

TEACHING A LITTLE ONE TO READ

By Edith A. Turner



LET us concede that in the majority of cases the mother who finds it necessary to undertake the early education of her children, tries to remember the method by which she herself was initiated into the mysteries of reading, and that that method is the one she endeavors to impart to her little ones. There is no disputing the fact that children learned to read well by the old A, B, C method, but a new and much easier one, which I shall try to explain, has almost superseded it.

It will be necessary for the mother who is desirous of teaching her little ones by this new method to provide for her work a blackboard, some chalk, a slate, a reading-chart and a primer. If she cannot spare the money a slate and a primer will be sufficient for the first six months, the primer to be followed by a first reader. When the child has actually commenced to read from a book it will be found that much better work is done by having two or three other books containing almost the same words as the one used for lesson, which will serve as tests of the pupil's ability to know the words in different positions. A bright child frequently deceives its teacher or mother as to its progress by memorizing a lesson and reading it off very glibly, while it would not be able to read the same words in different connections or relations. The time for putting the primer into the child's hand will depend upon the method of teaching followed by the mother. The preliminary work may occupy three or four months, or the mother may give the little one the book after two or three lessons. If the primer is not used by the child it would be well for the mother to use one to help her in making a selection of words. It will also be a valuable aid in its introductory explanation. One more suggestion: The mother must possess infinite patience. This work, apparently so simple to her, is full of difficulties to the little searcher after knowledge, and although the repetition of these "baby-words" may be a tiresome task to the mother, to the little one, if presented cheerfully and pleasantly, the work is full of joy and delight.

AND now for the actual work. The pupil six years old, that age being sufficiently early at which to start this work, is supposed to know nothing about reading, writing or spelling, not even the names of the letters. For the first lesson the word "cat" is selected, a word whose meaning is well understood by the child. In a schoolroom the picture of a cat will be shown, but at home the mother may take the real cat on her lap, and she and the little pupil will talk about it. Then the mother might say, "My little girl and I have had a pleasant talk about our pet; I wonder whether I could make the slate or the blackboard say the word 'cat'?" The child looks on with interest, while the mother carefully and in good-sized writing places the word "cat" on the board. "That is the word 'cat' said by the board. Go point to it, Nellie. Now go pat the real cat. Now go point to the word again." Then the mother might write the word many times on different parts of the slate and in different sized letters, making the child continually point to the words, thereby showing that she understands what she is doing. All this time there has been no mention of a single letter. Then the child may make an effort to copy "cat" on her slate. The letters will be peculiar looking, but never mind. This word "cat" will be a sufficiently long lesson. The next day write the word again and see whether the child recognizes it at once. "What does the board say, dear?" "It says the word 'cat,' mamma." Go slowly so as to be thorough. When the child knows the word take another, "man," for instance, first talking about its meaning, showing a picture, speaking of papa, grandpa, etc. "Is little brother a man?" "Oh, no, mamma." From the first insist upon the child's speaking in sentences, not stiffly, but easily. After this little chat write the word "man," having previously erased the word "cat." Use various devices to impress this word, then have it copied by the child. "Cat" and "man" might then both be written, and to have the child point to each, calling each word by name, will be an excellent test. When you ask her to point to "cat" do not be discouraged if she points to "man," but do the work over. Ask her to copy "cat," now "man," now "cat" again, etc., etc.

COMMENCE the third lesson by reviewing these words. Then introduce a new word, "top," first having the conversation, perhaps with a top in the hand. If the little one has no brother she may never have seen a top, but mamma surely has a picture, or anyhow she can tell her little girl about it, or she may be able to draw a picture of a top. Remember the art of reading is only useful as a means of conveying ideas. The ability to recognize printed words is of no value if the thought is not grasped at the same time. Sometimes we are apt to lay too much stress upon oral reading, forgetting that most of our information is gained through silent reading. "Ideas first, signs afterward," is the order of our work. For the third lesson we selected "top," to be taught similarly to "cat" and "man," which are to be reviewed at the end of the lesson. Now that three words have been considered, start to make a list, adding new words as they are taught. Good, strong wrapping paper will answer this purpose or a piece of pasteboard. The great educational reformer, Pestalozzi, had no blackboard, no conveniences whatever at first, but he made use of tapestries on the wall for object lessons, and the floor and pieces of wood served as blackboard and slates. For the fourth lesson teach the article "a," not by itself, but write on the board "a cat," "a man," "a top" and have these expressions read and copied. Do not have the word "a" pointed out or said separately so as to avoid unnatural expression. For the next lesson I would teach the phrase "I have." Place the cat on Nellie's lap. "What have you, Nellie?" Try to obtain this answer, "I have a cat." Give her a top. "What have you?" "I have a top." "Now, Nellie, we know that the board can say 'a cat.' I wonder whether it can say 'I have a cat?'" Then the mother writes that sentence; the child recognizing the words "a cat," knows that the first two are "I have." Then write "I have a top." Have the different words pointed out separately. For the next lesson teach "fan," "a fan," "I have a fan," and review. For the next "see," "I see a cat," "I see a man, a top, a fan," and review. For the next, "the cat," "the man," "the top," "the fan," "the" always being used in connection with other words. For the next, "am," "I am a man," "am I a man?" etc., and review. Next the expression "it is," "it is a top," "is it a fan?" etc., etc., first obtaining the expression "it is" through conversation. Constantly review, and remember not to take up a new word until the old ones have been thoroughly learned.

BY this time the child can read with natural expression many simple sentences arranged by the mother and written on the board. Aim to arrange the words differently. Do not use the same fixed sentences. Reviewing the word "cat" alone, the child should be master of these sentences: "I have a cat." "It is the cat." "I see a cat." "Have I a cat?" "See I the cat?" "Am I a cat?" "Can I see the cat?" "The cat is big." "Is the cat big?" "A cat is on the box." "Is the cat on the box?" "I see a big cat on a big box." "Is the cat on the box?" "Is the cat on a big box?" "Can I see the cat on the box?" With similar sentences the other words may be reviewed. The child has now a little vocabulary—"cat, man, top, fan, I, have, see, can, am, is," and "a," "the" and "on" in sentences. The time consumed in teaching these words depends much upon the quickness of the child and the patience of the teacher.

THE next step is to introduce the sounds of the separate letters. Commence again with the word "cat." The mother will say the word naturally, then more slowly and slowly until she is really saying the three sounds c-ā-t separately. Let the child repeat the word very slowly until she resolves it into its sounds. Write the word on the board. "Give me the sound of 'c,' of 'a,' of 't,'" pointing to the letters, or naming them if the child knows their names. Vary the order of giving these sounds. The next day review the phonetic sounds of "cat" and take up other words containing but one new letter. For instance, rat, fat, mat, bat, hat, sat, could all be built from "cat." In teaching "fat," write it under the word "cat." Ask the child to tell you where to draw a line showing the parts alike in the two words c|at f|at. Give the sound of "f." Have the child give f-ā-t, and it will then probably be able to name the word.

I THINK that it will not be difficult for the mother to give the sounds of the letters, even were she herself never taught phonics, for all that is necessary to do is to say the words exceedingly slowly or to draw them out. We know that one great difficulty in teaching the beginner to read is caused by the names of the letters being different from their sounds. Children enjoy this word-building, and they are fond of giving the sounds, which, if they give well and clearly, help much toward distinct utterance. Teaching by the "word-method" alone (that is, the word as a whole) would be rather a slow process, but by combining the "word" and "phonic" method, the work progresses much more rapidly. Some words must be taught as wholes; time will be economized if others are taught by the phonics. With children in their first year's reading difficult sounds are not considered. The word "pretty" would be taught as a whole; "strap" by sounds; "whole" should be taught by telling the child that "w" and "e" are not sounded, writing the word "whole," with a line drawn through the "w" and "e," as a help to pronunciation. About a hundred words should be taught, combining the two methods; then the chart could be used in connection with the blackboard, or in the absence of the chart the primer might be taken up, extreme care being used to see that the child does not memorize the lessons in parrot-fashion. Never forget that conversations precede all lessons or accompany them. The lessons must convey thought to the pupils. After a little story has been read have the pupil tell it to you in her own language. In her second year she could write her version of the story. If possible, as I said before, use other books containing about the same words for supplementary reading. All the words taught have been kept on the list for frequent reviews. Children like to find the words that they know. If they pick up a book beyond them, how gleeful they are if they happen to see a familiar word, like "pretty, small, woods, bright," etc. All such devices help them to recognize the words at sight. Many of the nursery rhymes, the short stories for very young readers, and the magazines published expressly for the "babies" may be used successfully in this work. The aim of silent reading is to obtain information; of oral reading to give natural expression to thought. In either case the reception of ideas depends upon the ease with which the child recognizes the words at sight.

AT the end of five or six months the primer may be followed by a first reader. Many of the lessons will review words already learned, but that is good. In seven months you will be able to teach the child about ten new words a day, sometimes fewer, sometimes more, according to their difficulty. When ten months have passed, an average child will probably know well five or six hundred words. The twenty-six letters of the alphabet have thus been learned, the sounds of the consonants, the long and short sounds of the vowels and a few of their other sounds. If the child has grasped the thought of the lessons she will read aloud intelligently. Do not mention punctuation marks. When I was a little girl we were taught to count one when we came to a comma, four at a period. In the lowest class this counting was done aloud; you can imagine the interruption to the sense of the story. It is not necessary to teach the letters in the order of the alphabet, but there is no harm in doing so after the children know their names from their writing and spelling lessons. When I taught little children who had been in school seven or eight months I arranged the letters to a simple air which the children sang very prettily.

THIS paper has only aimed to deal with the child's reading during the first year. For the next year the work will be followed on somewhat similar plans, less help being given to the child. From the first the mother should endeavor to have the child use a pleasant tone in reading, not a high, shrill tone unlike her natural one.

After three or four months select pretty, short snatches of poetry within the comprehension of the pupil, not beyond it, and teach her how to memorize them. Parents and teachers are sometimes gratified at hearing their children recite very difficult selections, but what a foolish vanity this, for the child, instead of being helped, is hindered. Forcing children beyond their natural limit is one of the mistakes in our American kindergartens, and is entirely foreign to Froebel's ideas. Sound, gradual mental development is what the truest teachers strive for, not false show. With a few more words I will finish. I hope that mothers may be benefited by what I have tried to say, but it is almost impossible thoroughly to explain the method in writing. At any time I shall gladly answer questions, for it is my earnest wish to be of practical help to mothers. Do not think lightly of this work, for it is now acknowledged among educators that the work of teaching the little ones should be entrusted to the most thoughtful and tactful teachers, although the subjects taught are in themselves so exceedingly simple.