

Learning to read with Down syndrome

 By Karen Meyer

July 27, 2006 - Teaching children to read is both fun and challenging but children with Down syndrome learn to read in a different way.

Children with Down syndrome can learn to read as young as preschool age.

Once they start the results are incredible. Three days a week at Gigi's Playhouse in Hoffman Estates, children are taught reading.

"The easiest way for them to learn to read is to teach them whole words first," said Shari Address.

Shari is the literacy program director and mother of a child with Down syndrome.

"We have individual sessions for kids where we developed an individual program, we make materials for them, we adapt books that they might be reading in school to help them be more successful at school," she said. "We just starting doing tutoring in a small group setting which is going to help them generalize that to when they go to school, they're going to be learning in small groups."

Gigi and Jessica are three years old. They are learning to read using pictures with sight words.

"We teach them to read first their name and then mommy and daddy and you know their brothers and sisters names," said Shari. "It's very highly motivating for them and we sort of lead them through the whole program using those words."

Jessica' mom Gayle Gianopulos says her daughter is doing great.

"She wants to read all the time," said Gayle. "Her favorite pastime is really pulling out the books from her bookcase and reading."

The group of children at Gigi's Playhouse range in age from five to seven and half.

Beth Spenadel's son Jacob will be starting second grade this fall. He started reading at two and half.

"He's got 150 sight words in his vocabulary right now so we can read beginning level books," said Beth.

"He does math, we've incorporated reading into his math, we use his sight words so that when he reads a math paper, he has to look at the words, ' I see two brown horses I see one black horse and then how many horses all together'," said Beth.

Gigi's literacy program is growing. Parents are strongly encouraged to be part of program.

"I've had people from Champaign that have come and spent a day and just made materials," said Shari. "We've had a woman who was going to India and had a nephew with Down syndrome and wanted materials to bring back to him in India."

"This program has been amazing in giving her the jumpstart that she probably can use and she's been blowing everybody away at school," said Gayle, of her daughter Jessica.

Gigi's literacy program is free. For more information call (847) 885-PLAY or visit www.gigisplayhouse.com .

GiGi's Playhouse
1069 West Golf Road
Hoffman Estates, IL 60169



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