Chapter 4
Right Brain Theory

(Put Your Right Brain in and Shake It All About)

One reason many people object to the idea of teaching babies to read is that these tiny tots don't learn how to read in the same manner as older kids do in school. It is true that tiny children can't learn to read with the same instruction methods common in today's schools. If you are imagining strict phonics lessons and assigned reading hours to complete each week, well, it isn't going to work. Right brain learning theories shed some light on why these traditional teaching methods can't work with very young children and explain some better methods for instructing them.

Are you ambidextrous? Most of us are not. Most people have one hand they favor to write and eat with and perhaps even a foot that is more easily controlled to press pedals when driving a car and so forth. Traditional thinking is that most of us also have one side of our brain that is more dominant. For the majority of people this is thought to be the left side of the brain.

Most traditional teaching methods are geared to teach to the left side of the brain. The left side of the brain is logical and likes to follow linear patterns. The left side of the brain is believed to be more responsible for verbal skills and short term memory. Left brain dominant people generally learn well when they hear information. Those who are left brain dominant are able to show their work for how they got the correct math problem or explain the logic behind an answer, requiring reasoning skills.

The right brain, on the other hand, is believed to be more visual and responsible for long term learning. Those who are right brain dominant tend to be able to *see* the answer to a problem without always being able to explain how they got it. These bright and creative individuals may

even be penalized in traditional schooling for not being able to show their work or explain their reasoning.

Right brain learning theorists, such as Glenn Doman, claim that at birth the right side of the brain is more dominant. Later in life the left brain generally becomes more dominant and overshadows some of the abilities of the right brain. By tapping into the incredible abilities of the right brain early, it may be possible to unlock the inner genius believed to be within every child.

Maximum learning potential may be achievable by teaching with methods designed to stimulate children's right brain when children are small (and right brain dominant) and introducing more left brain reasoning and logic as the child grows.

Glenn Doman was a right brain theorist and perhaps the first to advocate teaching tiny kids to read in his seminal work *How to Teach your Baby to Read* back in 1964. Doman worked with developmentally delayed children. Yet using his methods, they learned to read earlier than "normal" children. He then began to wonder why people didn't teach normal children earlier. Doman concluded if these brain-injured children can learn to read at such a young age, we must learn how to teach the average child and unlock their hidden potential.

Doman discovered many extraordinary things tiny children could be taught to do, not just in the area of reading, but in mathematics, memory potential, and even physical potential. Glenn Doman recognized exceptional abilities in infants and concluded, "Every child born has, at the moment of birth, a greater potential intelligence than Leonardo da Vinci ever used."[8] He believed that when parents recognized this potential and began to cultivate these amazing abilities, they could help their child unlock and hone these skills.

In *How to Teach your Baby to Read*, Doman outlines what were then quite radical and yet simple methods for unlocking

8 http://www.gentlerevolution.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=LETTER&Store_Code=G

right brain potential and teaching your baby to read through the use of flashcards. By rapidly showing babies and tiny children single words in very large print, one can expose a child to written language, at the same time they are acquiring spoken language, in a manner that they can actually process. The use of large print and the speed of the process activates the right brain's neural processes and allows the very small child to utilize the visual information.

Glenn Doman's original idea was to prepare stacks of large flashcards ahead of time, then sit down with the child when he is in a good mood, and actively engage him in a fun and exciting learning activity. The parent would quickly show the child one or more sets of cards, saying each word out loud (less than one second per flashcard card) one to three times a day. The parent would make sure to stop when the child lost interest, long before showing frustration or anger.

Today, computers can make this process easier and simpler. There is no need to write or print cards, fumble during presentation, or even bother to store such large stacks of paper. Perhaps using some sturdy, physical flashcards to engage children through the sense of touch is useful, but the bulk of the flashcards can easily be viewed on a computer, tablet, or even a smart phone if the font is large.

Doman recognized that the younger the child was, the easier he was to teach. He said, "Before the age of five a child can easily absorb tremendous amounts of information. If the child is younger than four it will be easier and more effective, before three even easier and much more effective, and before two the easiest and most effective of all."[9] Teaching small children is actually easier than the usual method of waiting until they are older.

He also recognized that lessons shouldn't be dull or boring. Doman thought that learning should be fun. Two of his Cardinal Points concerning tiny kids are, "Little kids

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9 *How to Teach Your Baby Math*. Revised edition, 2006. Page 88.

would rather learn than eat" and, "Kids would much rather learn than play."[10]

Showing children flashcards should not be a loathsome experience. Use an animated tone of voice. Have a positive and encouraging expression on your face. Use gestures or even sign language to captivate your child's attention. Make learning a game. Make new games to play when learning activities become routine. Sing songs. Love your child. Use physical affection appropriately to show your child that you simply love him or her and enjoy being together.

Glenn and his wife recognized that parents were their child's best teacher. They thought that even in their worst moments, parents were better teachers for their own child than even the best teacher in the world. You are your child's best teacher.

Doman advocates using lots of vocabulary flashcards, believing it is better to learn a smaller percentage of a huge number of words than 100% of a small number. The parent should also add in both large and small words. Learning all short words can be boring and size differences can give initial clues when the child is still learning the words. The parent should also include funny and interesting words that have personal meaning to the child as well. Useful and personal words like *mommy*, *daddy*, *milk*, *more*, and even funny ones like *belly button* are often learned first and retained the best.

Flashcard-based lessons activate right brain, learning so quickly it happens almost subconsciously. The child has no chance to get bored or frustrated. Glenn Doman advises, and we agree, that you should always try to stop a learning session before your child becomes actively upset or frustrated in order to keep the experience fun for him or her. Short flashcard sessions pack a lot of learning into a short amount of time, maximizing efficiency and long-term retention.

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10 *How to Teach Your Baby Math*. Revised edition, 2006. Page 42.

Utilizing right brain theory to maximize your child's innate potential can give parents a powerful tool with which to teach their child.

A note about current research

New research by University of Utah scientists has recently been released that is causing people to doubt the validity of using the terms "right brain" or "left brain" to describe individuals. After examining brain scans of several individuals, they found that no side of the brain was used more frequently. Although this research has been described as groundbreaking, when one takes a closer look at the actual experiment, the claims are rather unconvincing. The brain scans the scientists observed only cover 5–10 minutes of time while the individuals were at rest. It seems unlikely that any sort of conclusion could be drawn from such a miniscule amount of data. Furthermore, this study did not observe young children, for whom right brain theory was developed.[11, 12]

New research will continue to be released and may shed more light on the neurological complexities of the brain, but in reality, the brain is such a complex and amazing organ that we won't ever know exactly how it functions.

Right brain theory may or may not prove to be scientifically sound, but many people have learned to read using Glenn Doman's methods. Even if the reasons behind Glenn's theory are proved false, it in no way disproves the fact that Glenn's method has worked for many individuals over the decades.

11 Nielsen JA, Zielinski BA, Ferguson MA, Lainhart JE, Anderson JS (2013) An Evaluation of the Left-Brain vs. Right-Brain Hypothesis with Resting State Functional Connectivity Magnetic Resonance Imaging. PLoS ONE 8(8): e71275. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0071275 http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0071275

12 "Researchers Debunk Myth of "Right-brain" and "Left-brain"Personality Traits." http://healthcare.utah.edu/publicaffairs/news/current/08-14-2013_brain_personality_traits.html

While we have never found one early reading theorist with whom we agree 100%, we have gleaned bits and pieces of wisdom from many of them, Glenn Doman included. Using paper and digital flashcards proved to be the most effective tool for us to teach our own children. We do a variety of activities with flashcards, sometimes very quickly (similar to how right brain theorists would) but sometimes much more slowly. We cover how we actually use flashcards in chapter 9.