**BabySmart 23-2: Dr. Nancy Jeffrey: A Reader’s Perspective From a Retired Pediatrician**

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BabyRead Advisory Board member Janice Garcia interviewed Dr. Nancy Jeffrey, a retired pediatrician originally from California. She practiced in California for 50 years before retiring to South Carolina about five years ago. She has been a BabyRead reader for several years.

Ms. Garcia opened by asking Dr. Jeffrey about the benefits of reading starting at an early age. She responded by stating a baby recognizes her mother’s voice essentially from birth and can begin learning from a very early age, so Dr. Jeffrey suggested thinking about sounds and words at the outset. When asked about when parents/caregivers should stop reading to children, especially after they can read for themselves, Dr. Jeffrey said there isn’t really any defined cutoff timeframe. Rather she said it is an individual preference as some children continue to enjoy reading sessions while others choose to demonstrate their independence by reading alone. She provided an example of her 11-year-old son wanting to share a book she had given him on adolescence as a bedtime story. Dr. Jeffrey said it is important to understand the child’s reading comprehension level and where they are comfortable; children often comprehend things beyond their reading level and enjoy being read to about things that they comprehend as opposed to the level at which they can read.

Dr. Jeffrey provided additional hints to enhance the reading experience, stressing age dependency. There isn’t much when the infant is young other than point to the pictures. As the child gets older it is important to point to the pictures and start asking questions, especially relating the child’s experiences (e.g., eating specific foods) to the story. She stressed the importance of pictures in building early comprehension and understanding because they can see and understand the image and relate it to things you are reading to them. Dr. Jeffrey cited an older study where researchers taught 4-month-old infants to recognize three common items such as a ball, and noted the children were able to point to the object when asked to “show me the ball.” She said the study demonstrated that there is a great deal of recognition well before the child can speak the words. Both stressed the importance of showing pictures to build the vocabulary. Dr. Jeffrey said it goes for numbers too as many books have page numbers.

Dr. Jeffrey said page-turning is an important activity as the child gets older. She suggested looking at toddlers in a restaurant setting – if they are holding the menus themselves and are pretending to read it is an indication that the child has been read to at home. Ms. Garcia added BabyRead’s emphasis on teaching how books work by holding them right side up, pointing to the word and then the picture, running the finger under the words as you are reading, and turning pages. Feedback from area 4K and kindergarten teachers tell BabyRead that children that have been read to and talked to are much more ready for reading. Dr. Jeffrey said some children may already be reading when they enter kindergarten. She stressed the importance of talking to them about everyday activities (“narrate your life”) and speaking in complete sentences rather than 2-3 word statements as builds vocabulary, and it encourages the child to be more conversant and more comfortable expressing themselves.

Dr. Jeffrey discussed her experiences with bilingual families. Ms. Garcia asked if a child should be read/spoken to in their native language, in English or both. Dr. Jeffrey said it depends on how fluent the parents/caregivers are. If the parent is comfortable with English, she recommends reading in both languages. If the parents have different English fluency levels, she recommends the one that is more fluent in English read in the native language and that the other read in English to improve their own fluency. If both parents are bilingual, she suggested using the native language exclusively in the home and English exclusively in public, so the children learn the difference. Ms. Garcia noted BabyRead has a variety of bilingual books in Spanish as well as some of the other languages; Dr. Jeffrey said that was wonderful, noting bilingual Spanish books are the easiest to find.

Ms. Garcia asked for additional suggestions. Dr. Jeffrey suggested adding motion to the story (e.g., barking, running), and by asking questions to help determine the child’s understanding of what’s just been read. She suggested taking breaks for game playing or other activities to prevent the child from getting bored with reading. She provided an example of a child she read to with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) that would not sit still during her reading sessions but received feedback from the child’s grandmother and primary caregiver that the child did calm down enough to succeed in Early Head Start without medications. Dr. Jeffrey stated she felt the reading sessions contributed to the improved social behavior (also indicated by studies).

Ms. Garcia asked what benefit Dr. Jeffrey got from being a BabyRead reader. She said it was the satisfaction in knowing she had made a difference in a child’s success as they enter kindergarten and later in life too. When asked about how to address concerns about a child’s development, Dr. Jeffrey said start with the child’s pediatrician as developmental assessments should be part of every wellness visit; the pediatrician should know what local assets are available to parents/ caregivers.

Ms. Garcia closed by thanking host Riley Johnson and Dr. Jeffrey. She encouraged moms/ caregivers to become a BabyRead family or for others to volunteer.