

*Guiding Young Children to Reading Excellence*  
DKG California Presentation - Shirley Huddleson - May 5, 2018

Good morning Delta Kappa Gama sisters,

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I'm Shirley Huddleson and I'm the author of the book "*Guiding Young Children to Reading Excellence*". Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts on how to teach young children to become exceptional readers.

You may wonder what led me to write a book about teaching children to read. The answer is very simple; as a nation we are not teaching our children to read very well. In 1991 our children ranked 2nd in the world in reading skills, surpassed only by Finland. By 2008 we ranked 15th; in 2009 we ranked 18th and by 2013 we ranked a miserable 24th! Today, sixty-six percent of all fourth graders in the United States are not reading proficiently and eighty percent of our fourth graders living in poverty are not reading well. This is not acceptable; as a population, teachers are NOT meeting the needs of their students.

Why are our students doing so poorly? Many educators will say: "*Teachers aren't paid enough*", or: "*classrooms are too large*", or: "*we're dealing with a larger population of immigrant children*" or they will present a multitude of other problems. From my 20 years of teaching in California public schools and over 30 years of teaching in my own private school, I have developed a different theory: the problem lies within the teaching methods and concepts that teachers are given and those that they are not given before they begin their careers. My book focuses heavily on those concepts necessary to provide the tools for children to develop outstanding reading skills.

If we are to be serious about improving education in our country, colleges must give prospective primary school teachers a more effective set of skills, one that emphasizes mastery of teaching some simple but very basic building blocks: alphabet letter names, letter sounds (vowel sounds and consonant sounds), reading rules, phonograms and spelling. Children can master these concepts, beginning in pre-school and kindergarten. If children are given a solid foundation in these reading tools, they will have a skills base far above their peers, before they enter first grade. For over 50 years this has been my approach to a

comprehensive curriculum for pre-school through the primary grades. Children leave my school with reading skills far above their peers in public school; it is very typical for my students to be reading at a level anywhere from 3rd through 6th grade when they complete my kindergarten. The basic skills taught in this reading program are presented in a structured environment, in enjoyable, interesting and creative ways; the children are not being pushed or asked to perform above their comfort or instructional comprehension levels.

An important concept that teachers always must remember, *especially* in the primary grades, is that not all children develop at the same rate. It is our responsibility as teachers to meet the individual needs of each child. The members of the class should not all be working at the same level. If they are, the individual needs of the students are *not* being met; some of the children will be stressed, uncomfortable and very unhappy, because the lessons are too difficult and inappropriate for their developmental skills. Some of the group will feel unhappy or bored because the lessons are not challenging and they are not being given the opportunity to learn new skills. A few children in the class may be happy and enjoy the projects and activities because the lessons are matching their developmental needs. When children are operating at levels appropriate for their individual needs, they find the process fun, enjoyable and rewarding. They feel successful and competent in meeting the challenges of their daily activities because they have the skills and learning tools necessary to succeed.

The goal for all good teachers is to be as effective as possible for maximum, excellent learning to take place. What does a teacher need to do for this type of learning to become the norm? In order to successfully teach, the following six criteria must be met:

1. *Excellent classroom management and discipline skills.*
2. *Mutual respect between the teacher and the students.*
3. *Comprehensive knowledge of the curriculum.*
4. *Appropriate grouping of the students at their instructional levels.*
5. *Creative enthusiasm in presentation.*
6. *High expectations, academically and behaviorally.*

All of these components must be implemented well if students are to achieve the best possible education from their school experience. If the teacher does not establish solid management and discipline standards beginning on the very first day of class, with follow-up every day for at least the first month, he or she will be adversely challenged by the class for the rest of the year. Teachers who do not have well thought-out behavioral standards will never know what a joy it is to teach because they will always be in conflict with a class that does not show cooperation or respect; maximum learning will not take place if students and teachers do not feel mutual respect towards each other. High expectations in discipline and curriculum will lead to outstanding results in student behavior and to exceptional educational achievement.

Many of the teachers I have known were well trained in curriculum and were bright, hard-working people. But because they were lacking a basic understanding of classroom management and control, they became unnecessarily discouraged, frustrated and exhausted each day; I have often heard them comment in the teachers' staff room about how difficult the children were. This is a two-pronged dilemma; not only is it a real, stressful burden for the teacher to deal with an undisciplined and disrespectful class, but the students will learn so much less than they would if they were under appropriate management. Much of the responsibility for resolving the lack of classroom discipline skills lies with the schools' administrators; they should be observant and alert to the problems and should provide for the proper aid and instruction in classroom management for those teachers who need help.

Presentation methods for each lesson are also extremely important. If the teacher exhibits a high level of enthusiasm and creativity in presentation, the children will respond and learn eagerly from the experience; if the teacher presents lessons in a mundane, lack-luster manner, the children will not learn nearly as much from their lessons. At my preschool, the other teachers ask me almost daily: "What are you doing to make these children so eager and enthusiastic about going into class?" The answer is always the same, "First, I present materials with enthusiasm and second, if materials are at the appropriate level for the children, they feel successful and love the challenge of learning to read."

A child may be behind his peers in physical or mental development, but this may not be an accurate reflection of his or her capacity for future accomplishments. Some children are “late bloomers” but they may fully develop the skills and abilities that allow them to excel as they mature. A teacher’s early negative impressions of a child’s abilities may be faulty and more significantly, may influence a child’s future in a negative way, thus doing the child a terrible disservice. This is a major reason to approach children at their current ability level and to offer the opportunity to develop new skills at a rate they can absorb.

As an example of this important concept, I was given a child in second grade who was a non-reader; she had no letter knowledge. She knew nothing of the skills that are needed in order to become an exceptional reader. I had to start the child at the very beginning; she had to learn basic reading concepts, including letter names, letter sounds and reading rules in order to read well. By the end of second grade the Slosson Oral Reading Test (SORT) confirmed I had brought her up to grade level; she was reading at second grade, ninth month. Some teachers, in the misguided belief that she was not capable of learning, based on her previous lack of progress, may have allowed her to languish below her grade level and she would have lost all opportunity to be a thriving, successful student for the rest of her school experience. Instead of leaving her behind, my actions allowed this child to flourish; after she finished second grade she continued to excel; she graduated from high school with Honors and was Valedictorian of her graduating class.

A few years ago, a very quiet, serious child joined our preschool class. She was not a happy child; she did not smile or ever laugh. Every morning she would tell me: *“My mommy is still in the ‘Hopsicle’. She is very sick and they don’t know why.”* The child was very sad and overcome with worry; she did not seem to be able to learn much. I tried a couple of times to teach her the word “hospital” but she did not pick-up on it. I decided not to push it, since she was already stressed and did not need another frustration in her life. The other teachers and I were concerned about her; it was hard to know if she was absorbing any of the materials being presented in class. We were not sure that she would be able to integrate into a standard classroom in the following year, but we all continued to be cheerful, positive and encouraging with her; she was never made aware of our concerns about her ability.

One morning, after several months had passed, she approached me and saw the class list on my lap. She said: “*Teacher I can read those words.*” She began reading the last names of the children from the list. The names were not simple and we had never used them in class; she had never heard them before. She had been learning reading skills quietly and could read almost any word. The lesson for all teachers is never to assume you know a child’s capabilities until you have adequately evaluated her. The child had been traumatized by her mother’s condition and could not openly express her abilities in class. Thankfully, Doctors were able to successfully treat the mother’s brain tumor and all was well for this child; she went on to be very successful in school.

I wrote my book, “*Guiding Young Children to Reading Excellence*”, to help those teachers who want a better way to determine each child’s individual needs and to help children grow in reading ability at an accelerated pace. As teachers, we all want children to learn new reading skills as rapidly, thoroughly and easily as possible and we want them to retain those skills. To accomplish these goals we must meet the individual child at his or her ability level and encourage growth from that level.

To help you better understand the purpose of my book I would like to quote a short passage from the introduction:

*“This book is a distillation of the methods and materials I have developed or accumulated in my fifty-three years of successfully teaching children from pre-k through 4th grade to read well above their chronological age and grade level. It is not meant as a scientific discourse, but as a summary of the results of my own observations of what has worked best for me in teaching children to read, supplemented by my observations of other educators. The document not only describes the events of my long career, but more importantly provides a source of ideas and materials for new teachers and parents, as well as for experienced teachers who would like to cultivate their ability to provide a more successful learning environment for their students. The book is directed to parents and teachers, to help them understand methods and interactions that have successfully led my students to excellence in reading and to acceptance of learning as a joyful, rewarding, lifetime experience.”*

That’s the end of the quoted section of my book.

Children who have “fallen through the cracks” and have not mastered the skills necessary to be good readers can be easily identified and given special attention, even as late as the third grade; they can still be taught the reading skills that will help them to excel and to achieve success above grade level. One major problem for children who have not learned to read by the time they reach third grade is their feelings of embarrassment. They may resist working with the teacher because they are very aware that they cannot read like their peers. They are afraid of not being able to perform well and they think that the teacher will judge them as failures. The teacher has a big job, not only to teach the child but to develop an environment of trust and respect and to reduce the possibility of a negative self-concept.

A third grade boy was in my multi-grade one room class several years ago at Fairfield School, which is a part of the Davis School District. The child had not mastered any of the tools necessary for reading success. This young man did not want to work with me. One morning he said, *“Teacher, you keep trying to build a bridge to me and I keep breaking it. I won’t let you reach me.”* This was a pretty bright analogy from a child who had not learned to read over the past three years! I explained that I really wanted to work with him and teach him to read but I could not, as long as that bridge was broken. I told him: *“Today is Wednesday; I want you to think about fixing the bridge. By Friday I want you to tell me if you have fixed it”*. While I was on yard duty that Friday morning, He walked up to me and said: *“Teacher, I’ve been thinking about that bridge and I’ve decided to fix it. I want to learn to read and I will work with you.”* He worked cooperatively with me for the rest of the year and he was reading at fourth grade, ninth month by mid-June, one full year above his grade-level. We all want to feel confidence and pride in ourselves; if we cannot perform well at something, we do not want to do it. Failure is destructive to anyone’s self-concept; the child who cannot read is afraid you will think he is “stupid”. It is up to the teacher to encourage the child to feel safe and confident, ready to learn new reading skills.

The task of teaching a child who has failed for a few years is far more challenging than working with a child who has rarely or never experienced failure. However, children who are exceptionally advanced in their cognitive skills also may face problems in the classroom. Some children have the ability and desire to progress well above grade level, but many teachers are not prepared or are not willing to put in the extra time and effort to help a child to advance above the classroom norms. I have taught many children who finished my class two, three or even more grades above their chronological age, based on their “SORT” scores.

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One child had been in a Davis kindergarten class for a week; at the end of the week he came home with tears in his eyes and told his mother he was never going to school again. He said: *“you told me I would be going to school with all of the skills I already have and I would move ahead, learning new stuff. The teacher told me, ‘I know you can read and understand anything I hand you, but this year in my class, you will learn red for a week, blue for a week and green for a week, do you understand?”* The child told her, *“I understand you completely.”* The mother called me at Fairfield School and described her son’s experience with his kindergarten teacher. She asked me if I would teach her son and allow him to progress at his own learning level. I accepted the challenge and the child progressed extremely well, breezing through Davis public schools and earning a PhD from the University of Southern California when he was 19 years old.

One year while I was teaching in the Davis school district I had two very exceptional students in my first grade class; their vocabulary skills were “off the charts”. Both children were reading at 5<sup>th</sup> grade level, with ease. In May, I assigned the class the task of preparing a written mothers’ day greeting card. One of the exceptional children wrote the following message: *“Happy Mothers’ Day to truly one of the most wonderful mothers in the world. You showered me with love and kindness. You always met my needs in every way. Being a mother is one of the most important things in life, but I see you as so much more than a mother; you are a girl, a lady with excellent manners, a wife to my father, a pianist and violinist, a singer with a lovely voice and a writer of poetry. You are a complete person with so many talents and things you do well. Thank you for being my wonderful, charming mother.”*

Should this child’s intellectual capacity have been squandered learning “red” for a week, “blue” for a week and “green” for a week? Or should he have been given the opportunity to fully advance his intellectual skills? During my long career as an educator, I have always chosen the latter. *By the way ladies, how many of you would have liked to get a card like that from your son, at any age, let alone 6 years old?*

The other highly skilled child from that class graduated from the University of California with a Master’s degree. When she returned home after graduation, her mother asked her who her favorite teacher was, in her total school experience. She replied, *“Mrs. Huddleson”*. The mother replied, *“Why her? She was your first-grade teacher”*. The daughter replied: *“She was the one who recognized that I was capable of reading years above first-grade and she allowed me the opportunity to*

*work at a level that was challenging.*” When her mother called me to let me know what her daughter said, I was moved to tears.

Some may think that my methods have met with so much success because I am dealing with a select group of students in Davis, a college community with children coming from homes with very intelligent, highly educated and motivated parents. This was not always the case; I have worked with children from a wide variety of socioeconomic groups in the San Francisco Bay Area and in a rural community near Fresno California. In Davis, I worked several summers teaching kindergarten classes for the Migrant Education program, where most of the children had little or no familiarity with the English language. When they left me after 8 weeks of kindergarten, many had learned to read and all were capable of understanding a teacher who spoke English only. I have also worked with many children in my preschool whose parents were on the Welfare to Work program. My method has worked extremely well with this disparate group of children, several of whom have skipped a grade.

The following is a major example of how my methods can work for a child who has been evaluated and judged by other teachers as being “uneducable”. A kindergarten-aged boy was brought to me by his mother in late November several years ago. The child had been attending kindergarten since the beginning of the school year at two separate public schools; each school informed her that her son was not capable of learning. She was told that he did not have the ability to be educated, so he should be signed up for Social Security disability insurance. She removed her son from the public schools after receiving these reports and brought him to me. I began teaching the child basic reading skills and he responded very well, soon reading above kindergarten level. One morning he asked me: *“Why are you working so hard to teach me how to read?”* This was a pretty astute question from a child who was previously designated as *“not capable of learning”*. I responded that he deserved a good life and: *“You will read so well that you will be able to have a good job when you grow up. You can buy a nice car and have a good home; you can take care of your family”*. He was satisfied with my response and we proceeded with learning to read. When the Social Security Administration sent me the application forms at the end of the school year I returned them, with a note explaining that he did not qualify for disability, as he was a very capable, good student. At that point this kindergarten aged child was reading at a high second grade level. He has continued to be an outstanding student; about three years after he left my school I happened to see him while shopping. He ran up to me with a big smile and gave me a big hug. His



mother told me proudly that he was in fourth grade and that he was doing exceptionally well.

I describe several more examples of teaching successes and failures, both in teaching staff and in administration, in my book. The book is actually divided into two major sections: Section one is a description of the methods and techniques I use to enlighten and encourage children to become excellent readers. This section includes a highly annotated time-line for beginning readers and a description of how to encourage and motivate children to learn. It also includes descriptions of my teaching philosophy, experiences and background.

Section two includes twenty separate charts ranging from skills tests and reading rules to story starters and how to make little books relating to each child's special interests.

The Magic Door, Chart 19, is an example of one of the methods I use to teach word families. This is a simple graphic that children respond to very well; they love the fact that all the words are the same until you "magically" open the door and you have a whole bunch of new words, all closely related. Here's an example of the Magic Door for the "at" family.

To use it, the "door" is folded over the column of beginning consonants on the left side of the sheet, leaving only the "at" portion of the words exposed. You ask the children, *"what is this word?"* they answer, *"at"*. You then ask the children, *"What is the rule for a single vowel at the beginning of a word or syllable?"* From the reading rules they have learned in Chart 2 from my book, they will answer: *"When a word begins with a single vowel, the vowel is usually short"*.

Then you open the door, exposing the first column of consonants and ask them to read the list of "at" family words. The children are asked what the "a" in the "at" family says. They answer: *"The 'a' in the middle of the word is short."* They are asked why and they respond, again from Chart 2: *"When there is one vowel in a word and it is in the middle of the word it is short."* They are very excited to see all the words that are revealed behind the "Magic Door" in the "at" family.

Now I would like to show you a short video of some of the children I have taught. Three of the children will be reading after completing my pre-k program, followed by readings a year later, after completing my kindergarten class; notice the

tremendous growth in reading skills of each of the three children from one year to the next. Here's the link: [DKG Video](#)

For those of you who may wish to further pursue the resources in my book, it is available for download in a Kindle edition at Amazon.com. From the *Amazon home-page*, just search for "Shirley Huddleson" or search for "Guiding Young Children to Reading Excellence". You will also need to download the Amazon Kindle book reader app, available for free from the Amazon website.

Because of chart sizes and formats, the "Charts" section of the book is best read from a desktop computer - either a PC or Mac. The rest of my book can easily be read from a cell phone or tablet.

You can contact me through email at: "shirley@tender-learning-care.com"  
Please visit the web site for my preschool at: [Tender Learning Care](#)

If you have any questions about my presentation or about my book I would be very pleased to answer them. Before you leave, there is a stack of one-page handouts of background material with some additional thoughts available on the table, along with a stack of my business cards; please feel free to take a copy.  
*Thank you for your attention.*

***End of Presentation***

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## *Guiding Young Children to Reading Excellence\**

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1. In 1991, the “*International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement*” (IAEA) Reading Literacy Study assessed the reading literacy of fourth-graders in 27 countries. United States (U.S.) fourth-grade students ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>, outperformed only by Finland; U.S. students performed about the same as students from Sweden, while outperforming students from 24 other nations.
2. By December of 2008, U.S. fourth-grade students had fallen to 15<sup>th</sup> among nations in reading, according to the “*Program for International Student assessment*” (PISA).
3. By August of 2009, the U.S. had declined once again, falling to 18<sup>th</sup> among nations in reading, according to PISA.
4. By December of 2013, the U.S. ranking dropped to a *devastating* 24<sup>th</sup> in reading, again according to PISA.
5. In January of 2014, a study by the *Annie Casey foundation* reported that 66% of all fourth grade students in the U.S. and 80% of U.S. fourth grade students from lower income families were not reading proficiently.
6. According to a study in 2016, four nations who scored similar to the U.S. in 2011 scored *higher* than the U.S. in 2016. Those countries were: Ireland, Taipei, England and Poland. Students in Latvia and Moscow did not participate in 2011 testing, but did participate in 2016; they also scored *higher* than the U.S.
7. In December of 2017, a worldwide educational ranking study revealed that U.S. fourth-graders have flat lined in reading since 2001, allowing nations whose children used to perform worse than the U.S. to surpass the U.S. in international ranking.
8. California fourth graders ranked an abysmal 47<sup>th</sup> in the nation in reading and in math, according to a 2013 study by NAEP. In 2015, *California’s score* showed only 28% of fourth graders performing at or above the NAEP “proficient” level; OECD testing showed 18% of California students performed *at or below the lowest performance level*. Yet amazingly, even though California scores were lower than almost all of the other states, some leaders in California education claimed that *the “whole language approach to teaching children to read works better than phonics-based reading instruction”* and encouraged its continued use in California schools!
9. The Research Director of the *World History Group* has reported that the top three nations in reading today are Finland, Japan and South Korea. He postulates that one reason they score higher than other nations is because *they are smaller countries and are much more homogeneous, making it easier to maintain a standard*.
10. Additional speculation as to why the U.S. ranks so poorly in reading includes: *schools are not adequately funded; class size is too large; students are given unequal educational opportunities; teachers are not paid enough; and teacher training is inadequate*.

I strongly disagree with many of these statements. *Lack of homogeneity* probably is not why we have fallen behind other nations; In 1991 Finland and the U.S. were among the two top ranking nations in reading skills and the U.S. was a large nation with a *heterogeneous* population, much as we are today. But we did a *far better* job teaching our children to read, compared to other nations, *than we do today*. Furthermore, funding for each U.S. student is *higher* than that of

many of the other nations scoring higher than us. Also, classroom sizes *before 2000* were much larger than they have been in the past several years, consistently exceeding 30 children per class, and yet children scored much higher, according to international assessments.

Recall the sample videos from my web page; they provide convincing examples of how well phonics-based programs can perform. *All* of the children who complete my reading program, no matter their race, ethnicity, family structure or socio-economic background, perform at a level *well above* their peers when they are ready to enter the public schools. Children completing my kindergarten program *consistently read at third to sixth grade level*; they are truly ready to be at the top of their next class. This successful achievement rate has been the major impact of my phonics-based reading program for over 50 years; conversations with several of my former students (college and high school graduates) have confirmed the *long-lasting carryover effects* of my approach to teaching young children to read.

However, it is very reasonable to assume that *teacher training is often inadequate*. We need to provide our teachers with the tools that will allow them to succeed in providing a solid educational foundation. Teachers must know how to establish a satisfactory classroom management atmosphere, in which they can provide a supportive, inspiring educational environment that encourages children to master basic but very powerful skills: letter names, vowel and consonant sounds, reading rules, spelling and the phonograms. This focus should start in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. If our schools and pre-schools were to concentrate on these skills with four and five year olds, many would be reading years above grade level before entering first grade and even less mature children would still be far above the typical child starting in first grade. We *must* train our teachers in methods to guide young children to reading excellence, for the sake of our children and for the future of our country.

\*My book is available on Amazon, just click on the following link:

[Guiding Young Children to Reading Excellence](#)

You can contact me through email at: “[shirley@tender-learning-care.com](mailto:shirley@tender-learning-care.com)”

Please visit the web site for my preschool at: [Tender Learning Care](#)

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