

BabySmart 23-2: Ms. Lynell Hecht: Some Strategies for Effective Reading & Emotional Development

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BabyRead Advisory Board member Kathy Whitmire interviewed Lynell Hecht. Ms. Hecht has been a teacher for 25 years including at-risk children in Tennessee. She is currently a 3rd grade teacher at Orchard Park Elementary in Oconee County.

Ms. Whitmire opened by asking Ms. Hecht about the benefits of reading. She responded language development to include words the baby or toddler wouldn't necessarily be exposed to during routine conversations. She discussed the "million-word gap" noting children that have been read to routinely have been exposed to more than a million more words by the time they enter kindergarten than a child that hasn't been read to. She recommended establishing routines. Ms. Whitmire noted the impacts in terms of vocabulary and experiences.

Ms. Hecht said establishing a routine of bonding time during low key moments benefits the child and parent. She said attention spans vary based on the situation so don't force it. If the parent/caregiver or child is not ready try to establish a routine starting with a couple of days a week and then expand to several days a week as it will prove beneficial in the long-term. Ms. Whitmire said establishing a routine and consistency is key, noting parents have told her bedtime is often a good time to de-escalate and even short durations of 5 minutes will be helpful; both added it will tend to get easier over time as the child's attention span increases.

Ms. Hecht said allowing the child screen time before bedtime is a bad idea as it overstimulates the brain. She recommended reading or even just sitting or lying on the bed and having conversations are healthy alternatives to electronic use. It is a great bonding opportunity, has a calming effect, and gets the child ready for bed.

Ms. Whitmire asked about ways to instill a love of reading in children. Ms. Hecht talked about establishing a positive association with reading. It can be intimidating for first-time parents or parents/caregivers that aren't comfortable with reading. Reading should be associated with positive experiences. Asking questions about books that have been read before can expand the conversation without reading per se. Examples included: "We're coming to my favorite part of the book" to add anticipation; adding observational comments such as "Do you think there are fish in that pond?" when looking at a picture; or an association like "This reminds me of the story we read yesterday." You can also add approval or disapproval comments to elicit a response. Ms. Whitmire reinforced this by discussing the need for an emotional vocabulary as an aid to emotional regulation. Asking "how do you think that made him/her feel?" or "What do you think was going on in their mind?" or making comments about good and bad choices helps with emotional self-regulation. Ms. Hecht added children need to have the emotional words to express their feelings when asked. She said some teachers that felt they were being disrespected by a child or were dealing with behavioral issues might be dealing with someone that simply does not have the words to express what they are feeling.

Ms. Whitmire provided examples from her ADHD practice of a child saying they are “mad” when they are really frustrated, disappointed, embarrassed or guilty. Expanded emotional vocabulary can help establish appropriate remediation actions.

Ms. Hecht and Ms. Whitmire discussed emotional development deficit – the ability of children to express their feelings accurately with appropriate emotional words, and the ability to understand what’s being said to them. Ms. Hecht added she’s noticed an increase in expressive development deficit because of expanded electronic use. She noted it is easier to hand a child a phone or tablet but developing a routine of narration is essential to future learning and emotional development. She noted emotional development aids in comprehension when the child becomes an independent reader. Both talked about expressive language – the need to hear language as a precursor to being able to use words to express themselves.

Ms. Hecht talked about the benefits of narration when putting on shoes or observations in terms of left or right (directionality) and socks then shoes (sequencing) or providing synonyms for a dog’s behavior (e.g., playful, rambunctious) to build out vocabulary. Ms. Whitmire stated kids actually like and can process big words.

Retelling is another strategy. It may take some prompting to develop recall and affords another opportunity to express themselves. It aids in sequencing when children begin to write in school.

When asked what kinds of books a parent/caregiver read to their child, Ms. Hecht said whatever interests the child. Reading anything can provide an opportunity to identify letters or numbers on the page. Having a print-rich environment in the home is important.

Ms. Hecht said “less is more” for young babies. Simple images are more effective than busy ones for babies; bold or contrasting colors and black and white images are very effective for them too as their eyesight is developing. She said books with fanciful illustrations may be more attractive to the adult but are probably too complex for the developing baby. Exposing them to phonics early is beneficial to develop ear training but stay with simple words with different hard and soft sounds and avoid more complex (e.g., use cat vice circus) and “rule-breaking” words until later.

Ms. Whitmire closed by thanking Lynell Hecht and encouraged moms/caregivers to become a BabyRead family or for others to volunteer.