

BabySmart 23-5: Dr. CC Bates: Reading, Talking and Early Writing Contribute to Literacy

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BabyRead volunteer Janice Garcia and BabyRead Advisory Board member Kathy Whitmire interviewed Dr. CC (Celeste) Bates. Dr. Bates, a professor of literacy education, is the Director for the Early Literacy Center for South Carolina. She has written more than 30 published scholarly articles and developed the record of reading application for oral assessment. The app has been downloaded more than 400,000 times. She is the author of *Interactive Writing: Developing Readers Through Writing* and is the co-author of *The Next Step Forward in Running Records*. She is currently serving as the interim Associate Dean for research in graduate studies at the Clemson University College of Education.

Ms. Garcia opened by asking Dr. Bates about the purpose and function of the Early Literacy Center of South Carolina. Dr. Bates stated the center, which is housed on Clemson University, has evolved over time. It provides classroom teachers and interventionists with continuing education and has a clinic on campus for students from Oconee, Pickens and Anderson counties that are having reading and writing difficulties. Referrals are largely word of mouth. The clinic provides assessment services and after school sessions if warranted; they are focused on 1st, 2nd and 3rd graders. Kathy Whitmire asked about the referral process. Dr. Bates said the center responds to phone calls and emails. The clinic is staffed by two clinical faculty members and graduate students. Parents with children in public schools and that are homeschooling are encouraged to contact the clinic if they feel the need for an assessment or extra help.

Ms. Garcia asked about the importance of early reading on future success. Dr. Bates absolutely agreed with starting early. Although her current focus is early elementary school students, she began her career focusing on children from birth to five-years-old. She encouraged parents/caregivers to begin developing the habit of reading in the hospital. She said reading and in engaging in oral conversation throughout the day and not just at bedtime is beneficial. Understanding alphabetic principles and differentiation of sounds followed by vocabulary are early indicators of potential success. Reading introduces children to words and phrases that they aren't exposed to in the home; it provides familiarity for the child as they begin to read.

Ms. Garcia said BabyRead recommends "narrating your life" as a way of engaging in conversation. Ms. Whitmire said conversation is important because children understand "receptive" vocabulary before they master "expressive" vocabulary. Dr. Bates agreed, stating oral language, play and conversation develops a child's understanding of how conversation works and the principle of taking turns. Dr. Bates expressed a concern with the amount of time parents/caregivers are spending on electronic devices and the lack of verbal interaction. She liked the term "narrating your life" as a way of providing the foundations for success in reading and later in life. Ms. Whitmire clarified receptive vocabulary as sending vocabulary to the child's brain regardless of their ability to respond verbally. (Kicking, smiling, and cooing are indicators of successful receptive vocabulary.)

Ms. Garcia asked about the role of early writing in reading development. Interactive writing is typically associated with the school environment but can be an important tool for younger children too. Dr. Bates said the electronic age has diminished the understanding of the

importance of developing the foundational skills such as hearing sounds and words. She suggested being intentional by writing notes when talking on the telephone or making a grocery list as means to reinforce the association between writing and conversation. She suggested interactively asking the child what we need at the grocery store and writing it down. This type of interaction links familiar sounds to letters and the words that represent those sounds. It is somewhat reversed from classic reading association principles but provides early exposure to letter-sound relationships. Ms. Whitmire highlighted the importance of writing through experience stories and social books. She said to take a couple of pieces of paper, fold them in half, and staple them. Initially the parent/caregiver can write the words and have the child draw pictures about the day's experiences. In her ADHD work, Ms. Whitmire said social stories use the same principles to highlight behavioral or emotional regulation issues that need to be addressed. Children may not be interested in what is being read to them, but writing allows the child to express what is of personal interest.

When asked about when a parent should stop reading to their child, Dr. Bates said children have different paths to reading success just like they have different paths to walking. She encouraged parents/caregivers to go to the library routinely – there is something about owning your own library card and being able to select books on subjects that are of interest to the child. She said having a child sit on your lap (or in proximity if they are wiggly) while reading develops an attachment between parent/caregiver and transfers over time to a love of reading.

Dr. Bates said once the child begins to read on their own, books don't always provide the complex vocabulary needed so continuing to read with the child and engaging in conversation develops that rich vocabulary that is a big predictor of future success. Many parents feel their child is bright when in fact they have a rich vocabulary derived from being read to and talked with about their experiences. She stressed this is an opportunity available to *all* children. Dr. Bates said once the child progresses to chapter books, books in series that pique their interest help reinforce an understanding of characters and themes that will be important in high school, for example. She related a story about her own children as they entered middle school and high school. Often busy schedules limit opportunities to read together, so she suggested books on tape while driving or at night as an alternative. Conversation with children in high school tends to change too, so reading together with the child or reading separately at the same time and having a conversation about what you've read is a way to continue the reading experience in a more neutral and beneficial manner.

Ms. Whitmire said it's important for parents/caregivers to understand that in the school system they talk about instructional level of reading and independent level of reading. The instructional level is what teachers teach to; vocabulary is the key to independent reading. She offered non-reader examples of one child that benefitted from hearing classmate discussions about Harry Potter books that encouraged him to begin reading, and another student that learned word associations through TV close captioning. Ms. Whitmire and Dr. Cates encouraged reading above the level of reading comprehension to expand vocabulary and understanding. Dr. Cates said parents/caregivers should continue their reading sessions even when students begin with their 20 minutes-a-day reading assignments.

In response to literacy hints for younger children, Dr. Cates again recommended making the experience as interactive as possible. Recognize that books are going to get worn, dirty and wet. Pick a book format (e.g., board book, chewable, waterproof) that is appropriate for the age. Let them chew and handle the books – it fosters sensory development. Some children may not sit in your lap but want to play instead. They are still absorbing and learning. She said parents/caregivers need to be okay of letting go of the notion of reading quietly for 15 minutes at bedtime and taking advantage of incremental 2-3 minute interactive sessions throughout the day instead. This approach builds the habit, the attachment, and the love of being with the parent or caregiver *around* books that will evolve into a love of reading over time.

Ms. Garcia asked if interrupting the story and asking questions is beneficial. Dr. Cates said absolutely. Asking questions (e.g., “What sound does a pig make?”) where the book has limited text and stopping to engage in conversation is setting them up to understand they are supposed to interact with text. Each person’s experiences influence how the individual relates to the text, and that text is meant to be a meaningful experience; conversation about text is normal and expected.

Ms. Garcia wrapped up the interview by asking what parents/caregivers can do to prepare a child for success in reading. Dr. Cates said BabyRead’s mission, aim and intent perfectly exemplify the path to success. She stressed the need to develop the habit of reading and interacting as part of everyday life beginning at 0-3 months. She reiterated the importance of conversation around everyday experiences (e.g., narrating the cooking process) when in the presence of a baby or toddler instead of being so inward-focused on the task at hand (preparing dinner). This develops the receptive vocabulary that will be important as the child progresses to talking (expressive language). Play and word play such as rhyming, even with nonsense words, are important to the learning process too. Distinguishing individual sounds (phonemes) in words will enable the child to decode words and take them apart as they begin to read.

Ms. Garcia thanked Dr. Bates and Ms. Whitmire for their participation and closed the interview with a brief synopsis about BabyRead and how listeners can become BabyRead families or volunteers.