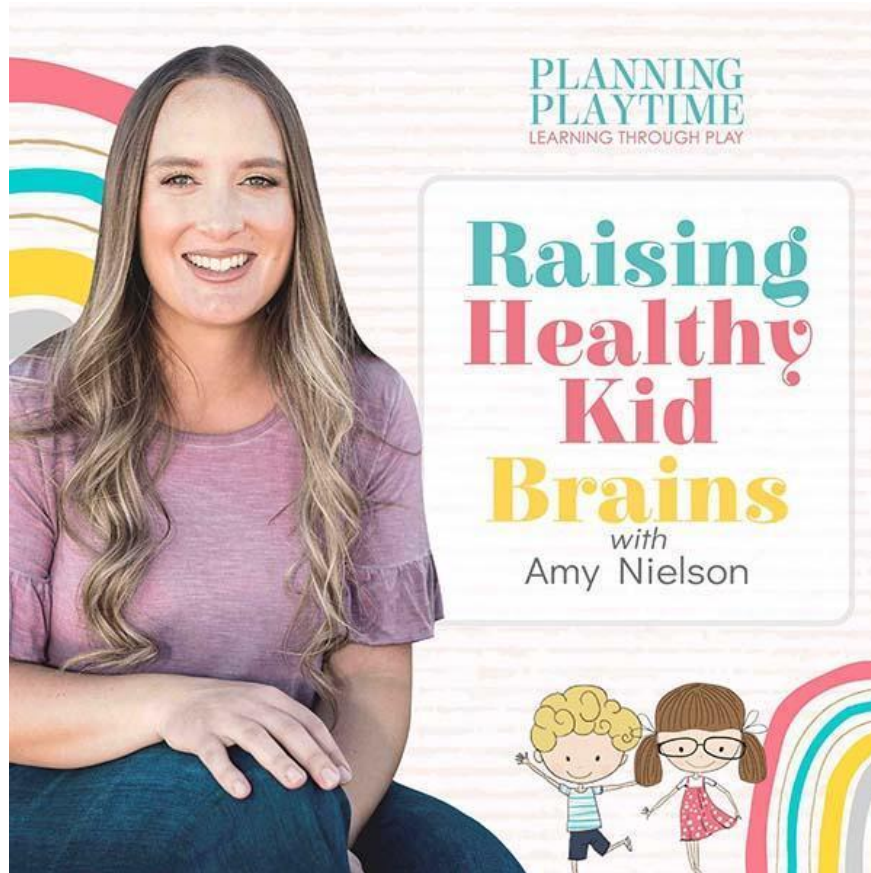


Ep #46: The Power of the Play to Read Program with Angela Mason



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Amy Nielson

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What would a teacher use at home to teach their own child to read? Today I'm talking with Angela Mason who was a teacher and then has now been at home teaching her own children to read. Angela has been a member of our Planning Playtime community for a number of years and we had a lovely conversation about how she is using the Play to Read program at home with her kids to teach them to read. We talked about why it works, both the science of reading as well as the addition of play.

And then things got very, very real as Angela shared something really personal about someone in her life who is not able to read and the real life struggles that that causes. It was such a touching conversation and one I'm so grateful that I got to have. I hope you'll enjoy it. It's coming up right after this.

Welcome to the *Raising Healthy Kid Brains* podcast where moms and teachers come to learn all about kids' brains, how they work, how they learn, how they grow and simple tips and tricks for raising the most resilient, kind, smart, compassionate kids we can. All while having lots of grace and compassion for ourselves because you know what? We all really need and deserve that too. I am your host, Amy Nielson. Let's get ready to start the show.

Amy: Angela, welcome to the show.

Angela: Hi. I'm so excited to be here and to talk to you and meet you.

Amy: This is so much fun. So for those of you that don't know this yet, Angela has been with us and a part of our Planning Playtime community for years and years and joined us on a lot of our live shows and has been in a lot of our programs and her cute little girls. And we've been able to do a lot of fun things together. And so this is so fun. This is our first time chatting live in person though, right?

Angela: It is and yeah, I'm really excited. I had to shoo the kids out because the girls wanted to talk to you too, but I was like, "No, this is for me, only me."

Amy: Yeah, they remembered a conversation we had on one of my live shows on the Planning Playtime page about the dinosaurs in my backyard because I

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live in Utah, where we have a lot of dinosaur bones. And so I'm going to have to send Matilda a picture later maybe of the dinosaurs and where my kids and I got to go see them digging them out of the ground, that would be so fun.

Angela: She would be so excited. Dinosaurs are just, they continue to be a source of amazement for her, she just loves dinosaurs.

Amy: I love that curiosity, that's so fantastic. That's amazing. Well, tell me a little bit about your experience and how you found us and why you found us. Are you schooling some kids at home? Tell us a little bit about that.

Angela: So I think I found you during COVID maybe, in 2020. So we were obviously, like the world, locked down. I was locked down with not quite three and a half year old, 20 month old and a newborn baby who didn't sleep and a husband who was out on the farm calving cows. And it was not much fun for me. And then I stumbled on Facebook across a live, your Planning Playtime and saw all these really cool binders and things that you were making. And Matilda was just getting into wanting to learn to read. She wasn't quite learning to read but wanted to do more things.

And obviously we couldn't pop to the shops and we couldn't do any of that. I do have an amazing craft cupboard. So we started watching your lives every week and Matilda liked to join in. And then we printed some binders off and we just kind of, it grew from there. And then you did this amazing Play to Read program, which I said to my husband, I was like, "I need that." And he's like, "Do you really need it?" He's like, "Matilda's going to go to school. You're not teaching anymore." And I'm like, "So well, how about if we get lockdown again when Matilda's at school, then I'll get it then." And he's like, "Okay."

And such a shame, we got lockdown. And also in Matilda's first year of school, you couldn't cough. You couldn't sneeze. You got sent home. So every little cough, which she just kept getting. I was like, "Well, we have to stay at home." And I was like, "But that's okay, because we have Amy's folder." Because let's not call [inaudible], it's Amy's folder which is sitting and we'll just do that every day. And it was just, I felt it was okay. It was okay that she was missing school

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because we had Play to Read, we were keeping on top of it. She loved it. It was just great. It was just great.

Amy: I love it so much. Okay, so I love that she calls it Amy's folder instead of Play to Read. That's the cutest thing ever. What an adorable kiddo. So had you tried working with her and learning to read it all before you started using the Play to Read program or was this the first program you used for kind of teaching, starting to introduce her to reading?

Angela: So I was a teacher. So I did 10 years as an early childhood teacher, teaching zero to fours or zero to fives. And then I retrained and became a primary school teacher, which meant I could teach five year olds, which is where, in New Zealand on your fifth birthday you start school. So I knew how to teach children to read but it wasn't the same at home. I could be a teacher in a classroom, that was fine, but when I tried to do the same thing with Matilda, she was like, "Yeah, I don't want to sit and listen. No, don't do that. Don't do flashcards with me, mom, that's not how it works."

So it was just completely, it was a whole different way of learning. So she learned all the alphabet through play. So I taught a very systematic logical phonics program. I was a bit before my time maybe. We didn't have decodable text, there was nothing like that, or the ones that I saw were really rubbish. So when your Play to Read program came out, I'm like, "Oh my goodness, that's how I teach. Look, that's got activities, they're hands on. She can play. There's nothing I need to go out and buy. And then there's a reading passage afterwards."

It was just slotted perfectly into the gap of how I knew you should teach and gave me all the resources to do it, but in a fun way that Matilda wanted to learn. So yeah, but she just loved sitting up at the table. Some days we'd do one, some days we'd do two. If we got close to the certificates, the certificates were the bonus. Then we'd have to do a couple because we could get a certificate at the end because we'd finished. So Matilda was in school for almost a year. And then we pulled her out, and now we homeschool.

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Millie turned five in May. So I now homeschool two. Millie is completely different to Matilda. Whereas Matilda would sit nicely and just read, Millie will sit nicely and do her math, will sit nicely and do her writing. But when it came to reading, she's a Flibberty Gibber and she wriggles and she, I don't know, she just can't sit still. But with the little manipulatives on your Play to Read, she's got something to [inaudible] with. She can't sit on a chair. The chair has to be moved away, she has to stand up. But she has a frog that jumps from lily pad to lily pad. She has an apple she has to put in the basket. It just totally focuses her.

But also if she needs to make great big movements, then the frog just jumps higher. And I've learned to just come and just go, "That's cool, the frog's jumping higher." She's still learning. She's still doing the activity. Yeah, she is just flying through it. So at the end of a lesson I will go, "Okay, turn the page, what do we need for this?" And we'll hunt around the house. I have a little box that we've collected cows and cars and everything that we need. Wonderful. Or I love this one. This one's my favorite, this little string where you say the letter, so c-a-t, that's such [crosstalk].

Amy: Blending, yes, that's fantastic.

Angela: And so everything's in my little box, which is William's favorite box, my 19 month old. He likes to empty the box and play with the cars, but it has to stay on the table and then it goes away when we finish the folder work.

Amy: I love that. What I think is so beautiful about what you just talked about is that we know that kids kind of come with different personalities. So I have five kids. And my kids have different personalities too, so I get that. But what I love is that it just works so well for your different girls in different ways. So, Matilda was able to kind of use it to sit and read through the passages and work through it, but enjoy it and really have fun and have it be playful and still get that systematic phonics instruction but in a fun way.

And then Millie is being able to use the movement to focus which is challenging because learning to read is one of those things we have to kind of hot wire our brain and we didn't come with the reading part of our brains. We're hot wiring

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and trying to build these connections between the visual part of our brain and the speech part of our brain. And it takes a minute when you're changing your brain to grow those new connections. And so if you're already having a hard time focusing then gosh, it's just tricky.

And so I love that that's something that's helping and I love that you're going with it and letting her just kind of, I mean, that takes some little bit of patience. But my gosh, what a cool thing for her to get to experience reading that way instead of flash cards or something that would just make it even more difficult for her to focus without that freedom of movement. And being able to bring that in as part of it, it's just part of the play. And this is, I think that power of stacking play with the science of reading is just this most magical combination.

Angela: It is really cool and it's just, I think because I was a really creative teacher, we can just think out of the box sometimes. So I've got our first, and Matilda started on set two because she was already reading. So she started on set two and the first one is the silent E, this is what totally got her hooked, the silent E and the little magic wand. And you were supposed to put an E on the top, but we made a fairy which is a bit worn, but we made this fairy who, because it was magic. It's a magic E so you need a magic fairy.

So she came home, our little fairy, and I think that just hooked Matilda. Because then we used her a couple of times during that unit and she just loved her little fairy. Because we were at school, so they've just adopted a new phonics program here in New Zealand and that's all I will say. And Matilda was in a split level class, so she was in year one too. She was the youngest in the class, and she was the top reader. And I had one mom come to me and say, "How, why is Matilda still progressing, why is she still reading when we're only getting one reader home a week?"

And I went, "Because we're not reading that reader, because she doesn't like it. It doesn't work for us." I said, "So we're doing this really cool program called Play to Read." And I showed her my folder and I gave her one lesson and I said, "Look, this is what you need to do. You need to make a wand." So she had a little boy and she went, "Yeah, that's not going to work, he's a boy."

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Amy: We can't do a fairy a fairy wand for a silent E, yeah.

Angela: So he got a drumstick because he was learning to play the drums. So he gets the drumstick to, I don't know, tap, pound, I don't know, change the silent E to change the word. And that was it. So she was hooked. So she then went and got the program. And when he was away sick or even when he went to school. He would run to the cupboard and grab his workout, and he'd do it. And she was really excited about it. And she was just talking to me the other day and she said, "He was off sick and he's been off sick for a few days, he actually has a proper cold. And so he ran to the cupboard to grab his folder out."

And she's like, "And it's finished. He's done. And he was just devastated because he didn't have his reading to do. And he didn't have his fun stuff to do." So I just thought that's the ultimate, isn't it? Isn't that what you want? You want them to love it so much that even when they've finished, they still want more. And his reading is rocketing, his reading is rocketing and it's all due to our sitting down to do the Play to Read program. I can totally say that's what it is, because that wasn't anything else they were doing at school.

Amy: I just love to hear that because this is something I'm so passionate about. This is what got me into play based education in the first place was making a five year old cry, trying to help teach them to read back when I was in college as a student at university. And I just was so upset that the system that we had to teach children to read was something that was making them cry. And he looked at me and with just the biggest tears in his eyes said, "I thought you were my friend." And I just thought, how have we ruined reading?

This is the most beautiful thing, one of my favorite things in the whole world and how we've ruined it for children. So it has just been my mission to help children not only be able to learn to read, but to do so in a way that brings them joy and that helps them build all those connections they have to build. But in a way that helps build the relationship with their parent or their teacher that they're working with, and also that they just love it.

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I watched actually a child this last week. Someone had asked me for some help with a child that was struggling to read. And you could just see this look in her eyes of almost defeat and pressure and just feeling this lack of confidence. And then to kind of just let all of that go and not put any pressure around this may be outdated method of learning to read and just come back to play and bring in some toys and just play, just play with the letters and play with building words and deconstructing and putting back together and play with it.

And just to watch her eyes and her face transform around what this could look like and what reading could be and how much fun it was. And then over the next day or two, she would keep getting it out and playing with it instead of her phone or whatever else was going on. And I just thought, that's it, that's the power of play, when we combine it with reading is that it turns it into something so beautiful and fun, and it's so important. Tell me, what would you say, because you've been a classroom teacher, what would you say to a teacher about this program?

Angela: You could easily use it in a classroom. You could totally easily use it in a classroom. You could just give every child a page, you could all be doing it. It doesn't cost the earth to do because I was a teacher, I had all my own supplies. And all I did was look at the page, okay, we need a frog, go to the toy room, find the frogs. We're all set. That's what I really loved, or if we didn't have a frog, we don't have any red pompoms. So we had pink pom poms. So we just had pink apples. And that's fine, that doesn't matter, Millie just went, "Oh well, we've got pink apples today."

Amy: I love it.

Angela: Yeah. And you don't need all this expensive equipment. I think that is the bit, it's a program in itself, it stands alone. We can use what you've got. I think the coolest part about it is, so when Matilda was at school, she had this, learned this terrible thing that you'd go through and look at all the pictures first. So you knew what the story was about. She still tries to do that but the cool thing is, you've got a reading passage in front of you which has a cute little picture

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down the bottom. But you have to read the words to get the story. The picture isn't really going to help you at all.

The picture is usually just the character who the story is about and that's what I love too. So my struggle was, how do I get readers for my child? Because we read seven days a week, the children must read. Millie reads a reader, Matilda has to read a chapter of her book, and they have to do that every single day of the week. If I went and brought the readers, where that's \$12 a day seven days a week. It's so expensive. And then the readers, they're only going to read them once. They're not these fabulous things they're going to go back to and read again and again and again.

And yes, I have four children, and I still have two more children to teach to read, but I can't justify that. And I'd rather spend my money somewhere else. So having a program where first you do the fun stuff, you get to play and you learn something new. So I asked the girls, so I'm just going to totally get straight. I asked the girls what their favorite activity was that they've done so far. And Matilda loves her little fairy wand. But she really loved the spin and collect because I used M&Ms.

Amy: Fun. That's brilliant, on the little maze ones, yeah.

Angela: Yeah. So she was like, "Well, we can do it again. Let's just do it again. I'll just keep practicing."

Amy: I bet she was. Yeah, absolutely, I'll do that every day.

Angela: And then she said the treasure chest one. I'm like, "Which one is that?" She said, "You know how you put [inaudible] in and then you can push them all under the treasure chest and then we get to eat them when we've read all the words." I'm like, "That's cool." So in New Zealand, there's no way you could do that in a classroom. You're not allowed food. It's culturally insensitive to be using food when there are people who can't afford potentially in your class, for food. So it's a treasure chest, you can fill it with gold coins.

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There are so many different ways that you could do the same technique and make it work and make it fun. And I think the other cool thing is the kids have so many cool ideas. I would say, "Wait, I know we have frogs somewhere. I know we have frogs." And they're like, "We can just make one. But you know those ones that jump, mom, you know the ones that you make out of paper? We could just make one of those. We could do that." I'm like, "Yeah, we could. Yeah, I forgot about that, let's do that." And they would just come up with an alternative which worked for them.

Amy: And it's fantastic that their brains are problem solving that way, and that they're coming up with creative solutions and not just saying, "I guess we can't." That's exactly what we want. And I love that that's something that you're bringing into this and allowing them to do. That's fantastic.

Angela: Imagine not doing Amy's folder, that wasn't an option. We had to do it. So I had to come up with an idea. They were not missing out and I think that's what I love. That's what I love, they were so excited to do reading. And reading's my passion, and as a teacher, reading, writing and math. They were my favorite things to teach. And I'd love to say I miss teaching and maybe I miss teaching children to read, write, and do math. I don't miss anything else. But I have my own children now and watching them spark and seeing everything all fit into together.

We're sitting at the table. We'll be doing our homeschooling and then Heidi will come running in then go, "I've got to do my learning too." And she'll go get her little binder that I've made her, and she'll go sit at the end of the table and it's just what you want. You want learning to be fun. You want it to be easy. You want the children to want to do it. But they will just get it out and sit at the table. "Right, we're ready, mom, come on mom, where are you mom? We're ready. It's time to do our reading now." And it just makes my heart, I love it. I just love it. That's what I want.

I want my children to be readers and they are there, even William, because they all learn from copying, don't they? So we started this terrible thing, we get up early. We're not allowed out of bed before six. The clock has to turn yellow to

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say the sun is up. And so William is quite loud and so when he wakes up, he's like me, his eyes are open, he's awake, he's up, he's ready to go for the day. So he now sits on my bed and reads books.

Amy: That's fantastic.

Angela: And he just sits and I don't have to read them to him now. He just sits there turning the pages and looking and chatting away in his own little chat that nobody else can understand. And then he'll put his book down and get another one. And I'm just thinking, we've already started on the reading process, he's already loving books and I just wait. And then we have Millie, so Millie is so excited about reading. And she will go for days talking and sounds and sounding every word, ouch, which I love it. It's testing is a good word. And I'll ask her, "What do you want for breakfast?" "I want spaghetti."

Amy: That's some good phonemic awareness right there. You're like, this is really good phonemic awareness. I'm just going to remember that, channel my inner, that is the stuff of dreams if we're teaching phonemic awareness.

Angela: I have to keep going back and going, "Yes, this is what we're teaching her. This is great. This is so much learning, this is fabulous. She's getting it."

Amy: Yeah, it's working. It's working so good.

Angela: And I guess it's come from sounding her words out, it's come from doing those really cool little activities where we're sounding words out. And it's working. It's moments like that which drive you mad, but it's working. It's actually working, yeah.

Amy: But it is working, that's so amazing. Thank you so much for sharing your experience with me today. Is there anything else you would want to say to our listeners about the Play to Read program?

Angela: I think the coolest thing is at the end of every unit you get a certificate. And as a teacher I was one of those teachers who was very generous in giving out certificates and celebrated every little success with my children. And I

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realized when Millie started school, well, Matilda did a year of school so she got a certificate. But when Millie started homeschooling with me I'm like, "Well, we don't do certificates really." And then we started the Play to Read and we was through unit one because we were already kind of sounding words out. And then we got to the end and she's like, "Where's the certificate?" And I'd actually forgotten the certificates.

And she's like, "I got a certificate." And then we moved to unit two and we're almost at the end and she turns and she's like, "If I do one more, mom, then I'll get a certificate." I'm like, "Yes you will." So there's lots in there. It's just it is all there. It is all there for you, all you need to do is print it off. And yeah, I can't rate it enough. It is just fantastic. My girls love it. Millie is thriving, we're May, so we're June, July, she's been doing it for two months. She's reading. She's trying to sound everything out. It's so exciting. It's so exciting and I can't thank you enough because you've just given my children the gift of reading and it's so important.

What I didn't say before is my husband's illiterate. So for us, reading is the pinnacle, our children had to read. They had to go to school with the alphabet and all their sounds because we know what the world is like when you're illiterate and it's hard. And he's coming up 50, so life was different before, but now we have internet. Now, you've got to be able to read. No, you can't get around not reading.

And so for us, our children reading and having a really good schooling experience, that was so important to us. And having the Planning Playtime, then it's making it fun. But having the Play to Read program, Calvin can see. He listens to the girls and he's like, "They're really reading, they're reading, they're reading better than I can read." He said, "They've got it. Can you hear Matilda read? She's reading a chapter book. She's just reading." I went, "Yeah, she's reading. She's doing it." So yeah.

Amy: That's so beautiful. Thank you for sharing your story. I think it just reaches my heart because I want everyone to be able to have that. And I just want every child to be able to have that experience of having the opportunity to be able to

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learn to read and to have the appropriate tools that work for them. And so that means the world to me. And thank you for sharing your story and for being so generous with your time today. And for just being such a valuable part of our community at Planning Playtime as well. We just love your family and all the stories and things you've shared over the years. And I'm just honored to have been able to chat with you about this today.

Angela: Thanks. Just thanks, just keep making those beautiful, amazing things. I've still got two more, two more children coming through, so just keep making those amazing things for us. And yeah, we love being part of the Planning Playtime community, it's just great, isn't it?

Amy: Yes, it is. It's my happy place on the internet for sure, absolutely. Alright, well thank you again.

Angela: Thank you ever so much, Amy, and it was lovely to meet you.

Amy: Yes, you too.

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So what this freebie is, I'll tell you, is an amazing alphabet activity that you can start using with your kiddos and it is based in play and is so fun. You can use dot markers with it, you can use Q-tip painting, you could use circle cereal. There's all kinds of options, but you can print it out today and get started. Just head over to planningplaytime.com/special-freebie and we'll send that to you right away.

Thank you for hanging out with me today for this fun chat on *Raising Healthy Kid Brains*. If you want to see more of what we're doing to support kiddos and their amazing brains, come visit us on our website planningplaytime.com. See you next week.