

## BabySmart 23-2: Ms. Jennifer Rich: Developmental Progression to Future Reading Proficiency

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BabyRead volunteer Janice Garcia and BabyRead Advisory Board member Kathy Whitmire interviewed Jennifer Rich. Ms. Rich has been a School District of Oconee County (SDOC) 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher and reading coach. She is currently the Instruction-Instructional Specialist in the SDOC main office. Her responsibilities include supervising all of the county's reading coaches as well as English as a second language instruction.

Ms. Garcia opened by asking Ms. Rich what some of the important things are to prepare children for success in reading. Ms. Rich stressed the importance of talking – “read, read, read; talk, talk, talk”; describe routine events such as shopping or by asking questions when listening to the radio. Rich said oral language paired with reading leads to understanding, increases vocabulary, builds relationships, and enhances confidence skills. Ms. Whitmire added, “Just speak out loud to your child.” In addition to auditory stimulation, it also adds observation skills and sensory awareness. They agreed that having children make little “experience books” helps them tell stories about themselves and about other events. It also helps develop the foundational writing/reading relationship. Ms. Garcia added BabyRead stresses “narrating your life” from birth even if it doesn't appear the child understands. Ms. Rich reiterated talking to babies early on builds the connection to you, exposes them to fluent language, expands vocabulary, and exposes them to letters – all keys to future literacy.

Ms. Rich said an understanding of letters is essential to learning to read. Nursery rhymes and repetitive language are important to learning, helping to reinforce the subtle differences between different letter sounds. Ms. Whitmire added repetitive language and rhyming are important to the developmental progression from receptive language (hearing/receiving language) to expressive language (talking in children).

Ms. Garcia said BabyRead founder Caren von Hippel uses the term “serve and respond” to describe this process. She asked if this is the same thing as “dialogic conversation.” Ms. Rich said the dialogic concept is new to Oconee County this year and will be introduced by kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers next year. It has three key components:

- Engage the child through conversation by asking questions;
- Repeat what they say to show you are listening; and
- Extend the conversation by asking for the child's opinions and making comments which add to vocabulary.

Ms. Rich then discussed phonemic awareness as part of the overarching biological awareness umbrella. (Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify and manipulate small units of sound. Example: dividing the word “cat” into 3 distinct phonemes or sounds to demonstrate words are comprised of different letters and then differentiating between the sounds of letters in different words over time.) Ms. Rich said studies show that phonetic awareness has a direct correlation with the ability of children to read as they get older.

Ms. Whitmire added ear infections can have long-term effects on auditory processing. Ms. Whitmire and Ms. Rich discussed auditory processing as an essential precursor to phonetic awareness (decoding or putting sounds to letters) which in turn leads to writing as an encoding output. Ms. Rich reiterated the importance of repetition and rhyming. Ms. Rich then discussed overall comprehension improvement with listening comprehension coming first followed by reading comprehension. She recommended parents and caregivers read a variety of genres (e.g., fiction and non-fiction) to provide the child with a wide background of subjects and enrich the learning experience. She encouraged parents/caregivers to get a library card for access to a variety of books.

Ms. Whitmire said it is important to allow children appropriate processing time as they need time to comprehend what they have heard. Ms. Rich and Ms. Whitmire suggested that parents and caregivers shouldn't answer the questions they pose too quickly because children have different processing times. Adding higher level questions over time adds complexity, aids in recall, and fosters emotional development. Sample questions include: "How do you think it makes the character feel?" or "Why did they do that?" or "Would you have done that?" Ms. Whitmire said asking questions about how the child or character feels is important for "emotional vocabulary" development and the ability to express themselves. The inability of children to accurately describe what they are feeling is a commonly observed deficit in Ms. Whitmire's ADHD practice.

Ms. Garcia thanked Jennifer Rich for her participation and closed the interview with a brief synopsis about BabyRead and how listeners can become BabyRead families or volunteers.