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More Than Words: How a Spelling Bee Can Round Out Your Child

by Sue Douglass Fliess

“Serrefine.” That was last year’s Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee’s final word. If it weren’t spelled out in front of you, would you know where to begin? Do you even know what it means? (“a small forceps for clamping a blood vessel”). If you were the one competing you would. Why? Because preparing for and participating in a spelling bee goes far beyond learning how to spell long or complicated words.

There’s no getting around it, children must study for spelling bees. But despite what you may think, it’s not hour upon grueling hour of memorization. According to Linda Wood, senior editor at Merriam-Webster and former judge for the Scripps National Spelling Bee, “The way the children learn the words is not just by rote studying, but through etymology and learning roots, pronunciations, and multiple definitions. This is invaluable in terms of building vocabulary.” Once children learn to break down words, they can decipher meanings of related words, develop a more extensive vocabulary and become better readers and writers overall. Wood adds, “With better reading comprehension, comes greater literacy, and greater enjoyment of reading, literature and language. All from understanding words.”

Let’s debunk one myth right now – that spelling bees make kids nervous or scared. Bees are adrenaline-pumping to be sure, just like basketball games or swim meets are, because they are competitions. Kids are just flexing a different set of muscles, and the game takes place in an auditorium, rather than on a football field. Children who compete, at least on a national level, are taken out on the town and essentially treated like celebrities. Wood explains, “Even when a child gets a word wrong, he or she is not usually devastated, as some would believe. They are actually enjoying themselves.”

So what can you do at home to encourage your child’s love of language and potential spelling bee participation? Host a home spelling bee. Play word games with your child. Help your child realize the studying part doesn’t have to be boring, repetitive or a chore. He’ll learn language history, and that playing with word meanings can be fun. Let him know he’s good at it and ask him to try new words. Then he may be more willing to compete and take the next step.

Not only can spelling bee preparation help raise SAT scores, but it can also enhance a child’s growth in terms of life skills. Bees teach discipline and competition, and are a great confidence booster. And while it does take practice and regular studying, kids may also find it rewarding and fun. Many make lifelong friends through the bee, who share their interest in language.



What's the value in being a good speller, gaining a better appreciation for language and literature and forging new friendships? That's one no one needs to spell out for you.

For some more word inspiration, check out www.wordcentral.com

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