

BabySmart #22-1 – Ashley Ellison (July 2022)

Ashley Ellison was interviewed by BabyRead’s Janice Garcia and Advisory Board member Kathy Whitmire in August 2022. Ashley just entered her tenth year as an Oconee County educator with a specialty in early education. Janice started the segment by providing an BabyRead program overview.

Ms. Ellison began by stating it is never too early to start reading to your children. Some experts recommend reading to babies in utero as early as 27 to 29 weeks. Janice noted some parents have given up trying to read to young children for various reasons. Ashley said young children have short attention spans. **She recommended strategies such as reading to the child while they are playing, using books that have interesting pictures and textures, providing books that they can interact with. She also recommended having conversations with the child.** Ms. Ellison said reading to the child is just as much about developing relationships, fostering the child’s love of reading from an early age, and associating reading with a loving relationship. **Kathy Whitmire reiterated the importance of developing relationships – it’s not just about the process of reading.** Benefits include building relationships, exhibiting positivity, parent-child bonding, and other positive developmental aspects such as visual tracking and auditory processing. Janice Garcia added she had one child that liked to cuddle and be read to early on while the other was read to while playing and both grew up to be readers.

When asked about reading daily and exclusively at night, **Ms. Ellison said it is important to read daily but reading can be done anytime,** that’s it is more about developing a love for reading and making it part of your daily experience. **Routine is important whenever that happens for the family.** She said bedtime is an important part of her family’s routine as it is a time to cuddle and settle the children down. She said their reading also takes place at restaurants while waiting for food and even while driving. For example, her 18-month-old will hold the book while in the car and is getting reinforcement on the concept of print, how to hold books and how to turn pages even though the child is not hearing the actual words.

Janice Garcia said BabyRead focuses on puppet books and books with textures for families with very young children. When asked about sources of age-appropriate books, **Ms. Ellison recommended the Oconee County library system as well as second-hand consignment stores.** She also stated Oconee County is now a sponsor of the **Dolly Parton Imagination Library;** that organization provides free high-quality books monthly until the child reaches 5 years old.

Ashley said age-appropriateness can be relative. Some books are obviously too long to hold a young child’s attention but **books that are interesting to the child is important.** Some of her children’s favorite books are ones they enjoyed earlier (e.g., dinosaur books with accompanying sound effects). Her younger child enjoys “older” children’s books because of the rhyming and vibrant colors. **Interest should be a determining factor as long as content is appropriate for the child’s age.** Chapter books are typically for older children but if a child is interested and the content is appropriate, Ms. Ellison recommends reading chapter books with them. These books can be a **great source of conversation** too.

Kathy Whitmire asked Ashley her to describe **pattern books**. Ms. Ellison responded with a *That's Not My ...* series (e.g., *That's Not My Dog*, *That's Not My Tractor*). These books describe “because of” differences. **Although they may appear to be boring as children get older, pattern books are important because they offer interaction opportunities, and the child begins to “read” the book as they pick up patterns.** They may not be able to actually read the words but their obvious pride in “pretend” reading demonstrates involvement and shows a beginning of reading fundamentals.

Is repetition helpful? **Ms. Ellison said repetition was very important because the child is picking up essential patterns** as well as developing that love of reading. **She noted just as children gravitate toward familiar relationships they are also drawn to familiar books because they are comfortable for them.** She offered “Pete the Cat is on vacation” as an opportunity/excuse to introduce new books. They should be of interest to the child. Kathy Whitmire asked about nursery rhymes. **Ashley recommended the classic nursery rhymes as well as newer books with sing-song type patterns because they provide a beneficial rhythm.**

Ms. Ellison said older children should be encouraged to read but should not be forced to read. She said even adults enjoy being read to, citing audio books as an example. She offered strategies of the child and parent reading alternating pages or chapters or the parent offering to read a chapter book while the child reads a picture book. **She recommends parent reading or sharing reading responsibilities in lieu of forcing a child to read as it can be viewed as a chore and can result in the child hating to read.** Better to develop that love of reading and have an enjoyable experience for parent and child. **Kathy Whitmire agreed that it is important not to force the child to read and offered an additional strategy of using different voices and leaving out an occasional word to encourage participation and develop that sense of pride.**

Ms. Ellison said she could see the difference in children entering pre-K or kindergarten if they had been read to early. Noting there are always some outliers, **children with pre-literacy skills know how to hold books, how they work, and how to match words to pictures.** **She said a child that has been read to just 20 minutes a day has been exposed to 1.8 million words a year** – that experience over five years provides a wealth of **vocabulary exposure.**

Ms. Ellison closed by stating the importance of modeling behavior. Children are always watching, and they are more inclined to enjoy reading if they observe that adults enjoy reading too. **She recommends developing a reading culture as a family.** She stated she does a lot of her reading on a tablet or a phone so she makes it a point to her children that she’s “reading now” instead of just looking at her phone. Once the child is older, the parent can set up a conversation about what each has read. **She stressed reading anywhere for a total of 20 minutes a day (car, breakfast table, restaurant, playroom) as part of fostering a reading routine.** Kathy Whitmire added reading early is very important opportunity for brain and sensory development in addition to developing an early love of reading. She encourages a print-rich environment regardless of the source (e.g., comic books, magazines).