

The Big Picture of Reading

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Whether you play the role of educator, parent, or tutor (or several of the above), reading is an essential skill for children to master. The better readers children are, the better they will do in school. But what do you do when children have turned away from reading or just find it boring? Has it become a struggle to get them to read? Maybe the child in your life is still interested but you have to fan that flame.

Here's a guaranteed-to-succeed, fresh approach:

See reading as more than just a skill.

Schools do a good job teaching many students the skills they need in order to become good readers, thanks to dedicated educators and the wealth of research available on the mechanics of teaching reading. Kids learn that letters have certain sounds, that putting those sounds together makes words and how our language "works."

The bigger picture is that reading is a tool with a greater purpose than being able to pronounce words correctly. We learn the skill so we can get the heart out of what the author is trying to say to us or teach us, so we can learn about how to make a paper glider or build a real airplane, how to make the best apple pie or fly to the moon.

Children don't always make that connection in the environment of the classroom unless we specifically tell them why we are learning those skills and point out the direct result of being a good decoder or a fluent reader. Every day send the message that we learn skills so we can learn, tap into our interests and needs for information, and, yes, even for an occasional escape. Include books about everyday activities such as Robert McCloskey's *Blueberries for Sal* (<http://www.amazon.com/Blueberries-Picture-Puffins-Robert-McCloskey/dp/014050169X>) or *The Night You Were Born* by Wendy McCormick (http://www.amazon.com/Night-You-Were-Born/dp/1561452254/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1236954155&sr=1-1) when helping students select.

Use reading as an important relationship-building connection between you and a child.

From the time children are babies, the sound of a familiar voice can be soothing and build an important connection between positive experiences and books. Children don't have favorite worksheets; they have favorite stories and favorite memories of those they love most reading to them. In the classroom, use guest readers or a read-aloud session with the teacher (without dissection) to feed that connection.

Whenever you are involved with a child in reading, talk about what *you* read. It gives you a doorway to discuss real issues without being preachy and to discover what ideas the child has about the world. Stories like Carmon Deedy's *Growing Up Cuban in Decatur, GA* (available on CD although the book is out of print at : http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_b_0_19?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=growing+up+cuban+in+decatur+georgia&prefix=Growing+up+Cuban+in) can help us understand those who come from different cultures or perhaps our own.

Reading can also be a coping mechanism to help a child (and a parent) calm down after a hectic day (*Time for Bed* by Mem Fox- http://www.amazon.com/Time-Bed-Big-Book-Mem/dp/0152010149/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1236954260&sr=1-1) or escape their world and find refuge in the familiar (*The Magic Treehouse Series* - http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_b?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-

[keywords=Magic+Tree+house+series&x=0&y=0](#)). Teachers can use readings to extend the core curriculum or expand upon it.

Let the approach to reading at home be different from what children experience at school.

Don't tell kids what to read outside of school; let them choose freely. Of course, they may have reading assignments but they should also be allowed to choose some of what they read. Try to carve out spots of time for that (like in the car on the way to errands or school, a quiet rainy Saturday afternoon, a few minutes to settle down before going to sleep).

Is a child interested in animals or pirates or secrets or skateboards? Let her read books about those topics. Is the fourth grade boy interested in world records? Find a copy of the *Guinness Book of World Records* (http://www.amazon.com/Guinness-World-Records-2009-Spanish/dp/8408081640/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1236954356&sr=1-1) to share. If comic books are their favorite, buy them a new one! Teachers, be sure to have a variety of materials on a variety of topics in your classroom library.

Don't limit reading to strict zones or guided reading levels.

Schools must use assessments (tests) to evaluate the level at which children read. There is also research-based evidence that reading on their "just right" level helps children's fluency and comprehension grow. However, if we are to motivate children to read, we cannot be exclusive or restrictive.

Children will read at different levels based on whether the book has a lot of technical terms or mostly familiar, "just right" words. Do we always read materials on a post-graduate or high school level? Of course not! So why should we place artificial limitations on children when our goal is for them to use reading as a tool to discover what they want to know? I still enjoy *Where the Wild Things Are* (http://www.amazon.com/Where-Wild-Things-Maurice-Sendak/dp/0060254920/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1236954410&sr=1-1) as much as I like Charles Dickens or the newest issue of my favorite magazine.

If you need help deciding if a book is simply too hard, use the FIST test. Have the child hold out an open hand while he she reads the two pages of a picture book or first page of a chapter book. Whenever he finds a word he doesn't know, he must pull one finger down toward his palm. If he creates a fist (pulls down five fingers) before the end of the selection, the book would probably create too much frustration in him for independent reading. Suggest instead that you read that one together. He can use this idea on his own at the library or bookstore as well.

Find the author and illustrator's name (the person who wrote the book and the one who drew the pictures).

Read from the back cover or side flaps of the book to learn about these people. Relate this person's life to that of you and the child. After reading the book together, you might want to read others by the same person. Authors are real people with real struggles, real pleasures and real passions. Use talking about these artists as a way to help your child explore life. For instance, did you know that Jane Yolan's book *How Do Dinosaurs Say Goodnight?* (<http://www.amazon.com/How-Do->

Dinosaurs-Say-

Goodnight/dp/0590316818/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1236954452&sr=1-1) was created when a friend of the author say to her, “I have a boy that loves dinosaurs by hates to settle down at night. Can you help?”

Read a story together by using any or all of these approaches:

- paired reading (you read a bit, the child reads a bit) – everyone gets a rest in between
- modeled reading (the adult does the reading, the child listens) – this is great for increasing listening skills and vocabulary
- guided reading (the child does most of the reading with help as needed by the adult)

Stop from time to time to laugh, talk about a part of the story or people in it, ask if your child knows what the story is about so far, and guess what will happen next.

Connect reading with life.

Don't believe that, because children can read on their own, you (teachers or parents) should stop reading with them. When they outgrow the snuggle-and-cuddle- stage or the story time circle, try reading a piece of an article from *Sports Illustrated* or the local newspaper. At home, get them in the kitchen reading you a recipe while you cook dinner. Use written communication in the classroom from time to time. Parents, let children open mail and read it to you for the first five minutes after you arrive home. Ask them to decide if the mail is worthwhile or just an advertising scam.

If you are a teacher, open each day with a celebration of the written word (you can select some stories, poems, or material to share or let your students bring their favorites).

Relax and have a good time.

For younger children, use special voices, play games with the words (like asking the child to hunt for a word you know is on the page). Act out the story and review what the people in the book are feeling (how do you think Jimmy felt when the puppy ran away?). For older kids, have the reading block where everyone reads whatever they want in the room at the same time (schools sometimes call that in the classroom Sustained Silent Reading). Allow sharing and interruptions, or absolute quiet with EVERYONE (including the adults) reading. Is your twelve year old into baseball? Try *Over the Wall* by John H. Ritter (http://www.amazon.com/Over-Wall-John-H-Ritter/dp/0698119312/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1236954495&sr=1-1). Does her interest lie in fantasy? Check out *The Dark Is Rising* (http://www.amazon.com/Dark-Rising-Sequence/dp/1416949658/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1236954526&sr=1-1) or *The Ear, the Eye and the Arm* by Susan Cooper (http://www.amazon.com/Ear-Eye-Arm-Nancy-Farmer/dp/0439530644/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1236954579&sr=1-1).

When a child and/or you finish reading a book, talk about what the child liked or didn't like about it (not liking a book is OK).

Use discussions in the classroom to reinforce standards and knowledge. Go beyond knowledge and understanding to evaluation and analysis.

Get a child's reaction to the book by asking them open-ended questions (any that cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no"). What was your favorite part? Would you like to read others like this (same type of story or same author) and why? This will help you help the child choose the next book they will enjoy and understand their changing passions.

Jim Trelease, the guru of the read-aloud experience and author of *The Read Aloud Handbook* (link: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0141001615/bookstorenow57-20>), says, "What we teach our children to love and desire will always outweigh what we teach them to do."

In Closing

When we help children learn that reading is more than a chore, we can engage their interests and a spirit of exploration and life-long learning. In the process, we give our children one of the greatest gifts of all – the big picture of reading. As Mr. Trelease retires from traveling to spread this message, he leaves a gift for every family: three free downloadable brochures about reading with your children <http://www.trelease-on-reading.com/parent-reading-brochure.html>.

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