

BabySmart 23-2: Ms. Ashley Robertson & Ann Douglas: Importance of Reading and Talking in the Critical Years of 0-5 YO

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Janice Garcia and BabyRead Advisory Board member Kathy Whitmire interviewed Ashley Robertson and Ann Douglas. Ms. Robertson is the current Director of the School District of Oconee County's (SDOC) Center for Early Learning. She has more than 20 years of experience as a teacher and was principal at James M. Brown Elementary before taking the Director post in 2022. Ann Douglas is a retired SDOC educator with 32 years of experience in teaching and supervisory positions. She retired in 2019 as the Director, Center for Early learning.

Ms. Garcia opened by asking the basic developmental advantages of early reading to children. Ms. Robertson said early bombardment of auditory experiences through reading and talking is very powerful. Ms. Douglas added gestures are an important consideration in early childhood to build up associations with words and to begin emotional regulation (the child's ability to control their own emotions).

Ms. Garcia asked about interactive communication. Ms. Douglas said communication helps build a positive bond between the parent/caregiver and child. Ms. Robertson said it is important to communicate with the child but to have them communicate in response. She suggested using complete sentences and a variety of words to communicate with them. Saying, "Use your words" and "Tell me what you mean" when the child is simply gesturing (e.g., pointing to the refrigerator or cup) is critical; you want them to verbalize. If you don't require them to use their words, they can get stuck on not using words. Ms. Douglas and Ms. Robertson stressed the emotional parent/child bond is a crucial step in the socialization and emotional regulation processes.

Ms. Douglas said it is important to use your normal voice often and to use an object's real word instead of nicknames. The goal is to build vocabulary. Breaking multi-syllable words into parts (e.g., bot-tle) as you speak will help too as the child transitions to reading. Responding with the child's word for an object can be appropriate too (acknowledgement).

Ms. Garcia returned to the importance of reading. Ms. Robertson said it is vitally important to read to children between birth and 5 years of age to inspire imagination, to learn how a character feels, and to learn how to respond emotionally to other children or adults through the character's actions. Play is another beneficial activity that inspires the development of imagination. Ms. Douglas added book variety teaches children about diversity – how some things and other people around the child are different. Reading to young children helps prepare them for school because it provides them with a broad understanding of things like colors, numbers, and positions.

Both guests provided hints for parents/caregivers that feel they aren't equipped for effective reading. Ms. Robertson suggested going through the book and just looking at the pictures, then asking what/when/where questions about what's happening or what the character is doing. Relating the story to activities in which the parent and/or child may have participated can also be effective.

Ms. Douglas said about 90 percent of all learning occurs before the age of 5 so reading and talking from birth to 5 is a critical window. She noted it is very difficult to make up the deficit even with top notch learning activities and dedicated teachers. She stressed reading should be a fun activity that contributes to a joy of reading in school and hopefully later in life too.

Ms. Garcia and Ms. Robertson discussed different behaviors in children – some like to be read to and others prefer activity. Both present learning activities as long as their behavior is regulated, and good behavior is modeled. Ms. Douglas acknowledged today's parents are busy with work and activities with older children. It's important to find even 5 minutes of quiet time to read but she advised that even handing a book to an infant or toddler in a car seat or restaurant can be beneficial. Just holding and even chewing upon a board book can be beneficial. Ms. Robertson talked about counting, identifying colors of objects (e.g., "I Spy ...") and making a game about rhyming words while driving in the car.

Ms. Robertson discussed BabyNet and Child Find. South Carolina's BabyNet is for younger children (0-3) with potential developmental delays (e.g., speech, emotional problems, motor skills). The goal is early intervention when appropriate. Child Find is for children 3 and older when a parent/caregiver suspect there may be some developmental delays. The Center for Early Learning is responsible for Child Find and is a gateway to the Pre-School Intervention Program (PIP). The process includes gathering inputs from parents on what they are seeing or what the child is doing, screening to determine where the child is developmentally based on a standard bell curve, and initiating remediation efforts, if required. Ms. Robertson provided a phone number: (864) 718-5133.