

# Learning to Read with Ease

by Hannelore Engelman



*The greatest gift Montessori Primary education can give a child is to become a competent reader in an unhurried, supportive environment!*

Allison read her first book today! What is so remarkable about her reaching this childhood milestone, like taking a first step and saying her first word, is that she joined our school exactly a year ago with no English language skills at all. At just over 3, Allison spoke Chinese only and chattered away in her native language, quite unaware that we could not understand her. As long as a teacher listened attentively, smiled at her, and said an occasional "yes yes...very good", she was happy. And with that, the magic of early childhood and our Montessori environment merged.

Dr. Montessori termed the natural stages of development the *Sensitive Periods*, a time in a child's development when a specific skill is learned and mastered with joyful determination, a

determination coming from the child and not from the adults in his environment. And the new skill is mastered with seemingly little effort.

A child typically learns to walk between the age of 9 and 18 months – the *Sensitive Period* for walking. So, what would happen if a parent puts her little 5 months old on the floor, demanding that he walks? Nothing, nothing at all. It is not the adult who determines when a child should learn to walk, but a desire and a timetable coming from within the child.

The *Sensitive Period* for the acquisition of language is 3 ½ to 6 in general, and for reading from 4 years and up. Each child learns his mother tongue by osmosis, a scientific term we use in learning, especially in the early years, as a gradual and largely unconscious process by which a child *absorbs* the language spoken around him. No one teaches him, he does not have a vocabulary list to memorize: the young child simply becomes accustomed to the words spoken in his environment and their meaning.

I know, based on my four decades of work with children of many cultural and linguistic backgrounds that the greatest gift Montessori Primary education can give a child is to become a competent reader in an unhurried, supportive environment!

In the Primary classroom of 3 to 6 year olds, language is all around us. Stories are told and read, poems and songs are recited, and discussions about many different subjects are all part of a typical day at school. So are the “I spy” game, sandpaper letters, and many other pre-reading exercises. Often, a Kindergartener will read a story to a little group of younger children. Is it our imagination, or are the youngest children really paying more attention to a Kindergartener reading to them than to a teacher? Oh yes, it is true, for older children are wonderful teachers! In a Montessori environment this transfer of knowledge from one age group to another can be observed throughout the classroom, but nowhere is it as obvious as in reading and writing. Following that inner directive, children who are about ready for this momentous step to reading will frequently observe the older children’s language work, often asking *what are you doing?*

Dr. Montessori developed language materials in her native Italian, a phonetic language based on Latin, as an aid to natural human development. The English language exercises commonly used were developed by Muriel I. Dwyer as outlined in *A Reading Scheme for English* (©1968). They encompass many exercises to accommodate the non-phonetic English language, with its confusing array of spelling one particular sound, for example the sound “ai” as in nail, day, lake, beige.

From the founding of our school in 1972, we used this approach and were pleased with our Kindergarten’s ability to read the 20 *MAX books in series I and II*, by the end of their leadership year.

My introduction to the *California Phonetic Reading Program* came at a Montessori conference in San Diego about fifteen years ago. It was developed by LoAnn Jundt, Executive Director of the *Montessori Center for Teacher Education* in San Diego, CA. I cautiously purchased the first set of the program to study, and to see how our young students might adapt to it. It was an eye-opener to realize that this program focused on reading *only*, instead of the customary reading/spelling exercises. To quote from their website, “While a knowledge of spelling may be

a possible outcome, the main goal of this program is to teach reading skills in a sequential and effective manner”.

Most other Montessori work isolates particular aspects of a complex concept. In math, we introduce the quantities alone, long before we introduce the corresponding symbols. It is logical that we should also separate reading from spelling. What a revelation!

Our students enjoyed their new work, and by the end of the second year of using the *California Phonetic Reading Program* we realized that their reading skills had vastly accelerated. Children now started reading months earlier as only six letter sounds are needed to start the reading program. By the time they were Kindergarteners, most could simply pick up any book in our classroom library and enjoy reading it. Today, our students go from the *California Phonetic Reading Program* boxes to series I and II of the *Max books*, to DK reading books. DK books are on all levels far superior to other age-appropriate books; the language is sophisticated, the illustrations beautiful, and the paper of the highest quality. It is simply a pleasure to just hold them in one's hands. The traditional reading/spelling exercises are now used along with the reading program but as separate work.

It is important that children manage the sequence of their reading activities with minimal help from teachers. This is accomplished with individual reading charts stored in an attractive basket on a language shelf, on which children keep track of their work. Every time a child completes working with a new reading box, she puts a little sticker over the number of the box on her chart. This way, she also can look up on her chart which box to read next.

Meet the *bookworms*, a fun way for children to keep track of the books they read. Punching or cutting out ellipses using the Metal Inset as a pattern and construction paper of colors of their choice, children start their bookworm by making the first link with a little *worm* face, and the title with their name, for example *John's bookworm*. Each time a child reads a book to a teacher, he adds another link to the bookworm with the title and number of the book, let's say *Max 1*. So the bookworm grows until a child has read all 10 books in a series, and he takes his bookworm home. The first twenty books are read to a teacher who gently guides the child into reading with comprehension, fluency and expression.

And for Allison, I predict that next year she will be enjoying reading DK books at the same level as her fellow Kindergarteners who grew up in an English speaking family. We should all stand in awe of the great accomplishments of the early years in a child's life!

## **Footnotes:**

### ***Learning to Read with Ease***

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### **Muriel I. Dwyer**

<http://www.thesharperpen.com/NAMTA/ubpages/montpubs.html>

reprinted her book under a new title:

*A Path for the Exploration of Any language Leading to Writing and Reading As part of the Total Montessori Approach to the Development Of Language*

**California Phonetic Reading Program**

<http://caphoneticreadingprogram.com/>

**Max books**

[www.pearsoned.com/](http://www.pearsoned.com/)

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