

BabySmart #4: Ms. Cathy Sytsma, Parents Are the First Teachers

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Cathy Sytsma was the guest for BabySmart #4. She has 40 years of experience as a teacher including 20 years as a 1st grade teacher and a few years teaching kindergarten.

City Talk's Riley Johnson was the host. Ms. Caren von Hippel, BabyRead's founder and Director, and Ms. Kathy Whitmire interviewed Ms. Sytsma.

Dealing with Children That Are Behind. Ms. Sytsma said she had seen and dealt with a few children so far behind their peers that it was next to impossible for them to catch up. They simply did not have the literacy skills or background knowledge they needed to know what was being discussed in school. Consequently, she's made it her "mission" to help change that by spreading the message of developing pre-literacy skills beginning with babies. **Parents that complimented her about being the best teacher their child could have didn't realize the role they played by reading to their children for years before they entered her classroom.** It can be a bit overwhelming because it's such a big responsibility, but it really isn't that hard for parents to be a great first teacher for their child. Ms. Whitmire reinforced this by stating 60 percent of a child's ability to learn happens in the first four years, so **parents need to see themselves as teachers. Ms. Sytsma said it can be a scary responsibility, but it is easy – talk, talk, talk about what the child is seeing. Act like you are giving them a running commentary even if they cannot respond.** Talk about what you are doing for dinner, laundry, shopping, feeding the pets, etc. It may not look like they are responding but the neurons in their brains are being engaged and that helps develop brain activity.

Reading Everyday Matters. Ms. Sytsma also stated the importance of reading to your child every day. You don't need training. She commented her granddaughter's favorite reader isn't the educator mother or grandmother but the grandfather because he embellishes the story, changes voices and pitch. **If you don't know the words on the page, just talk about the pictures.** Another thing that helps is making books available. It helps build their background knowledge. She cited an example of a child that had never seen a duck or farm animals so classroom discussions about a farm were like a foreign language. **Reading exposes the child to things they may not experience in their everyday world builds their background knowledge.** For example, books about a rain forest are cheaper than a trip to a zoo or the jungle. Talking about the pictures and the words makes the child familiar with that concept. Ms. Whitmire and Ms. von Hippel totally agreed.

Language Is Key to Overall Brain Development. Ms. Sytsma said reviewing some Harvard research about brain development in infants really put the puzzle pieces together for her. **The brain's language center is the center of the brain. As the language center of the brain is stimulated, it makes neuron connections with the other parts of the brain such as behavioral control, emotions, memory, and motor skills. If the brain's language center isn't stimulated adequately then the other parts of the brain don't develop either such as self-control and emotions.** That is why some of the children that are struggling in school lack of impulse-control and have emotional melt downs. That would escalate when the child tried to learn as they would just fall apart because it was too hard. **The child could be labeled as a problem child and once that happens things tend to just spiral downward. That's why Ms. Sytsma stresses stimulating the language center of the brain to develop behavioral and emotional control.** When a child has these attributes, it makes life so much better in school and at home.

Impact of Ill-prepared Children When They Enter School. Ms. Sytsma said it was heartbreaking to see a child in kindergarten or 1st grade that saw school as such a new experience for them that instead of being a positive thing for them they were overwhelmed. **When they saw they didn't have the skills other kids had their self-confidence went down and they felt like a failure. If their first impression of school in kindergarten or 1st grade is negative, it sets the stage for bad thoughts about the rest of their schooling.** She compared it to adult behavior – if there is something adults don't like they tend to avoid it. It's the same with children.

Ms. von Hippel related a school event encounter with an 8 year-old she was sitting next to at an event. She asked the child if she was looking forward to the 2nd grade and the child emphatically said no because she couldn't read. Ms. von Hippel asked if the child had asked her 1st grade teacher for help (she had) and said you need to try again with your 2nd grad teacher. Ms. von Hippel said she sent a follow-up email to the school's principal. Ms. von Hippel said reading should be a breeze for most children, except for those with learning disabilities. **She also stated schools are resource-limited and are doing the best they can, so it's incumbent on parents/caregivers to help prevent them from becoming problem children by developing those pre-literacy skills.**

But Does My Infant Really Understand? All three ladies said the parents really want the best for their children, but they just don't know what to do. Ms. Sytsma said she knew about the importance of language development in children early but until she started working with BabyRead she didn't realize how important it is. Read and talk to your babies. **Ms. Whitmire said parents don't understand why it's important to talk to children when they cannot respond back.** She said there are two types of responses: expressive (talking) and receptive. **What they see, hear and, listen to is receptive modeling behavior and lays the solid foundation for future success.**

Ms. Sytsma's closing thoughts were for parents and other adults that interact with children to talk to babies continually to help develop the language center of the brain to lay the foundation for future life skills. Ms. von Hippel said if you don't have books in the house, call her and she would provide books free – children should not be denied the opportunity due to lack of resources.

Ms. von Hippel closed with contact information for BabyRead and the Center 4 ADHD.