

TEACHING YOUR CHILD TO ENJOY READING

Dr Goh Chee Leong, Board of Governors, HELP International School

The Challenge

In the age of 24-hour cartoon channels and computer games, reading may seem like a less exciting past time to our children. There seems to be so many quicker and simpler ways to obtain information and as a result, few children have developed the attention spans needed to enjoy reading. However, as parents, we can and should encourage our children to reclaim the lost art of reading.

The Reason

Reading is the gateway to knowledge and understanding. It is the passport to new worlds and new ideas. In this age of the (K) Knowledge-Economy it seems strange that less and less young people enjoy reading. If we train our children from a young age to enjoy reading it will be a habit that will serve them well for the rest of their lives.

Research has also found that reading among young children is related to the development of other intellectual abilities like their memory, imagination, creativity, lateral thinking, moral reasoning, logical thinking and problem solving ability.

How?

1. Start by Reading to Them

Start to read to your child as soon as you can. I encourage parents to read to their newborn infants. Infants start to familiarize themselves with language sounds in the first 6 months of life and this can have repercussions on how easily they pick up words later on.

For very young children parents can choose books with interesting illustrations that capture the child's attention. The best children's books encourage interaction and discussion with the child. Their aim is to engage the child in the story.

It is good to set aside a regular story time everyday so that reading becomes part of the child's daily routine and something the child looks forward to. Having a regular story time with children can continue all the way until they are 8 to 9 years old. This helps the child associate books with a positive experience and helps shape their attitudes towards reading.

2. Don't Force. Create a Culture

My brother and I grew up in a house filled with a whole variety of books; history, geography, science fiction, philosophy, classics, contemporary fiction, western and eastern writing, theology, sports, adventure, religion, personal development, science, humor.... It was no surprise then that both of us developed into voracious readers, with a wide range of reading interests. This reading habit remains with us until today.

What is important to note is that we were never forced to read. We just read because it was the culture in the house to read. Everybody in the family read. This did not mean that we were indoor bookworms; as we still spent time participating in a range of other activities. It just meant that from an early age, we learnt to set aside time each day to read.

3. Lead by Example

Looking back at my own childhood experience, I am convinced that in order to encourage our children to enjoy reading, parents need to lead by example. Consider the example of Rizal, who like most 12 year old boys his age prefers television and computer games to reading. For years his parents have nagged and lectured him about the importance of books. Their words, though, lack conviction, given the fact that neither Rizal's mother or father have read a book in the last 5 years.

Contrast this with Shahnaaz's parents, Encik Azmi and Puan Zaiton who both are regular readers. Shahnaaz recalls, "during dinnertime, my dad would talk about the interesting books he was reading, whether it was a novel, or a history book, and the rest of us would be hanging on to his every word. It just seemed like he was so into his books, and I guess that rubbed off on my sister and me. Nowadays, we read te books right after he has finished them!"

The bottom-line is that before we tell our children to read, we need to make a conscience effort to begin reading ourselves. For some of us this is a huge challenge given our busy schedules. However, when we regain our discipline and enjoyment for reading, we will find that inevitably we have helped create a reading culture in our homes.

4. Organize "Book Hunting" Family Expeditions

Every month, Encik Bakar brings his while family to the bookshop. Each family member is given a budget to buy a book of their choice, including "mum and dad". Throughout the course of the next few weeks, they would often share and discuss the interesting parts of the books they were reading at home. There is no need to force the children to read or argue the merits of reading. The passion for books and knowledge was infectious and it spread naturally and quickly to the children.

The Phoon family have a similar reading culture. They visit the local public library every alternate Saturday with their 3 children aged 7, 5 and 4years. Everyone, including the two parents, borrow a book of their choice and during their evenings at home they talk about what they are reading. Mrs. Phoon remarks that this family practice of reading and sharing has not only ingrained a love for reading among the children but "also led to the children being good at communicating ideas verbally."

5. Encourage them to write

Reading encourages our children to discover the world. Writing encourages our children to discover themselves, their thoughts, their feelings, their own ideas. Children who enjoy reading should be inspired to write stories of their own. They could be fiction or non fiction; that doesn't matter.

With young children, we can start by encouraging our children to write very simple stories about things that have happened to them. This could be in a form of a letter to their grandparents or to their friends.

When we take them for holiday trips; they could keep a scrap book and journal that captures their new discoveries everyday.

Conclusion

Reading is a key part of a child's holistic development. Teach your child to enjoy reading from a young age and it will stay with them till adulthood.

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