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Essential Articles on
Parenting & Education

Raise Children Who *Choose* to Read

Maria Russo Editorial Director, *minedition* US

Back before the world shut down for COVID-19, I had the chance to travel to several cities across the country to talk about kids and books. The book I co-authored, *How to Raise a Reader*, had just been published, and it turned out that a lot of parents and educators really wanted to talk about the subject. Many of the people I spoke to looked back on their own childhood reading with great emotion and fondness, and they wanted to help provide that sort of experience for their own children. Others who may not have grown up as strong readers regretted that, and wanted something different for their own children. As a culture, it seems, we'd arrived at a place where just about everyone agreed that being a strong reader was a pathway to success in many areas of life, and that books, in general, should be a regular part of childhood—the more, the better.

And yet amid all this support for the idea of kids and reading—that childhood reading can provide a kind of quiet joy and personal freedom that will last a lifetime—there was also an ambient anxiety about the topic.

What is a Parent's Role?

How, so many of us wonder these days, are we supposed to raise children who choose to read books, when their days are saturated with screens and devices, when life has become a moveable feast of digital distractions?

And screen culture is not the only thing creating feelings of stress around our kids' reading. For so many parents—even before we were forced to become administrators of a hastily assembled program of distance learning, in the midst of a deadly global pandemic—teaching our children to read, and then helping

them progress as readers, had come to feel like another job we have to do. Somehow, many of our home lives had already become infused with a school-like atmosphere, especially around reading. Where's the joy and freedom in that?

The more I talked to these worried parents and educators, the more I became aware that when it comes to kids and reading, the role parents think they have to play, their understanding of the job they think they have to do, has swerved off course. It's so much simpler than we think! So, I present to you three things you can do—three very easy things—to create a family culture of reading in your home, and help your child become someone who naturally, organically, *joyfully* chooses to read a book in his leisure time.

Build a Home Library

Bring books home. Lots of them. Books for grownups and books for kids. After all, the way your home looks—what objects you keep in your home—conveys to your kids and to the world what your family's values are. The idea is that your home should be a place where kids get the clear message that books are valued, books are treasured. That being surrounded by books is a good way to live.

And, in fact, there is research that backs this up. Something about the very presence of physical books in a home encourages what researchers call “literacy activity” in later life, regardless of the income or education level of the parents. According to an article in the *Guardian*, one study shows that “teenagers with only lower levels of secondary education, but who came from a home filled with books, ‘become as literate, numerate and technologically apt in adulthood as university graduates who grew up with only a few books’”. So this is powerful stuff—and it's doable for everyone. Books are cheap at garage sales, stoop sales or secondhand book shops.

Be sure to give each of your children his or her very own bookshelf or, if space is tight, at least one shelf of his or her own to curate. Give children a chance to show off their favorite books. Let them be in charge of their bookshelf, arranging and rearranging it and moving new books onto it, and when the time

is right, sending older books to the donation pile. Children are natural collectors, after all, and they like to be able to see and display their collections, which are a reflection of their identity.

Whenever you can, read one of the books in your own collection—or a book from the library, or borrowed from a friend—yourself. Children need to see their parents reading. They need to know that reading a book is a choice that you make, when it comes to your own precious leisure time. Sometimes when I'm lying on the sofa in my sunroom, reading a book and ignoring the demands and bustle of my children, I think to myself, *I am parenting them right now*. Try it! The visual and sensual impression you create when you do this is something positive that they will carry into adulthood. It may turn out to be a sweet contrast to other images they may have of you, say, hovering over their homework. They may be moved to emulate you, when they're all grown up and deciding how to spend their own leisure time.

Leave It to the Professionals

If you've appointed yourself your child's reading teacher, fire yourself. Instead, become a fellow traveler, a fellow lover of books and reading. The research on when and how children learn to read is clear: There is no "correct" age at which a child learns to read. The normal range is anywhere from age 4 (or even before) to age 7 (or even 8). In Scandinavia and Germany, children are not formally taught to read in school until age 7 for just this reason. Everyone learns to read eventually, and it is an easier process for a brain that is developmentally ready. There is absolutely no future learning advantage enjoyed by a child who learns to read at 5 compared to a child who learns at 7. Why rush it?

You can help your child become reading-ready by reading lots of books out loud and creating a positive environment around reading in your home. But you cannot control exactly when your child learns to read. When it comes to the mechanics of reading, you are better off leaving it to your child's teachers, who are, after all, trained professionals.

Your job is to make your child want to read. How do you do that? By keeping the atmosphere around reading positive, fun and full of discovery. By not making it seem like a chore. By not incessantly tying reading to school and schoolwork and a feeling of obligation or judgment or competition or comparison to other kids. Share your pleasure and excitement about the books you are reading out loud. Re-read the ones your child loves and treat your read-aloud sessions as a beloved ritual.

The period when your child is on the verge of becoming an independent reader, but not yet there, is really important. Don't apply pressure. Don't convert reading into a measure of achievement, instead of a source of pleasure and entertainment. If your kid is on the "late" side, you don't want him to get the idea that there is something wrong, and that maybe books aren't his thing, after all. If your kid is an "early" reader, you also don't want to raise a gloater, a kid who sees reading as a way to beat his peers or feel better than other kids.

Your best strategy for creating a lifetime love of reading is taking the pressure off, de-emphasizing the idea that reading is a competition and the kids who read earlier, or who climb the ladder of reading levels faster, have somehow "won."

Don't Be a Book Critic

So you don't have to teach your child how to read, or monitor and prod him to ascend the reading levels ladder in school. Those activities are not only a poor use of your precious time, they may well be draining joy and damaging the atmosphere in your home, and make reading into a chore for your child, yet another activity to be assigned and evaluated by the grownups.

But you're not off the hook entirely—there is something you need to do that might actually be even more time-consuming and challenging: You have to help your child find the books that are going to keep him interested in reading. And then you have to get those books into your home. And then you have to do it again, and again, each time your child has finished the latest batch of books you've found.

The first step is to get to know your kids, and your kids' very individual tastes in books. This is, by the way, a wonderful opportunity to develop an authentic bond, to really get to know and respect them for the individuals they are becoming.

Ask children's librarians and booksellers for help. It is their job, after all, to match the right book to the right kid. Take advantage! Describe your kid and her interests, and name some titles that have hit your kid's sweet spot. They love to help.

Ask your kids' friends, and their parents, what books they are reading, and what their all-time favorites are. Then try those books at home.

Broaden your idea of what counts as a book. Don't judge. (You're a hunter-gatherer, a detective, not a critic.) Many kids today—especially boys, whose brains tend to prefer to process information more visually—gravitate to graphic novels and graphic nonfiction, for example. If you are clinging to the idea that graphic novels are not “real” books, you are harboring an outdated notion. The 2019 Newbery Medal for the most distinguished contribution to children's literature went to a graphic novel—the terrific *New Kid*, by Jerry Craft. Graphic novels are now respected staples of children's literature.

But not every book has to be a medal winner. Make plenty of space, also, for books of facts and statistics, atlases, *The Guinness Book of World Records*, joke books, and so on. Many kids are fact-gatherers more than story lovers. If that applies to your kid, you can still find lots of good reading material.

If your child is happily reading any book he or she truly loves, take a moment to note: *My kid is happily reading a book*. Enough said. Then pat yourself on the back. You are doing a great job.

Resources

- Flood, Alison. "Growing up in a House Full of Books is Major Boost to Literacy and Numeracy, Study Finds." *The Guardian*, 10 Oct., 2018. See theguardian.com.
- Sikora, Joanna, et al. "Scholarly Culture: How Books in Adolescence Enhance Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Technology Skills in 31 Societies." *Social Science Research*, vol. 77, Jan. 2019, pp. 1-15.

Maria Russo is Editorial Director of minedition US, a children's book publisher. She is the co-author of *How to Raise a Reader*, which was published when Ms. Russo served as Children's Book Editor of *The New York Times*.