

How to Foster a Love for Reading in Your Child

The technological age has many benefits, but it also presents a larger hurdle to our children in developing a love and ability for reading. How do we get our kids to enjoy sitting down with a good book when there are so many other distractions? They can play on a tablet, a phone, a laptop, the video game console, the list goes on. Note that the list is mostly a video engagement - visually compelling, requiring little effort, and marginally social. A book in contrast is positively old fashioned - quiet, individual, and imaginative.

Reading is Important for our Children's Future

Yet we all know that reading well is important for our children's future. Reading is the foundation for most of their future learning. Even at University, the lecture merely inspires us to go out and teach ourselves about a topic through further reading. Reading is the key to independence. Speaking into your iPhone may be quicker than typing, but being read to is horribly slow and impairs the thought process of anything but story telling or basic lectures. Deeper thinking and learning require reading. One has to be able to comb back and forth through the embers of others' worded thoughts at one's own pace.

From Phonics to Fluency and Comprehension

So reading is necessary but lacks sex appeal. To make matters worse, it is hard for most people to learn how to read. As learners start to read in English, they use phonetics to decode the words. As texts progress in difficulty, this method is less successful. Phonetic reading is slow and impairs fluency and thereby comprehension. Usually passages have to be read at least twice to create understanding. If you've ever learnt another language, you'll have recalled just how painful the process can be.

Sight Words

The next step in learning to read is to memorize sight words. This increases both fluency and mistakes. We often see children try to use their sight word knowledge to read more quickly, but making many mistakes as they assume the word based on the first 2-3 letters.

Ultimately an adult reads by skimming through words and even lines. Some adults can even skim pages (jealous am I!). Adult readers know words accurately upon sight. An advanced reader has quick fluency that results in fuller comprehension. Somewhere near this point, reading becomes much more enjoyable. The process to get here though can be frustrating and long.

Endless Modern Distractions from Reading

The wonder is why more children don't throw in the towel along the way. In the past, there were few other sources of entertainment. Reading well meant being able to entertain oneself on a cold and rainy day. There were clear and obvious benefits to learning to read well. Good books took you to other(wordly) places. They fired one's imagination to paint the picture of what the author was trying to portray. One reason that many people are disappointed with movie adaptations of popular books is that each individual imagined the book slightly differently. Now children can be spoon fed amazing visual feasts of books like The Hobbit through the movies. At every point of frustration in learning to read, our children can simply reach out for the tablet, the video game, the electronic screen. They need not bear with learning to read to be entertained anymore.

Model Reading Behavior

Even worse, we rarely sit down and model reading. In days gone by the parents would read the morning (and sometimes the evening) newspaper at the table, and then retire to a good book by the couch. Children model their parents behavior. So if we slouch on the couch with a DVD instead of a good book after work, our children are likely to do the same. So the first lesson in fostering a love for reading is:

1) Model good reading habits in your household. Your children are waiting to copy you. If you don't read for pleasure, there is a high chance that they will not either. If they see you enjoying reading, they will want to discover it for themselves.

2) Make the process of learning more pleasurable and less frustrating. As your children are learning to read phonetically and blending their sounds, make games of reading large signs on buses and the like. Driving to and from school is your opportunity to play reading games with your kids and engage them with the world passing by the window - don't let them dive into a video screen (other than on a road trip perhaps).

3) Be patient. Your child is likely already frustrated with their progress in learning to read. They know that they don't read well. The mystery of reading well is perplexing and takes a lot of practice. Your child likely knows a peer in class who seems to already read easily, or they have come to the obvious realization that you can read easily. If you get frustrated with your child's progress, they will be far more likely to do the same and give up.

4) Encourage reading aloud and sounding out. We encounter many students whose reading progress grinds to a halt as they become embarrassed about needing to sound some or even all words out. They see this as something that beginners do, and they don't want to announce to the world that they are still learning. So go ahead and set an example of sounding words out - and let them follow along. Be aware of the environment and choose somewhere private where they won't be publicly embarrassed by reading aloud. Your taking the lead will take out some of the stigma. Give them a quiet place to decode and sound it out, and then go over the reading together.

5) Read to your children every single day. It is important to not only model a joy for reading for yourself, but even more important to show your children how enjoyable a good book can be. Pick a story you really enjoyed as a child and do your best to bring it to life. You will get far more connection as a family than sitting in front of a movie.

6) Technology can be your friend. Some kids just don't want to read with their parents. They get hung up on their difficulties and don't want any witnesses. One great program that can help here is **Raz Kids**. Children get to pick their own books (pre-selected for their level of reading), have the computer read it to them slowly, read it back to the computer, and complete a comprehension test. They then accumulate points they can use to buy things like aliens. This program can transform reluctant readers who are engaged by the video screen.

7) Let your child pick a book they are interested in. Try to steer them to a section of books at their level, but then let them pick from these. You might very well be surprised at what they are interested in. Some early readers develop a love for certain books, and there's nothing wrong in letting them read them several times. We had one student who was struggling to read take *The Biggest Bear* out of our little library at least 10 times. After a while we simply asked that he take it out every second time or pick another book to take with him.

8) Reward a love for reading. Our eldest son always wants to stay up late. He's a bit of a night owl. So we used this to encourage him to read chapter books - something he was sure he could not do. We gave him a night light and told him he could stay up late reading quietly with his night light if he chose a chapter book to read (we started out very small). This worked wonders, so much so that he still stays up late every night reading. Thankfully he doesn't seem to need that much sleep - he's also the first riser in the house.

9) Don't let apparent disabilities get in the way. My PhD supervisor at the London School of Economics was very dyslexic, but it never stopped him from reaching the pinnacle of success in academia - a mountain literally made of reading and writing. That said, you should seek out professional help early on for any suspected disabilities in order to minimize frustration and to better help your child learn how to read. Keep in mind that almost all children confuse b/d and p/q.

Don't Forget to Have Fun!

In sum, try and have fun with reading. If we want our kids to read well, they will need to read a lot. They will only read a lot if they enjoy reading. It is a question of setting up a self-fulfilling virtuous cycle, one where kids get better and better at reading because they like it more and more. We also want to disrupt any vicious cycles that might have started. For instance kids who don't like reading because they are not good at it - and they aren't good at it because they don't like it. I always enjoy hearing parents complain about their kids who are so absorbed in books they can't get them to stop - so much better a problem than the all too common video game addiction, which has no benefits whatsoever. Reading sparks the imagination and the mind, and leads to a richer and more meaningful life.