**BabySmart 23-5: Ms. Mary Ann Suggs: Reflections of a Parent, Educator & BabyRead Volunteer**

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BabyRead volunteer Janice Garcia interviewed BabyRead volunteer Mary Ann Suggs. Ms. Suggs is a mother of four with several grandchildren, and was a teacher for 18 years, a school principal for 11 years, and was a substitute teacher later in her career. She’s had several BabyRead roles.

Ms. Garcia opened by asking Ms. Suggs how she learned about BabyRead and the various roles she’s had in BabyRead. She first learned about BabyRead at a Keowee Key newcomer’s event. Ms. Suggs became a reader and simultaneously held the position of Reader Assignments Coordinator for about two years. Ms. Garcia provided background on BabyRead’s purpose and asked Ms. Suggs about her BabyRead family. She said the mom had done a nice job of reading to the 3-year-old child but wanted to help ensure that the child was ready for pre-school. This included exposing the child to another reader before going into a more public setting. She read for about 2 years. Currently she assists one of the BabyRead book coordinators by helping readers select age-appropriate books for their families. Ms. Suggs also orders replacement books and educational magazines for the Seneca Head Start organization.

Ms. Garcia asked how she picks out books. Ms. Suggs responded that some of the books are selected based on her own experience as a teacher, mother and grandmother. She also keeps up with information on current literature and asks the readers about the individual child’s interests as it is important to target those interest areas. She provided examples of selecting books based on the situation (e.g., losing a tooth, how to be a good sibling). BabyRead provides two free books a month to the child and special books on birthdays and Christmas, for example.

Ms. Suggs said her reader’s role to an older child was to continue what the parents had started. She relied on her educational background of the essential foundational blocks for effective reading and used techniques such as prediction, frequency, and retelling. Having a different reader than the parents afforded the opportunity to have a more formal setting, set ground rules for the reading session (e.g., sitting quietly), provide exposure to another reader while alternating between reading and activities such as finger play to maintain attention – replicating and acclimating to the kind of environment the child would experience in pre-school.

Ms. Garcia asked Ms. Suggs to provide more information about prediction and retelling. Prediction is a means of assessing a child’s comprehension. The reader stops the story and asks the child, “What do you think happens next?” If they give you a good answer, you know they are comprehending. If the child gives you a nonsensical answer, they are either not listening or aren’t comprehending. Insights can help the reader encourage the child to take the story apart into pieces and reassemble them like you would a jigsaw puzzle. Retelling is a means of sequencing the story to explain what happened first, second and last. She encouraged parents to stop reading and ask the child what they think happens next and why. The parent/caregiver can also ask what else could have happened if they made a different decision. She reiterated you are teaching the child that good literature is storytelling and literature is fun.

Ms. Garcia asked about modeling behavior. Ms. Suggs said as a teacher you learn to be animated to help hold the children’s attention; same goes for parents. She encouraged using different voices for different characters. Using props is effective too. Interrupting the reading and retelling encourages the child to become a part of the story. This helps the child under-stand that good literature involves the reader. Ms. Garcia asked for tips if the reader gets nonsensical answers. Ms. Suggs suggested asking more probing questions, going back to the story and retelling it using different words, asking the child if they remember what happened, and explaining why it happened and what happened next. She said understanding letters and words, having a good vocabulary *and comprehension* are essential reading skills. Teachers not only taught us how to sound words out but also how to follow a story from beginning to end.

When asked about involving other children in the BabyRead experience, Ms. Suggs said it absolutely helps by instilling reading as part of the daily routine. Reading doesn’t have to be limited to bedtime which is often chaotic. She suggested reading while cooking dinner or turning off the TV for 10 minutes and having all the children read for 10 minutes. Developing the reading routine is as important as developing hygiene and sleep routines. Older children can read to the younger child – it doesn’t always have to be the parent/caregiver. You can also ask the younger child to “read” a story to you. Ms. Garcia said children often say they can read before they actually can, and both agreed this should be encouraged (essentially retelling).

Ms. Suggs said BabyRead provides tailored literature based on the child’s interest, hands out developmental literature at appropriate milestones and makes recommendations to parents/ caregivers on other sources. BabyRead also provides literature to help readers that aren’t as experienced or need additional background, so they feel comfortable in their role as readers.

Ms. Garcia asked what benefit Ms. Suggs derives from BabyRead. She loves being around children and her grandchildren aren’t nearby. She also loves literature and reads the new books as they come in. It gives her great satisfaction to know she is preparing a child for reading. She feels reading is a key to success for children and adults. Reading fosters a feeling that there are more ways to learn than watching television or listening to music – it can be someplace that is special to the child, something that their older sister is not reading or something different than the TV program everyone is watching. She encouraged people to become a BabyRead volunteer even if you don’t have children. You are making a difference and can experience the joy of “the BabyRead person is here” or getting a hug. Both said the Oconee County libraries are great resources for children’s literature and encouraged parents/caregivers to use them.

Ms. Garcia thanked Mary Ann Suggs for her participation and closed the interview with a brief synopsis about BabyRead and how listeners can become BabyRead families or volunteers. She also reminded listeners that November and December are BabyRead’s annual donation drive and used the Suggs’s interview to highlight how important books are to the BabyRead mission.