

Becoming a Parent: Implications for the English Teacher

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Nine months ago, I joined the club: the parent club, that is. My husband and I welcomed a beautiful baby girl named Ella into our lives and began the marathon course of emotions that follows the birth of a child: joy, pride, curiosity, frustration, exhaustion, and . . . guilt.

Ever since her birth, I've found myself wondering if I was doing *enough*. In fact, I was haunted by the word. Is Ella getting enough food? Is she warm enough? Is she stimulated enough? And then my teacher identity came through, and I began to worry about her future in the classroom. Are we reading to her enough? Does she have the right books? Enough books? How can I ensure that I'm doing enough to prepare her for school? These were questions that I was used to answering about my middle school students, but this time I didn't have the answer, just another question: What's an English teacher to do?

Bringing in My Past as a Researcher

As the questions mounted, I acted like any teacher who faced a new situation. I made a list. I thought about my objectives for Ella and an action plan for reaching those objectives. Immediately, I focused on what I have learned about reading through workshops, classes, and personal research. According to by the American Pediatrics Association, *What to Expect During the First Year*, and numerous baby development websites, like *BabyCenter* and *KidsHealth*, it is indisputable that reading to a baby every day is important. The positive impact made by reading does not change as a child grows. In fact, three years ago, I completed my doctoral dissertation on reading during adolescence and its effect on college-age women. In my study, I identified four areas of influence from reading during adolescence: 1) Shaping reading preferences, 2) Finding a life path, 3) Understanding the world, and 4) Developing an understanding of self (Sass-Henke 40). As I thought about these influences, I began to see a connection between adolescents and infants. A child of any age and gender can be influenced by reading, even one as young as my daughter. She may not be ready to find a life path, but reading to her at an early age could help her see a number of options for a life path, shape her preferences, and help her develop an understanding of herself and the world around her. The American Academy of Pediatrics states, "The entire reading-with-your-baby experience is custom-designed to foster both fun and learning, from the close contact of being held, to hearing the sound of your voice, to watching the pictures and pages go by." Reading to my daughter and helping her develop a love for reading is not all that different from my role in the classroom and the steps that I take to create a successful experience for my students.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents begin reading to their children at the age of six months while Trelease suggests in *The Read-Aloud Handbook* that read-alouds should begin much earlier (23). At four months, Ella sat in her pink Bumbo chair each day for story time, and we read as long as she was willing to sit still. At that point, her eyes were drawn to the pictures on the page and the sound of my voice as I read to her. This same pattern has continued over the past five months. I try many different books, like I do when I share titles in my classroom. Ella loves books with pictures of other babies, and she's not alone. Babies appear to prefer a variety of illustrations, including pictures of other babies and baby animals (Honig 24) and pictures with vibrant, contrasting colors. It's clear that the time the baby spends in her chair allows for much more than visual stimulation and a mother-daughter connection. Already, Ella's preference for certain books is apparent. She loves the illustrations of

Mo Willem's *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* and Ian Falconer's *Olivia* and shows her love by flipping the pages and clapping her hands when new illustrations appear. Could this dictate her reading preferences later? Perhaps.

Reading books at an early age has introduced Ella to the world outside her crib and prepared her for future experiences. In the early months, infants strive to make connections to their outside world in order to understand it (Makin 268). As Ella grows older, reading to her about protagonists in different situations can create vicarious experiences that expose her to people, places, and situations that she may not encounter in our Minnesota neighborhood. Right now, though, read-aloud time in my house can help her to not only understand the world around her, but also develop an early understanding of herself. As children grow, they identify favorite books. Honig suggests that these preferences help a child form an identity through discovering a favorite book and feeling ownership and pride in knowing that favorite (30). By sharing numerous books with Ella over the years, my goal is similar to my goal of sharing books in the classroom: finding favorites that help her to learn about herself and the world around her.

Can't Forget about the Classroom

As a middle-level, language arts teacher, who has ten years of experience, it is hard to ignore what I have learned over the years. I have found that the best way for a child to increase his or her reading comprehension is through reading. I follow a simple procedure: find a book and read it. For many of my middle-school students, however, this is more difficult than it seems. Even though there are thousands of titles in my school's media center, I often hear, "There are no good books in the media center." As an experienced teacher, I have learned to smile and say, "You just don't know about the good books yet."

I try to prevent the above scenario from happening by exposing my students to as many titles and genres as possible. I hold book talks on Mondays in my sixth-grade classroom, where I share young adult books, give my opinion, and read an excerpt. Some books garner little attention while others, as a result of my showcasing, find themselves becoming the most checked-out book in the media center. When it comes to my role as a parent, I want to replicate these results and introduce as many books and genres to Ella as I can. Over time, I hope to find gateway books, which serve as a starting point and draw kids into reading. In my classroom, we read Rick Riordin's *The Lightning Thief*, which often grabs students who had previously identified themselves as non-readers. Once they've finished the book, they read the next book in the series and the next and the next until they've discovered Percy Jackson's fate. Afterward, they could search for more books about Greek mythology, or they might read a different book by Rick Riordin, or they may search for another book from the fantasy genre. My gateway book was *The Secret of the Wooden Lady*, which was #27 in the Nancy Drew series. Once I read that book, I read all of the original 56 Nancy Drew books. When I had finished those, I sought other mysteries to read, and as I encountered topics that interested me, I branched out into different genres. This is what I want for my daughter: an exposure to many different books and genres so that she can find her gateway book.

A Reading Role Model

I see myself as a reading role model, and this identity is one that I portray outside of my classroom's walls. For instance, every occasion where I need to give a gift to a child has included a book. The English teacher in me will not let an opportunity for reading be ignored, and the publishing world loves gift-givers like myself. After countless book talks and courses

taken and taught on the topic of children's literature, I believe that I know good books. One such recipient of this knowledge and discriminating gift-giving is my niece, Alexa. For every birthday and Christmas during her five years of life, Alexa has received at least one book from Aunt Amanda. I have bought board books, picture books, and most recently, I-Can-Read books for her. And you know what? Alexa loves to read, and she loves to share her love for reading.

Recently, during a family trip to the cabin, my English-teacher heart melted. I ran around with the other adults and prepped for the day while Alexa sat in front of Ella and read aloud to her every single book that was in Ella's diaper bag. She started with *Animal Babies Peek a Boo!*, followed it up with *Goodnight, Gorilla, No No Yes Yes*, and concluded with *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*. She took that time to do something she enjoyed, and while she read, Alexa acted as a reading role model to my daughter.

As the English-teacher parent that I am, I want to create more of these opportunities for my daughter. I want her to see all of the readers in her world. These readers are people like her cousin Alexa who reads to her, a volunteer at the library putting up a poster of well-liked books, and her Grandpa Ed clutching a biography in his hand and sharing bits and pieces about Teddy Roosevelt's life. Keeping books in Ella's diaper bag allows me to be ready for reading opportunities, whether shared with me or another role model. Access to these reading role models lets my daughter know that reading is an everyday activity that can further connect her not just to the world but also to the people around her. It is my job as a parent to be prepared for and anticipate those opportunities.

What's an English Teacher to Do?

One of my greatest challenges in being an English-teacher parent is to realize that mistakes will be made, but there will also be many other teachable moments where I can illustrate the wonders of reading to my daughter. I feel pressure because of who I am in the classroom, but I have an advantage. My identity as an English-teacher parent allows me to draw from several sources: my classroom experiences, the vast amount of knowledge shared by the reading community, and my personal research. I can then merge these components together to form a literacy base for my child.

Being a parent is hard, and being an English-teacher parent adds another layer of difficulty. Other teachers should know that feeling guilty comes with the territory because of our background and education, and this background and education is what can make good parents. We need to capitalize on those aspects of our identity and do what our classroom selves would do:

- 1) Be prepared – Plan for reading opportunities, and when these opportunities occur, have a book on hand to support this learning activity.
- 2) Build a library at home – Just like the shelves in our classrooms that hold books from our childhood to those collected during our careers, create a small library filled with different genres and characters and messages. Make it accessible. Begin with board books and plan ahead by buying books for the next reading stage.
- 3) Share, share, share books – Read to your child as much as possible, and even though, he/she may develop favorites, continue to introduce new books, characters, and genres. Help that child find a gateway book that will help develop an appetite for reading.

4) Act as a reading role model and find other role models to share their love of reading – Give books as gifts, talk about a love of books in the classroom and at home, and include others who love books in your life. Loving books and reading can be contagious.

5) Don't ignore what you know – An English teacher has the background and education that makes him or her a practitioner of reading. Self-reflection is an important aspect of teaching, and any pangs of guilt can help fuel reflection, research, and a plan for the future.

Joining the parent club has been fraught with emotions, but the transition also brought a new awareness of the value of my classroom savvy and the power that it can have on my parenting. My outlook changed on many things, including reading, and my role as a reading advocate became stronger. I gained an opportunity to utilize my classroom know-how in another facet of my life, and I have seen an interest for books develop in my daughter.

I love hearing Ella's squeals of delight as she turns the pages in board books, and I enjoy seeing her eyes fix onto each illustration. She helps turn the pages although her idea of what is next may be different than the chronological order the author intended. Her collection of books has developed immensely over the past nine months and consists of many sturdy board books that can handle her grabby hands. Vivid colors abound in the illustrations, and the topics range from the familiar, like pacifiers and dogs, to the unfamiliar, like dump trucks and flowers from India. I try to expose her to a variety of genres although the majority of her books are either informational or realistic fiction. I love taking her to the library to pick out board books from the bins, and just recently at nine months, she found a favorite in *The Baby Goes Beep*, which focuses on the different noises a baby can make.

As a parent and an English teacher, I feel a huge amount of pride as I watch her crawl toward books that are left on the floor, and I am delighted to see her flip through the pages and squeal when she sees a picture that captures her attention. I don't worry as much about whether I'm doing enough, and I feel more confident about my role as a parent. I have evidence of success because when I see Ella choose a board book over a stuffed animal, it's clear that she has already found her gateway into the world of children's literature, and there is enough of a trail for her to continue on once she's beyond the gate.

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