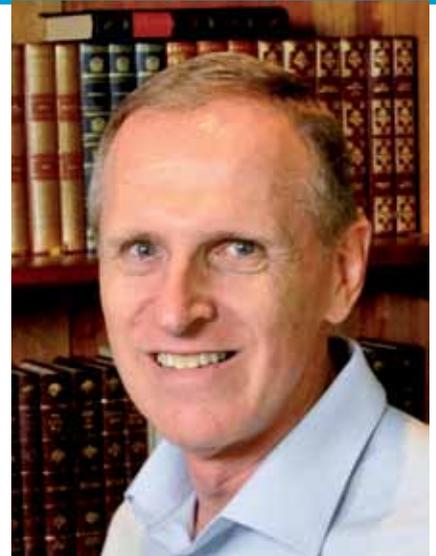


The Early Worm

MY WORD
with Rodney Martin



Early

Early essentially means 'before-ly' or 'sooner than-ly'. It comes from Old English *ærlice* (*ær* became *ere* 'before' in Modern English). The spelling went from *ærlice* (pre-1000) to *erliche* (pre-1200) to *erli* (pre-1382) to *early* (late 1500s).

The early bird catches the worm' has been shown in research to be true for education. The government has recognised the importance of early learning by creating a national early childhood curriculum called *The Early Years Learning Framework: Belonging, Being and Becoming*. You can search and download this document on the internet.

One measure of early development is vocabulary. Depending on the kinds of stimulation they had, children's vocabularies by age three can be anywhere from about 500 to 1,100 words.

The difference between those at the low end and those at the high end of this scale is greater by the time they enter school at age five. Once this difference is established, researchers have found that the gap is likely to grow as the years go on.

Early learning, vocabulary in particular, is influenced by the way communication happens with young children and their family. For example, suppose you take your child to the zoo.

How much of your communication is about discipline? "Stay near me... don't do that." Versus ideas and information: "Look! Here are the lions."

Young brains are sponges for detail. You can stimulate vocabulary growth by taking simple facts further, for example, by categorising things. "That's a male lion because he has a hairy mane. There's the female; she doesn't have a mane."

The same principle applies when you read picture books with young children. Do you simply read the words, or do you encourage your child to ask questions? Do you talk about the pictures and the parts of the story told in pictures rather than just words?

Some digital books for children now allow them to not only read and listen to books, but also to create their own books. Children are encouraged to create and share ideas and not just consume literature. The first three years at home lay the foundation for the future.

The first five years before school are vital. Children need to grow in confidence through being able to express themselves – not just learning basic words, but knowing ways to explore ideas and learn more words. This is why childcare centres, pre-schools and kindergartens now have a national curriculum as guidance.

So be an early bird and feed your children a challenging but tasty diet of words for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Rodney Martin is a children's author and educator. His SA family business, Era Publications, creates interactive online children's books for homes, schools and public libraries around the world. (See free samples at www.erapublications.com/south-kids.)