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SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN THE TEACHING OF READING

A recent letter from a reader really made my day. Let me share it with you. It's about one of my favorite subjects -- teaching children to read by the phonics method (which means teaching the sounds and syllables of the English language).

"Dear Mrs. Schlafly: I can't thank you enough! I took your advice about teaching my five-year-old to read, using the phonics method, and it worked! Eight months ago, she couldn't read at all, but today she can pull almost any book off her bookshelf and read it by herself -- including some books intended for kids twice her age.

"I can't help being amazed, especially since I never had any teacher training at all, and my daughter is not (so far as I can tell) particularly gifted; yet in eight months' time, working with her less than an hour a day (and skipping some days when the weather was too nice to stay inside), I have her reading better than her friends who have spent a year or longer in school. Now she spends several hours a day reading, by her own choice. I never even have to suggest it!

"Her writing and spelling skills are also very good, though we didn't work on them specifically. They seem to have come as a fringe benefit of learning to read.

"I wish there were some way I could thank you adequately. You have made such a difference in our lives!"

All over the country, parents are having the same experience. They are discovering the thrill and achievement of homeschooling. Incidentally, "homeschooling" has now become a verb (as in, "I am homeschooling my children"); and homeschooling is the fastest growing movement in the country today.

Parents are discovering that teaching children to read simply requires the correct method plus love and patience; it doesn't require a teacher's credentials.

This is not a reflection on teachers; it's a criticism of the faulty first-grade textbooks teachers are compelled to use. The same mail which brought the above letter from a successful homeschooling mother in Wisconsin, brought another letter from a teacher

in the same state, which I shall also share with you.

"Dear Mrs. Schlafly: Soon after Dr. Rudolf Flesch's 'Why Johnny Can't Read' appeared in 1955, the Reading Establishment, its pet publishers, and its textbook authors added a 'dribble' of phonics to each of their books from 1st to 8th, and to the 12th grade in some schools. The outlines call for the learning of two or three letters or letter combinations in no logical or organized succession for each grade from 1st to 12th.

"Parents, teachers and administrators seem to think that taking 8 to 12 years to teach (maybe) the same letter sounds is the phonics method, but it isn't. They seem to think that this phony-phonics in today's readers is 'for real.' The fact is that teachers are really still using the 'look-say' ('whole-word' or 'sight-reading') method.

"No wonder kids can't spell when they don't practice saying or sounding out or writing the individual letters in words! Just sounding out the words would help children to spell English words, 85% of which are purely phonetic; the other 15% are only partly non-phonetic.

"We teachers heard many criticisms of 'progressive education,' but no mention of the omission of the phonetic reading courses for primary teachers ever reached us. As many children came to our 4th to 12th grade classes with reading problems (after the old phonics-taught teachers left our schools), we teachers in the upper grades just thought that the new primary-grade teachers were not efficient. We didn't dream that they hadn't been teaching phonics!

"The man in our school who is in charge of the prevention of 'dropouts' says that the students who have school problems in most cases are those who have problems with reading.

"The most tragic result of the 'look-say' non-method is that millions of children have been erroneously labelled 'dyslectic' or 'learning disabled.' The Michigan Reading Clinic examined over 30,000 alleged dyslectic children in 1975. Of these, only two children were found to be unable to learn to read. It makes one wonder what other states would discover if their alleged dyslectics were examined.

"I blame the Reading Establishment, their pet greedy publishers, and the professors in the teacher's colleges who author the textbooks, who won't admit that 'look-say' does not work in the teaching of reading, writing and spelling. How can they remain so stupid? Thank you again for your many articles about the need to return to phonics."