

Teaching Your Child to Love Reading

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Roger Rosenblatt once said: “There may be no more pleasing picture in the world than that of a child peering into a book—the past and the future entrancing one another.”¹ As homeschool parents, we all recognize the importance of teaching a child to read as well as he is able. Reading instruction is usually one of the first academic activities we attempt as homeschool parents, and it can be one of the most rewarding. Many books have been written on the topic of reading instruction, and curriculum fairs are full of resources to aid in the task. However, sometimes in the quest to teach our children to read, we neglect to teach them to love to read as well.

Creating a love of reading offers many benefits to both you and your child. Academically, if your child likes reading, he will find the study of literature, history, and even science easier and more enjoyable. This makes your job as a homeschool parent easier as well. For a child, however, the acquisition of knowledge is often insufficient motivation to learn, and it is certainly insufficient motivation to love reading. As Bruno Beitelheim once said, “What is required for a child to be eager to learn is not knowledge about reading’s practical usefulness, but a fervent belief that being able to read will open to him a world of wonderful experiences, permit him to shed his ignorance, understand the world, and become master of his fate.”² For some children, this understanding comes sooner than for others.

Reading not only gives knowledge and teaches us about the world it; can help us to understand people as well. For homeschooled children, who may have limited cultural experiences, wide reading is even more important, for it can help us understand human psychology in a way that nothing else can. Good books are all about character development; human motivations form the basis of most plots. As we begin to understand why people react the way that they do, and what they believe about the world we strengthen our own insights into the human condition and learn better how to reach out to others.

If children learn to love to read and choose good books (or are introduced to good literature), they soon learn to feel the power of literature to expand their minds and release their emotions. This can increase their desire to experience that power for themselves—thus enhancing their own desire to write. Even children who cannot read well love to dictate stories to their parents. In fact, most of the benefits mentioned above do not require that children read well for themselves—only that they are exposed to great literature.

However, there are many obstacles that can stand in the way of creating a love for reading. Let’s face it: some kids are natural readers and love books nearly from birth while others have to be encouraged to develop a love of reading. In some cases, there may be vision difficulties that cause words to look blurry or tracking problems that cause the eyes to see words in ways that are difficult to interpret. Learning disabilities can also interfere with a child’s enjoyment of reading. If your child is 8 or 9 and is still not reading, you might want to have some of these issues checked out.

For most children, however, the obstacles that interfere with a love of reading are more basic and easier to address. For instance, if reading instruction begins too early, you may turn a struggling reader into one who hates to read at all. One of my children fell into this category. While most of my kids learned to read easily by age 6, one was struggling with the whole phonetic concept at that age. Each day I worked with him on his reading concepts, but he and I both were frustrated by the end of a session. Finally, I decided that all I was doing was creating a child who hated reading. For the rest of that year, we dropped reading instruction and I just read to him. By the time he was 7, we started reading instruction again and this time reading came to him easily. Soon, he caught up and tested on advanced levels in his reading. He simply developed those skills at a different pace than the others.

Embarrassment can also play a factor in the development of the love of reading. Remember the old “reading groups” we were placed in as children? Teachers would try to disguise the reading levels of the different groups by giving them clever code names, but it did not take kids long to figure out that the Blue Birds were better readers than the Red Birds. In every class, there were the kids who loved to be called on to read aloud, and ones who tried to hide behind the textbooks and hated to read. One of the great advantages of homeschooling is that we can lessen, to some extent, this pressure to perform. Yet siblings can sometimes still cause problems for a struggling reader. Parents need to be sensitive to this and not let the other children either mock the struggling reader or usurp his opportunities to read aloud.

Television and video games can also interfere with a love of reading. In the past, reading was one of the best forms of entertainment a child could have and books were treasured possessions. Today, we live in a media-driven society where entertainment is constantly on tap for our youngsters. It is small wonder that many are drawn to the lights, sound, and action of television and video games rather than the deeper and more contemplative joys of reading. In order to foster a love of reading, you may need to limit these other forms of entertainment or have your children read books in order to “earn” media privileges.

However, parents themselves can unwittingly be one of the greatest obstacles to creating a love for reading in their children by their failure to create reading role models for their family. Unfortunately, many parents never learned to value the joys of reading. Now, they find themselves “too busy” or “too tired” to read and prefer to watch television instead. If your child sees his mother or father get excited about a movie or a television show and never sees the same reaction over a book, what conclusion can he draw?

Fortunately, there are many strategies that you can implement to encourage your children to develop a love of reading. Even if they do not all become avid readers as children, you can expose them to a wide variety of literature and increase the likelihood that they will develop a love of reading as they grow older. Some of the best strategies that you can try in your own home are listed below.

Model reading for your children.

Let your children see Mom and Dad reading books—and getting excited about books. Discuss books together as a family—which books you liked and why.

Have books readily available.

Cicero once said, “To add a library to a house is to give that house a soul.”³ You can easily create an inexpensive library in your home by buying cheaper paperbacks and looking for used books. Make a wish list of good books for you and your kids so that relatives can know what to choose as gifts for special occasions. Books last much longer than toys, and giving them as gifts adds to their status as treasured possessions.

Choose books that interest your child.

As much as possible, let your child make choices of what he reads within broader categories that you select. This freedom will enhance his desire to read and encourage him to look through books on his own. When we go to the library, I tell my kids to choose one science related book (animals, planets, mechanics—whatever interests them at the time) and one social studies related book (such as a biography, books about other countries, or history). I choose a well-known classic for each of them. The rest of their selections can be “mind candy,” as long as I give final approval to the choices. Even my most reluctant reader loves to pick out books on library days. Generally, we also try to get a treat on library days, so the thought of books is tied in with special favors. If you are not sure how to choose good books that will interest your child, ask your librarian or choose resources from the books mentioned in the sidebar that accompanies this article. These resources can help you select quality books for your kids.

Have a specific time to read.

Build time in your schedule for free reading time. For instance, when the younger kids nap (and maybe Mom too), let the older ones have a choice of reading or sleeping. It is amazing how often they will choose the more entertaining option!

Don't be overly concerned about where they read.

My husband used to complain that he was constantly finding encyclopedias in the bathroom where one of our sons would leave them. To be sure, this was not the best place to leave them, but as I told my husband, he was reading the encyclopedia voluntarily! If you constantly nag children about where they read books, you may simply discourage them from reading at all. Children do need to learn how to take care of books, but be careful about making your rules too strict. Reading in bed is a good way to relax as well. Perhaps you can offer to extend bedtime a little if they are using the time to read.

Read to your children.

Many of us read to our children when they are very young but tend to stop as they learn to read. However, reading to your kids is one of the best ways to keep their interest in reading alive. Reading together allows you expose your children to more advanced books than they may read on their own and creates a time of family bonding around works of literature. Even longer chapter books, such as *The Phantom Tollbooth* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (two of my favorite

read-alouds), can keep a child's interest when a parent is reading them. Plus, you get the joy of seeing your children respond to literature. Try to read with expression, choosing different voices for the different characters. Let older kids take turns reading aloud. If you cannot read together for some reason, get the books on tape and follow along in the books together. Spending this quality cuddling time with Mom and Dad will add to the positive experience of reading.

There are many other strategies for creating a love of reading as well. Using incentives, such as special library programs, book clubs, or competitions within your homeschool group, can encourage an interest in reading. The most important thing to remember is to not let the mechanics of reading get in the way of creating a love for reading. Once a child learns to love to read, a world of possibilities awaits him.

Endnotes:

1. www.plcmc.org/services/.asp
2. Books and Reading: A Book of Quotations by Bill Bradfield
3. Ibid.

Biographical Information

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