

The Rocking Chair Method

by Diane Hurst

When my children were young, we used what I like to call the “rocking chair method” of instruction. Each child had a “notebook,” which was a three-pronged report folder with pockets. The notebook contained only a few pages, ones we were currently working on. Every school day, all through the year (including summer), it was part of our daily routine to do each child’s “notebook.” One at a time, they would come sit on my lap in the rocking chair (or next to me on the couch, when they became older) and we would go through all the pages in the notebook.

We started notebooks when a child was preschool-age, and an alphabet page and a number page were always the first two pages introduced. I made pages myself, using ink pens, felt pens, and colored pencils, on both white and colored paper and cardstock.

On the alphabet page, we would sing the ABC song, and ask questions like “Where is ‘m’?” or “What’s this letter?” The number page had a large circle with numbers one to twelve written around the inside of it, to make a clock. I would say, “Let’s go ‘round the clock,” and we would say, “one o’clock, two o’clock, three o’clock,” etc. while pointing at each number.

We went over the same few pages every day, until each page was thoroughly learned. When the child could easily recite a page by himself, it would be taken out and a new page would be put in.

We found doing “notebooks” to be easy to do year-round, even though our usual homeschool schedule changed for the summer, because it only took about five to ten minutes to go through a notebook. I usually did notebooks with the kids in the early morning, often before breakfast. Then the rest of the day was open for various activities—other schoolwork during the regular school year, and playing, swimming, and outings in the summer.

“Rocking chair” learning was a great way to introduce and reinforce letter names and sounds, forming sounds into words, counting and other number concepts, as well as a few other things; preschoolers always learned their name, address and phone number, and older children learned the pledge of allegiance and the location of geographical places on blank maps. Sometimes we included songs (such as “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” and “I’m a Little Teapot”), rhymes or chants, and poetry.

In the next part of this article, I’ll give some ideas for notebook pages, based on some of our favorite pages. But the possibilities for other notebook pages are unlimited. You could use a notebook page to thoroughly learn any topic or concept. For example, if you were doing a unit study on anatomy, you could provide pages with pictures of bones, organs, and major muscles to identify. If studying astronomy, you could have a page of planets, and pages of constellations. For biology, you could have pages with living things like birds, sea life, insects, plants, and parts of a cell. Words in foreign languages could be learned by using pictures of foods, clothes, dishes, furniture, toys, animals, transportation, etc.

The ideal age group for the “rocking chair” teaching method is preschool to early elementary. This is the age in which children like to repeat things, and they also like to have close physical contact. I experimented with making a baby notebook, for a one-year-old, with one of my kids, and that was kind of fun—it had visual things, like a picture of a refrigerator that you could open the door to, and see what was inside. So I can see there are possibilities to use the notebook concept for younger ages than preschool. One of my daughters continued doing a notebook into about fifth grade. Most of the others only went through about second grade, mainly because I had run out of time to make pages for the higher levels of study.

To give examples of some specific pages, here are descriptions of many of our favorite pre-school age pages.

Months of the Year Page

We had a small picture symbolizing each month, and sang the names of the months of the year to the tune of “Frere Jaques”:

*January, February,
March, April, May.
June, July, August,
September, October,
November, December,
Are the months of the year.*

Days of the Week Page

We had seven connected rectangles, each a different color, and a day of the week written at the top of each. And we sang the days of the week song that we had learned from watching “Mr. Rogers Neighborhood.”

Family Member Names Page

This was a page with “Mommy,” “Daddy,” and siblings’ first names written on it. I used a different color for each name. It was a good way to have the young child start to learn what words are, and begin to recognize some words.

Phone Number Page

Our home phone number was written in large numbers, and we sang it to the tune of “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star”:

Three-three-six, one-one-four-eight... Three-three-six, one-one-four-eight...etc.

Mary at the Cottage Door Page

This is a fun counting rhyme. On this page, we had a picture of a little house with a path leading up to the door (under the numerals one, two three, four, written very large) and a picture of a plate of cherries (under the numerals five, six, seven, eight). The rhyme goes:

*One, two, three, four,
Mary at the cottage door,
Five, six, seven, eight,
Eating cherries off a plate.*

We had a lot of fun with this page, and my young kids did it every day for a long time, without getting tired of it.

Buckle My Shoe Page

This is another counting rhyme—good as a sequel to “Mary at the Cottage Door,” since the counting goes all the way to ten. We had some simple illustrations along with numbers, on this page. The rhyme is:

*One, two, buckle my shoe.
Three, four, shut the door.
Five, six, pick up sticks.
Seven, eight, lay them straight.
Nine, ten, a big fat hen.*

Matching Letters Pages

We had a lot of letter matching pages. Capitals were learned first, so there were pages for matching a group of capital letters to the same capital letters, using themes. For example, a circle in the middle of the page held some capital letters, and each of these letters was also put on small pictured objects that were scattered around the rest of the page. We used leaves for one page, raindrops for another, and flowers for another. To use these pages, I would point to a letter in the circle and ask my child to find it on one of the scattered objects.

Later, we matched some capitals to some lower-case letters, using other pages. One page we liked simply had two circles on the page, with some letters in them. One circle held upper-case letters and the other held lower-case. I would ask things like, “Where is big ‘G’?” and “Where is little ‘G’?”

There were also some letter flap pages. These had some pictures of things that start with certain letters along with some little windows that could be opened to find a letter. The child would open up a window, say what the letter was, and then find pictures (two or three) of things that start with the letter.

Alphabet Page

There was an alphabet page with the entire alphabet in both upper-case and lower-case letters. The way the letters were arranged, there were a row of capital letters with a row of small letters directly beneath them, and several sets of rows were used to make the whole alphabet. We used this page to sing the alphabet song.

Consonant Train Page

I made a train-themed page for practicing the consonant sounds. It had a train engine, twenty-one cars, and a caboose. On each car there was a consonant letter (in alphabetical order). The child would say the sound each letter makes, while I pointed to each car.

Number Matching Page

This page had numbers zero to ten in a column at the left, and numbers on flowers scattered on the rest of the page. I would point to one of the numbers in the column, say its name, and ask, “Where’s the number (six) flower?”

Number Counting Pages

We had several types of counting pages. There were picture pages, which had no numbers. They just had various amounts pictured—for example, one apple tree, two apple trees together, three apple trees together, etc. up to five apple trees, all on one page.

There were pages that only had numbers. One had the numerals one to ten written diagonally up the page, and another page (which we put right next to the one to ten page) had the numerals eleven to twenty written diagonally up the page. I, or the child, would point to each number as he/she counted.

We also had a page that we used after numbers one to twenty were mastered, which had twenty to one hundred.

Shape Pages

One of our favorite shape pages was a “shape dolly.” This was a figure of a girl made completely out of geometric shapes. We had some other shape pictures, too.

Song Pages

I enjoyed singing songs with my young children, using song pages. Each page had an illustration, and sometimes the words were written on the page, too. Some of our favorites for three to five year-olds were, “I’m a Little Teapot,” “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” and “B-I-N-G-O.”

Rebus Rhyme Pages

Words to a rhyme were written on a page, but instead of some of the words, there were pictures. I would read the rhyme, and when we came to the pictures, the child would fill in the words. Rebus pages were a lot of fun, and they make young children more familiar with how reading is done.

Some concluding suggestions and thoughts:

If you don't feel skilled enough at artwork to make your own illustrations for pages, there are other options: You could use pictures you print out from the internet (if you put pictures you want to use onto a document or j-peg file, and transfer them to a jump drive, you can have them printed in color at a copy center).

You can also cut pictures from inexpensive books, or buy sets of flashcards and use their pictures. Or you could ask a friend or an older child to help you make some pictures.

The "rocking chair method" is such an easy way for children to learn many things. It's also a great way to have regular one-on-one time with each child. I hope you will try it, and you and your children will enjoy it as much as we have.

*Diane and Michael Hurst have nine children, and have been homeschooling for over 25 years. Michael is an educational technology teacher who teaches public school and university. Diane is a stay-at-home mom, home teacher, writer, artist, and song writer. Diane and Michael have a homeschool curriculum business called Gentle Shepherd (www.gentleshepcurr.com). Among Gentle Shepherd's products are some preschool materials which Diane has used with her own children, and has recently made into books. One of these is **Preschool Beginning Notebook Set I**, an e-book with fifteen colorful pages that can be printed out for use in preschool notebooks.*

Note: This article has been joined to another and published by *The Old Schoolhouse Magazine* as a WeE-book. WeE-books are short, very inexpensive e-books. The WeE-book includes photos and some samples pages from Gentle Shepherd's *Preschool Beginning Notebook Set I*. The title of the WeE-book is *Homeschooling With Young Children*. It is available at www.theoldschoolhousestore.com.

Here is a direct link to the WeE-book:

<http://www.theoldschoolhouse.com/product/homeschooling-with-young-children>