, to learn to read. The actual effort involved in mastering reading will sail smoothly if we have done our homework with the roots and the tree trunk. It's always important to remember whenever you are having a hurdle and the child is having a hard time learning to read or do math or to communicate orally or in writing, go back to your root system and go back to your tree trunk and ask if there's any more fundamental work that you have to do.

But in the approach to helping children with the actual branches and leaves of the tree, and in this case reading, you'll see that we are going to be further strengthening our root system and even our tree trunk as we do this. So everything reinforces everything else. Now the key principles to underline in working on reading and reading comprehension and the other academic and learning skills are:

1. To always use all the senses and the motor system involved in learning, so you are using the whole mental team involved in the child's learning.




2. Also we want to use the highest level of thinking possible so we want this to be “thinking driven” as opposed to “rote memory driven.” So we want it to be thinking and multi-sensory and motor based.

3. Most importantly, we want it to have high affect and a lot of pleasure, in particular be emotionally meaningful to the child. We want to create the learning initially in the things the child is very interested in so we have his full emotional investment with pleasure.

4. Related closely to #3 is, not only do we want to make it meaningful to the child, but we want to create an early sense of mastery and we want to set it up so the child is being successful 70-80% of the time. If we use a curriculum where the child is only successful 30%, they are going to feel discouraged. Children being children tend to work harder when they are mastering and receiving positive feedback. This is just a question of pacing the learning – every child can be paced in such a way so there is a 70-80% success rate, but not if they have to be the same as Sally or Johnny or someone else next to them. So we want to have a sense of mastery.

Let’s look at reading. The first part of reading is being able to figure out what those shapes mean that you are seeing in front of you. You see a word “b-o-y,” what does that mean? Or you see the word “b-e” – what does that mean? The first step in figuring out what these shapes mean is something that Pat Lindamood and others who have pioneered in reading have called, “phonemic awareness.” The ability to discriminate the sounds because you have to be able to match the sound to the shape, so the “b” sound, you see the shape of the “b,” you have to recognize that visual pattern, and you have to then be able to connect it to the “b” sound and the “e” to the “e” sound. So one of the first things we want to do is say, “Can the child understand these different sounds?” Can they, in technical terms, discriminate these different sounds? In other words, can they tell the difference between a “b” and “e” and a “b” and a “d” or a “b” and an “m” – the closer the sounds, obviously, the harder it is to tell the differences.


Now in terms of phonemic awareness and some of the approaches that Pat Lindamood pioneered but others as well, there are many ways to do this. The way I think is best, that builds on the work of Pat and other pioneers, is to see if the child can actually say the sound after they hear you make the sound. So you might go, “Buh buh” and see if the child can actually imitate the sound. Now if the child is having difficulty



with it, let the child see how your mouth is moving. He can even put his fingers in your mouth and then look at his own mouth in a mirror and see how his mouth is moving. Then you can play games, if the child can't make the "buh" versus the "duh" sound, you can have a "buh buh buh" where you are touching your lips and then a "duh duh duh" where your tongue comes to the upper part of your palate and play little games with your "buh's" and "duh's" and then add your "muh's" on.


So the first step is to make sure the child can make all the different sounds that the child is going to need. But we don't have to go through the whole alphabet. We can begin working on some sounds. Here's what I advocate: If we take a few select sounds that are going to be part of words that the child uses everyday that are very meaningful for the child, let's say the child likes to play so we work on "puh" and "luh" and "ay" and "y" – "play" – because that's a word the child is going to be very invested in. We want the child to see how this works so it's not all very abstract to the child. So we might take those four sounds to begin with. Rather than follow the alphabet or follow some pre-described sound sequence, ask yourself what words are fairly simple and easy to learn and which ones will my child that I'm teaching or parenting most likely to be invested in that are part of his everyday life? Maybe "M-O-M" or "D-A-D" or "T-O-Y." We'll work on repeating those sounds. If the child can make the sound easily and discriminate or know the difference between toy – T-O-Y, that's terrific. If the child is having trouble with it, again we will use the mirror, we'll play little games where we'll go over it more times until we think the child kind of has it. If the child is still having difficulty with it, we add on some more elements to it. One of the things we do is we can have the child put his hand in our mouth to see how our mouth works and see how the child's mouth works, how his own mouth works in the mirror, we can do what another colleague does, which is let him hear different people make the sound and see how close he can get to making different sounds for those different visual images.

Also to make this more meaningful to the child, we want him to be able to either see the visual image so when we go "Buh" we want him to see a big "B" and then with your hands, actually make the "B" in the air. As the child is able to, he can do it right on a page or first copy your hand movement in the air. Then the two of you can do it together on a page where he can copy what you are doing. Or if he is gifted enough, he can do it himself. It's also fun to have the child then walk it off on the floor so we can have a big "B," for example, for "boy" on a big piece of paper on the floor and the child can step it off. Then he can step it off like it's a dance, making a "B" without actual



seeing it on the floor. So now the child is doing it with his gross motor movements, doing it with his fine motor, i.e., in the air and on paper, making the sound, and connecting the sound to these motor based and visual images because he is seeing the “B” also as he is doing it so it’s a “buh, buh, buh” with a “B” and the same thing with a “O” and a “Y” until we have “BOY.” The same thing for “PLAY” or “TOY.” Once we master three or four letters, we have a word. What we should do is also, when seeing a word like “boy” or “toy,” he’ll see that certain sounds go together. “B-E” is “be” – it’s not just “B” and “E” – it’s a blend. I favor getting into the blends quickly, not mastering each one separately, but showing how these kind of go together. You kind of say them quickly – “B” “E” “be.” Or eventually, “T” “O” “Y” and you get toy. Then you can actually write out the word “toy” and have a big picture of a toy under it so the child can see the toy – his favorite toy, hopefully, and now he is already reading. So he has three letters and he’s a reader. That will give him a sense of mastery and excitement and pleasure. Then you move on until you have covered all the letters of the alphabet, all the vowels and consonants, and all the different kinds of blends that are pretty frequent. So you start off with picking words that have certain consonants and vowels together, again not going with what is in the dictionary in terms of blends that are most commonly used or even those that are in curriculum, but rather blends that fit in with words that he is going to use everyday at home and that are meaningful to him, and he’s going to want to read about.

So just remember that our principles are: You want to use all the senses in an emotionally meaningful way for the child, have a sense of mastery, and use things that the child is already very familiar with like a toy or play or “go out” so the child gets a sense that they are moving ahead and reading very quickly. In teaching the basics of letter or visual image sound connection, make sure that the child can hear the sound, make the sound (i.e. imitate it), connect it to the visual image, and do something motorwise – writing it in the air or writing it on paper and maybe walking it off, and all three together kind of gives the child the fullest sensory and motor mastery. Now some children will do this relatively easily and not need all of these steps. They may be recognizing words without you knowing you ever taught it to them. They kind of pick it up on their own. Then you can really bypass, in many respects, this first step, unless you find that the child has difficulty with new words and is doing it all by visual memory, in which case you want to go through these steps and make sure the child can also sound out words so they are also doing it with new words. If they have a good ear and they have picked it up on their own or with minimal effort, you can whiz through this first




step of simply being able to do step one of reading which is simply recognizing and saying what the word is that you are reading or saying it to yourself.

Now step 2, which is reading comprehension, or the second part of reading, is the more challenging part because that involves our basic thinking skills and you can't really comprehend what you read beyond the level that you can think. Here, we want to use lots of understanding and we want to promote understanding. Again here too, my colleagues Pat Lindamood and Nancy Bell – especially Nancy Bell - came up with a visualizing verbalizing program which is an excellent foundation for learning to use thinking as a vehicle for reading comprehension. Building on Nancy's work and other people's work and our own model of the stages of thinking that are part of the tree trunk, we've come up with an approach that we think you will find very, very helpful. It involves a number of steps. Once the child is able to read sentences and little paragraphs, help the child in the following way. There will be a number of steps to this and they are going to parallel our levels of thinking we talked about in the tree trunk, so these will be pretty much very, very similar.

The first step is to focus on what the image is that is in the passage and help the child literally describe what is in the passage using all of their senses, not just vision, but also movement, touch, and smell. In other words, make it a multi-sensory idea. So if the boy is walking in the flowerbed and looking at the flowers, describe what is happening in there. What is the boy doing? Even though it doesn't say what he smells, what do you think he is smelling? What color are the flowers? What shapes are they? Get as much detail as possible about what is happening. In other words, describe it in as much detail as you can imagine. Or if it is a sentence that talks about the boy having a new bicycle and he is very excited, describe what is happening and what it looks like and even though it doesn't say what color it is, what color would you make it? If it's new, what is the smell of it? What do you think a boy would like to do with that bicycle? So, you are really describing what the experience of the objects or the characters in the passage are having. If it's just a scene like "the tree is blowing in the wind" – what does that look like? What is happening? What does that tree look like? What color is it? Do you think it has leaves or not? Just ask any questions that help the child give more detail to the passage.

So the first step is describing basically what our first stage is in our functional thinking capacities and our tree trunk, which is an awareness of the world. So the world is the passage and just as the child looks at mommy's face and sees big eyes and a nice,



shiny mouth, and a big smile, and hears nice sounds, here too we want to see what the child is seeing in the passage, what is the passage conveying in terms of smell, and also is there a dialogue in the passage – what is being said? Is the boy talking to his daddy and saying, “Daddy I want a new bicycle.” What is the boy saying to his daddy – what does he want?

So the adult reads the passage as the child does, and then asks the child to describe it, then helps with the questions about all the things the child can see, the things the child can guess from the fact that there are flowers or a bicycle but they aren’t stated, what is being said, if there are smells or movement, what is happening – in other words, describe it as richly and fully as possible.


Then the second step focuses, as you remember, on relationships, on forming relationships. So, what are the relationships in the passage? Who is relating to whom? Is it two people – the boy is asking his daddy for a bicycle? Or the boy is giving his mommy a hug? So what is going on in terms of a relationship, or is it to objects? The boy is opening a shiny new present.

Then we get to the third step. What kind of purposeful actions and emotional interactions are occurring in the passage? How does the boy feel about his new bicycle? What is he doing with it? What is he doing with the flowers? What is he doing with his daddy? What is happening? What is the purpose and intent? Is there any exchange of basic feelings?

Then the fourth step involves problem solving – shared problem solving. Is the boy solving any problems doing anything, is he opening up a package to get his new present? Is he looking and exploring how his new bike works? It may just be a tree blowing in the wind. There may not be any problems to be solved.

Then the fifth step is what is happening in terms of creative imagination and ideas? Here, we want to see if the child can embellish the passage with some creativity. If you were going to extend this, what would happen next? If you were writing this passage about a bicycle, would you put anything else in it? In other words, can the child use his imagination or use some creativity to add to what he has already described?

Then the next step is connecting ideas together and being logical; making sense. This is where the child explains like, “I want to go outside because it will make me happy.” So here we get to a new level of describing the feelings in the passage. Is




anything causing the child to feel a certain way, or the daddy to feel a certain way, or if a tree had feelings, how would the tree feel when the wind blows? “Well, it’s cold and snowy so the tree is probably feeling cold so he’s probably not feeling very good.” So here we approach feelings, again, from the point of view of one thing causing another. Or, are there other things causing things in the passage? Is the boy happy because he has a bicycle? So, are there any causal relationships implied in the passage? In other words, is one thing affecting another or causing another?

Then we get to multi-causal thinking. Is it more complicated? Are there multiple things, like the wind and the rain is making the tree wither at the vine, so there are lots of things happening to that poor, little tree.

Then we get to gray area thinking – shades of gray. The passage may be complicated with two characters having a discussion, or two friends who disagree with each other. We want to look at gray area thinking and comparative thinking. How does the boy’s feelings compare to the daddy’s feelings? What is he thinking and what is the daddy thinking? How angry are they at each other or how happy are they with each other? So we get to gray area thinking.

Then finally, we get to reflective thinking. Remember, this is where you can think off an internal standard, where you can say, “I’m happier than I should be” or “I’m angrier than I should be.” Here, we get the child’s opinion. This we can’t do with the very young child just beginning to read, but a 9, 10, or 11 or 12 year old, you could ask, “What do you think about that passage?” or “What do you think about that author?” “Would you do it differently?” “How does he compare with other people you have read?” In other words, what is your opinion about it? Here we want the child to be reflective and actually be somewhat critical and analytical, comparing it with other passages, other authors, with experiences in the passage, compared to their own experiences. We want the child to project themselves into the story. Well, if you were a tree blowing in the wind on a cold day, how would you feel? Does the author describe how you would feel? Would you describe it differently?

So we can think of many examples and we can each add in many more examples of each of these. Basically, we walk through our different levels of the tree trunk, strengthening them as we are comprehending the passage, and using them to bring the passage alive and make it part of our personal experience, to make it as multi-sensory, emotionally rich, and then look at the relationships and any sort of purposeful actions,



problem solving, we create beyond the passage, we look for causal connections, causal events happening in the passage, and then we look at the high level thinking that we can apply to that passage.

So that is our lessons for reading comprehension, and if we do that with the child around their reading, every child will be a good comprehender and will be a better thinker. So we are strengthening comprehension and thinking at the same time.

That's all we are going to have time for today. Next time, which will be in two weeks, we'll go into math and math reasoning, and the best ways to strengthen those while we are strengthening the fundamentals of the tree trunk and the root system.

Thank you very much.