



**BabyRead Columns
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**2022 Journal Column
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A BabyRead family: Adai and Atalia

Atalia is a “graduate” at 4 years old! Before she was 1 year old, she and her mom, Adai, started reading with Dr. Beatriz Gil-Stewart. Adai tells us that BabyRead has had a huge impact on their entire family of seven — five children plus mom and dad! Having learned about BabyRead at a James M. Brown Elementary event, they decided to join to help Atalia develop her English-speaking skills. This goal has been met with great success, plus she is very comfortable interacting with others. Adai has also noticed that her older children have been helped with communication, reading and social skills. When they began BabyRead, Adai’s English was very limited. Now she is much more comfortable conversing in English.

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GARCIA

Occasionally, Atalia’s siblings joined the reading sessions and enjoyed them so much that Adai and Beatriz arranged to meet after school so all could be involved. During the monthly sessions at the Walhalla library, Beatriz and Adai read individually with each child, as well as reading to them as a group. The children were very excited to receive a new book whenever they met and to add it to their little home library. So many lessons were learned during these sessions, e.g., reading in both English and Spanish, being patient while waiting for one’s turn and enjoying reading together as a family. Adai thinks their improved grades are due in large part to participating in BabyRead and that Atalia has entered school better prepared than her brothers and sisters did.

Beatriz introduced Adai and her children to the library, helping them to get a library card. This opened a whole new world of reading possibilities for them. During the time our public libraries were closed because of the pandemic, Beatriz delivered books to their home, and both Adai and the older siblings read to the younger ones.

BabyRead has awakened an interest in reading in each child. Their vocabulary and reading skills have improved. Atalia’s pediatrician commented on how smart she is and how well she communicates for her age. Adai’s interaction with Beatriz has resulted in better communication skills for her, too, and greater self-confidence.

Adai told Beatriz that she is so grateful to BabyRead for the experience and for the books, and to Beatriz personally for taking the extra time and challenge of including the other four children in the reading sessions. Adai sums up their BabyRead membership as “a very lovely experience.”

BABYREAD’S MISSION is to help children break out of poverty and succeed in school and life by encouraging moms/caregivers to read daily to their children from birth. Volunteers either read twice monthly in person in town libraries or, because of COVID, drop off books and instructional magazines each month and phone/text the mom/caregiver regularly. Donate on our website and use smile.amazon.com. The first time, put in BabyRead as your charity. For more information, contact our president, Caren von Hippel, Ph.D., at babyread@charter.net, (864) 643-8083 or babyread.org.

Adults' brains: 80% developed by age 3

“At birth, the average baby’s brain is about a quarter of the size of the average adult’s brain. Incredibly, it doubles in size in the first year. It keeps growing to about 80 percent of adult size by age 3 and 90 percent — nearly full grown — by age 5.

“The brain is the command center of the human body. A newborn baby



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has all the brain cells (neurons) they’ll have for the rest of their life, but it’s the connections between these cells that really make the brain work. Brain connections enable us to move, think, communicate and do just about everything. The early childhood years are crucial for making these connections.

At least 1 million new neural connections (synapses) are made every second, more than any other time in life.” (firstthingsfirst.org)

“Eighty percent of their brain’s physical development happens during their first 3 years. As their brain gets bigger, it also forms the connections it needs to think, learn and process information. These connections, called synapses, form at a super-fast rate, about 700 per second in the first few years.” (The Harvard Center for the Developing Child).

“Reading aloud to babies matters because children’s early years are a time of such intense formation. The

young brain is plastic, adaptable and growing like mad. In the first 12 months, a baby’s brain doubles in size. By a child’s third birthday, his brain has completed 80 percent of all growth it will have. The sensitive period when synapses are forming for language and many other higher cognitive functions peaks when a child is two. By the end of the first five years, a child has passed through all the most rapid stages of development involving language, emotional control, vision, hearing and habitual ways of responding. Early experiences and the firing and wiring of neurons create the architecture of a small child’s mind, laying the pathways for future thought and reasoning.” (The Enchanted Hour: Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction)

“The evidence shows that the difference between [children] who get bedtime stories and those that don’t, the difference in their life chances, is bigger than the difference between those who get elite private schooling and those that don’t.” (The Enchanted Hour)

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Secrets to a smarter baby: School readiness can start now

All parents want happy, healthy babies, and they want them to be smart. “Growing research in early brain development shows that there are some basic things that you can do right now to start raising a child who is curious



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about the world and ready to learn. These early education activities we are talking about are simple — and screen free.”

Use the “5Rs of Early Education” in your daily activities right from birth:

1. READ together as a daily, fun, family activity. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends this to build language, literacy and social-emo-

tional skills that last a lifetime. It is never too young to start reading with your baby and the sooner the better. Research shows that “reading to your child boosts activity in parts of the brain that form the building blocks of language, literacy skills and imagination.”

This is the mission of BabyRead, to inform and encourage moms and other caregivers to read aloud with their babies right from the get-go — when they are born. Your child understands much more than you think — he is a sponge for the multi-media show life presents in the world around them.

2. RHYME, play, talk, sing and cuddle together often throughout the day. “The AAP recommends parents use play to help meet their child’s health and developmental milestones.” Need ideas? Go to the AAP website or many others — read past BabyRead Journal columns on Play found on our website, babyread.org, or visit healthychildren.org, brightly.com or just type “play for babies” in your browser.

Talk with your child about what she sees in the world around them as you are changing diapers, making dinner, going to the supermarket or the doctor’s office. Talk about simple things — the color of the diapers, what you are making for dinner or the fruits, vegetables, meat and paper goods you see at the supermarket. Try to watch for what your baby or toddler seems interested in. Try to respond to whatever sounds or movements your child makes — cooing, crying, pointing to objects before your child has the words, dancing and so on. Sing songs you know and make songs up — babies and toddlers love singing and music. (All quotes from healthychildren.org, aap.org. 2021)

More secrets for a smarter baby will continue next month.

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Founder and president of BabyRead wins Humanitarian of the Year Award

SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

BabyRead founder and president Caren von Hippel has been awarded Humanitarian of the Year for 2022 by the South Carolina Head Start Association. At a recent luncheon, a variety of awards were



Von Hippel

presented to people who have made major contributions to Head Start over the years. Head Start is a free, comprehensive child development program for low-income families available all over the United States. In addition to providing daycare, it provides health screening and nutritious meals. It connects families with medical, dental and mental health services to ensure children are receiving the care and attention they need. Children receive support for building resiliency to cope with the possible adverse effects of trauma. This allows many low-income moms to work during the day. Head Start programs deliver services to more than a million children each year through 1,600 agencies in local communities. Caren began her association with Head Start in the 1970s, working with a Head Start program in the South Bronx in New York.

Von Hippel founded BabyRead, a 501(c)(3) all-volunteer nonprofit, to address the need to bring the joy of reading to lower-income families with preschool-age children in Oconee County. Nearly 70 percent of preschoolers in the county go to kindergarten unprepared. Fifty-seven percent live at or below the poverty line. These families often do not un-

derstand the importance of reading to their little ones from birth. Those who do often do not have sufficient funds to buy children's books.

Head Start and BabyRead share the same goal — to provide experiences to children from birth to kindergarten that will enable them to succeed in school and in life. Because of this shared vision, von Hippel expanded BabyRead's mission from working with individual families to include reading to children at the local Head Start in 2016 and providing them with free books at Christmas and in early June to take home for the summer.

Prior to the pandemic, BabyRead volunteers were reading to and playing with the infants and toddlers at the Seneca Head Start facility. During the lockdown, the gift of books was expanded. BabyRead gave the Early Head Start children free books monthly to take home. Additionally, every Head Start and Early Head Start child started receiving "BabyBug" and "Highlights High Five" to take home. This continues. The Head Start families are extremely grateful. Now that Americans are learning to live with COVID, von Hippel and other BabyRead volunteers plan to resume their visits to Head Start weekly to read and play

with the babies and young children.

BabyRead, a local organization devoted to the low-income families of Oconee County, started in 2014 with only eight volunteers. Today, there are more than 60 volunteers serving more than 30 families, emphasizing the need to read to infants from birth. Families often stay in BabyRead for one to four years. Family readers meet with parents or other caregivers and their young children twice a month to read with them, sing songs, do finger plays and recite nursery rhymes. At the end of each meeting, the child receives an age-appropriate book to add to their own library. Parents develop a sense of comfort and familiarity with books that many do not have prior to participating in BabyRead.

The relationship that develops between the assigned BabyRead family reader and the parent/caregiver as they read together with the baby or toddler in one-to-one sessions in public places such as town or school libraries is the "secret sauce" of why BabyRead is so effective.

To learn more about BabyRead, contact von Hippel at (864) 643-8083 or babyread@charter.net or visit babyread.org. To find out more about Head Start in downtown Seneca, call (864) 882-8700.

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Part II: 5 secrets to a smarter baby

A few months ago, we discussed the first two secrets:

1. **READ** together as a daily, fun family activity. The American Association of Pediatrics (AAP) “recommends this to build language, literacy and social emotional skills that last a lifetime.” Does this last impact of reading surprise you?



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2. **RHYME**, play, talk, sing and cuddle together often throughout the day. “The AAP encourages parents to use play to help meet their child’s health and developmental milestones, beginning from birth. Playing allows for learning decision-making, resourcefulness, creating and having fun, comfortableness being by yourself and with yourself. Social play is also very important, like

teaching sharing, respect, getting along with others.”

The last three are:

3. Build **ROUTINES** for meals, play and sleep. This is difficult with so much daily chaos. Start slowly. Try one routine, e.g., a bedtime story, and build from there. Routines help children thrive because they know “what to expect and what is expected of them. Brush, Book, Bed is a great way to structure your child(ren)’s nighttime routine. Eating family meals together, like two or three meals each day, is associated with healthier kids by many studies. Routines are calming, for everyone.”

4. **REWARD** everyday successes. Praise what a child does right. “Catch your child doing something good and praise them for it. Praise from those closest to a child is a very powerful reward. ... Model good behavior and reinforce it by using positive discipline techniques that build a child’s self-regulation skills.” A child internalizes what the people closest to him do. She will do that behavior as a child or do it later as an adult.

5. Develop **RELATIONSHIPS** that are nurturing, respectful and consistent. “A strong parent-child relationship helps protect against the lasting effects of adverse childhood experiences.”

You are your baby’s best teacher. “A certain toy is not necessary for your child to reach his or her next developmental milestone. There is no one app that will teach your child to read. While it is easy to fall victim to the marketing (surrounding all of us), YOU are what your child needs to start on the path toward school readiness with daily reading, rhyming, routines, rewards and relationship building.” (healthychildren.org, AAP)

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Education is the path out of poverty

Education is the path out of poverty. And literacy, the ability to read and write, is the key to education. When you learn how to read, you can not only read books that take you anywhere, but you can learn all of your school subjects — math, history, civics, geography, English. You can then read signs in



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stores, on the road, at the gas pump and so on. Give your child the gift of reading.

Education is the path out of poverty. Even if you plan to be a basketball or rock star, you need to read the \$25 million dollar contract you will sign (with lawyers). Even then, you need to be able to read and write English.

A few years ago, I had just come out of Ingles. I got to talking with a guy with a truck next to my car. I told him what BabyRead was about and he told me this: He needed to hire more truck drivers, so he phoned a friend of his who owns another trucking company. After he explained that he was looking to hire more truck drivers and asked his friend if he knew of anyone, the friend replied: “Does he have to know how to read?” Even with GPS, it is impossible to read the signs on the road without knowing English.

Extensive research underscores that from pregnancy through the toddler years is the time of life that most influences how we turn out as adults. When you read and talk to an infant, you are building pathways in the brain that provide the foundation for future academic success. “The road to college attainment, high wages and social success in the U.S. starts at birth,” notes James Heckman, a Nobel-winning economist at the University of Chicago. “The greatest barrier to college education is not high tuition or the risk of student debt, it’s the skills children have when they first enter kindergarten.” Professor Heckman focuses his work on early education for low-income families with preschoolers, because he sees that as “perhaps the highest-return public interest in the world today.”

At the core of education is literacy, the ability to read and write. This is critical to everyone. Families need to teach to their children, before kindergarten, pre-literacy skills like being comfortable with books, knowing how books work — e.g. you read from left to right and the words under the pictures describe the pictures — knowing colors, letters and some counting.

BABYREAD’S MISSION is to raise the literacy level in Oconee County by encouraging moms/caregivers to read daily to children from birth. This prepares children for success in school and in life. Readers read with mom/caregivers in person at town or school libraries. We have a COVID option: drop off books monthly and text/phone weekly with support and tips. For more information, contact our president, Caren von Hippel, Ph.D., at babyread@charter.net or (864) 643-8083, babyread.org.