



Grant and Denise Ford taught their children Michael and Magdalen to read by the age of two

PICTURES: FRANCIS OLIVER

**If you think your child's education doesn't start until they turn five, think again. The best time for them to begin learning may actually be before they get to school**

# Teaching your child

## – when should you begin?

**M**ichael Ford was just 23 months old when he read his first book. By two, he could identify the first 20 chemical elements in the periodic table of elements from both their symbols and their atomic structures.

Before he turned three, he could recite the Greek alphabet and identify the individual letters. He also knew many breeds of dog and cat, different flowers and herbs and recognised works of many famous artists. By the age of five, he had a reading level of between eight and nine.

A child genius? No, say his parents Grant and Denise.

Neither Michael (9), nor his sister Magdalen (6) – who is also advanced for her age – are exceptionally bright, says Grant.

He reckons every child is capable of such incredible results, if only they are given the chance.

Child development research shows half of a child's potential intelligence, or their ability to learn, is developed before the age of four.

A further 30 percent is added over the next four years but, the older we get, the harder learning becomes.

Children's ability to not only enjoy school but to perform well may be directly affected by the amount of stimulation they get in preschool years, when important pathways in the brain are being developed.

Grant and Denise Ford have always believed children find learning easier if they are encouraged right from an early age. In fact, the couple were

so passionate about helping Michael's development they created their own accelerated learning system, which is now sold as Reading Master.

Combining the best practices of leading educators such as Philadelphia-based child development guru Glenn Doman and Italian educational reformer Maria Montessori, they began showing Michael flashcards with realistic pictures and words in 6cm-high lettering when he was about 12 months old. The cards were used three times a day, every day, with 10 different cards shown to him for about 10 seconds at a time.

They also labelled major items in their home and would take Michael around each one, teaching him what the item was and what the word for it looked like.

"A child will learn whatever is available for them to learn," says Grant. "If their environment is filled with the building blocks of reading, mathematics and writing from an early age, the child will read, write and do maths from an early age – learning these skills alongside other early masteries, such as walking and talking, needed to survive in our world."

Waiting until the child gets to school could be leaving it too late.

"I think people have, over the past 30 years, bought into the idea school is the place to educate children. That's what's been accepted but many parents have unknowingly set up their children to struggle with school."

Adds Denise, "Children naturally learn language between

0 and 4. This is when they are not only most willing to learn but are best able to do so.

"There's nothing a child wants to do more than learn. They don't constantly ask, 'What's this?' or 'Why?' for nothing. They really want to know." Both Michael and Magdalen loved every minute of their learning programme, she says.

Children can absorb knowledge through three different learning styles – visual, audio and kinesthetic-tactile (doing or feeling).

"Each child is an individual with different learning strengths. They need exposure to all learning styles in order to develop," says Denise.

She recalls the experience of one school where six children with learning difficulties caught up with

Tinytown centre. "I couldn't even dress or feed myself. They taught me everything."

Angela believes the problem is not that parents don't want to assist their children's development but that many simply don't know how to begin.

"I have heard teachers talking about children turning up at school at five unable to open the zip of their own bag, because their parents have never actually shown them how to do it."

Jane Hall, national coordinator of the Home Instruction Programme for Preschool Youngsters (Hippy), says many parents are hamstrung by their own upbringing.

Hippy is a 70 percent privately-funded programme which shows low-income parents how to teach their preschoolers, so they don't start school at a disadvantage.

"People learn by example. Parents who haven't had good experiences themselves as children may be limited in what they can do for their own."

"People think it's okay because school will help catch their kids up – but it won't. The child who starts school with a developmental age of three will almost always stay lagging behind."

Graeme McKay, principal of Auckland's Bailey Road Primary School, says, "A lot of people are under the impression children can't do anything until they are five, whereas we know of some who have been speaking two languages from the age of two."

"There's huge potential for children to learn so much before they start school but it's underestimated by a lot of parents. We need to help them become good first educators."

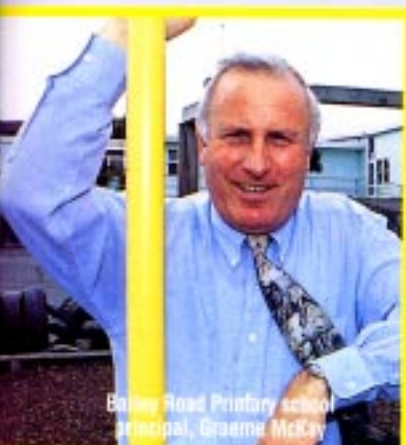
"Even the type of conversation parents have with children can affect their development. Some range from virtually nil to chastising or telling them to 'shut up and watch TV'."

"I've had parents say, 'If you have any trouble with my kid, punch him in the head,' and they've really meant it."

**Judith Thompson**



Angela Wilson-Salisbury: Parents want to help but don't know how



Bailey Road Primary School principal, Graeme McKay

their peers after Reading Master CD-ROMs were incorporated into their school programme for half an hour a day, over three months.

A special needs teacher who asked the Fords to help with a 14-year-old autistic boy was rewarded when he read his first sentence after using the system. He is now reading at a seven-year-old level.

Angela Wilson-Salisbury is another early learning success story. Raised in a dysfunctional family with 11 siblings, she became a ward of the state at four and was first fostered then later adopted by early childhood education pioneers, Paul and Rosemary Wilson, who established the Tinytown Learning Centres in 1973.

"I couldn't read or write a single word at the age of four, when Paul and Rosemary took me in. I had no social skills," says Angela, now a mother of four and a qualified early childhood educator and manager at Auckland's Mt Wellington



## Learning the basics

● A \$3 million public information campaign informing parents and others about how they can help children learn to read, write and do maths starts next month as part of the Government's \$19.5 million literacy and numeracy strategy.

The strategy follows a series of studies indicating New Zealand students are not doing as well as they could in the core subjects.

In January, the Education Review Office found two-thirds of the country's preschools are not following the voluntary state curriculum, Te Whaariki, for reading and maths. This means tens of thousands of children are going to school disadvantaged in the basics.

Other studies have shown New Zealand nine-year-olds are performing well below their international peers in maths, while about 17 percent of six-year-olds end up in reading recovery programmes each year.