

How I Learned to Read

By Mary Rasinski (in collaboration with Tim Rasinski)

Thanks to a great kindergarten teacher, my mom, and my dad, I learned how to read before starting first grade. My journey illustrates that the path literacy is not always straight and narrow, children can come into literacy in a variety of different ways.

One of my earliest memories was of my mom (and dad) reading to me as a toddler. We have movies of mom reading a favorite book to me over and over again while I cuddled with her before I was even one year old. She made up voices and read with great expression, bringing the stories and characters to life. As I grew older our family beagle, Ginger, joined in on the nighttime family ritual, jumping onto my bed as mom read to myself and my siblings. The family joke was that after mom finished reading, Ginger would jump off the bed, trot downstairs and tell dad what the book was about 😊! Read alouds occurred in preschool, kindergarten, and all throughout elementary school years. I am certain it is one of the major reasons I learned to love reading.

When I entered kindergarten things began to get serious. Besides the daily read aloud, my teacher taught us the letters of the alphabet and the sounds associated with them. Of course, learning my letters was also part of our family routine.

Something else happened during the first part of my kindergarten year. My dad (Tim Rasinski) decided to try out an approach to early reading that he was just beginning to study. (My dad is a literacy researcher and a professor of literacy education, first at the University of Georgia- where I was born- and later at Kent State University- where I eventually graduated with a bachelor's degree in fashion design and master's early childhood education).

Dad's Method

Dad began working with me on reading for about 10 minutes a day three times a week beginning early in my kindergarten year. He would find rhymes and songs that I had learned at home or in preschool and print out the words. Two of my favorites were the songs *Mary had a little Lamb* and *Mary Wore Her Red Dress* (for obvious reasons). We would spend a day or two on each text before moving on to a new one. We would begin by “reading” these texts – since I had already learned the rhymes and songs earlier by heart, I could “read” the text, although it wasn’t really reading in the real sense. First, he would read the text to me pointing to the words as he read them. After a few repetitions he asked me to join in and read with him, again with him pointing to the words as we read. Finally, after a few choral readings, dad invited me to “read” to him, again pointing to the words as I read them. Although I still was not reading in terms of decoding the words in the texts, I was beginning to match the words “read” with the words in print.

After I performed my reading for my mom or one of my siblings, dad and I would choose several words from the text and write them on index cards. We spent a minute or two practicing the words and we did a variety of other activities that, now looking back on it, directed me to examine the internal structure of the words – in other words dad was directing me to “orthographically map” the words into my brain. We broke down words by letters and sounds, and then built other words based familiar word patterns – for example “snow” from *Mary had a Little Lamb* expanded to “row” (as in *Row Row Row Your Boat*), and “tow,” “Stow” (my hometown), “low” and “slow.” We sorted words by letters and sounds. We made silly sentences by laying the cards on the table in different ways and we played word games such as “match” where pairs of words were laid out facing down and we took turns trying to match each word with its match.”

These “dad lessons” took about 10-15 minutes, and we did them about three times a week, often reviewing texts from the earlier days. I enjoyed the opportunity to spend some alone time with dad, which was sometimes hard to do in a family of four kids. We only did this for about three months. However, by December I was able to read independently. I could decode words, I had a growing sight word vocabulary, and I was developing fluency in my reading through the repetitions.

Of course, I cannot simply attribute my early reading to my “dad lessons.” As I mentioned earlier, mom would read to us kids daily, and often multiple times per day. Also, I had a great kindergarten teacher in the Stow, Ohio public schools. Still, I think my dad working with me 10-15 minutes a day, three times a week on poems and songs that I had previously enjoyed and learned by heart, made an important contribution to my learning to read.

I am now an early childhood teacher. As I help children gain the power and potential of literacy, I try to incorporate many of the teaching techniques I originally learned from my mom and dad. Thanks to both of you.

Love,

Mary

Postscript from Tim

My work with my daughter Mary and my other children was the foundation for a home/school reading program called *Fast Start for Early Readers* which has been found through scientific research to have a positive impact on young children’s reading development, whether done at home or in the classroom.

Thank you, Mary for helping me understand better how children learn to read and how teachers and parents can better help their children become proficient readers! Love,

Dad

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