



The Science Behind Raising Readers

Literacy is one of the main pillars of early education. There's a big focus on learning the ABCs, strengthening comprehension skills, and understanding literary devices. Being able to read and understand text is a foundational skill that enables learning in all other subject areas. Additionally, when children are exposed to book reading from an early age, it begins a 'causal spiral' – they more they are exposed to books, the greater their reading skills, which in turn encourages them to read more, culminating in greater academic outcomes.

But to focus on only the academic angle is a pretty narrow view of the benefits of reading. Adult book lovers innately know that there's a lot more to the benefits of reading than just academic achievement.

Here are just a few of the benefits:

- Reading is an antidote to stress. For example, a study of children hospitalized in the ICU found that listening to a story for just 30 minutes reduced their levels of cortisol (stress hormone) and increased their levels of oxytocin (the love hormone). Similarly, over a whole academic year, a study of college students found that recreational reading was associated with reduced psychological distress. In other words, reading can help people cope with mental and physical health challenges by boosting resilience to stress.
- Reading allows us to connect meaningfully with our fellow humans. Neuroscientists have determined that reading fiction provides readers with the opportunity to strengthen a certain neural network, which in turn makes them better at being able to use theory of mind capabilities (being able to consider the mental state of others).
- Reading makes us happier. A study of older adults found that frequent fiction readers report greater life satisfaction and greater positive affective well-being.
- Reading helps us live longer! A longitudinal study of 3675 participants found that book readers experience a survival advantage. This line from the study sums it up best: "The benefits of reading books include a longer life in which to read them."

Clearly, a love for reading leads to a much more fulfilling life and that's something we definitely want to pass on to our children!

So how can we implement a reading culture in our home?

Read together

This is the easiest and most effective way to encourage reading in kids of any age. Reading aloud has a strong and long-lasting effect on reading and cognitive skills. The best way to go about this, per cognitive

psychologist David Willingham, is to (1) choose books that are rhyme-heavy; (2) engage them by asking questions as you go, (3) having books available in places and at times when they are likely to be bored (like in the car).

Have physical books

Make them available and accessible throughout your home. Literally, show kids how important books are by giving them valuable space in your home. Having lots of books in your home has a greater relationship with your child's reading ability than even being a good reader yourself.

If you're not sure how to get started, the first stop is a visit to your local library! There are thousands of books waiting to be discovered: picture books, graphic novels, folk tales, poetry. Borrow as many as you can carry!

Be a model

Show kids that you enjoy using your free time to read. Kids imitate us, so we can inspire them to read simply by picking up a book and reading in their presence.

No pressure

There's a lot of pressure towards reading at earlier and earlier ages. However, the evidence doesn't support pushing our kids to read early.

A focus on early reading (that is, teaching reading before age six or seven) shows only short-term effects that even out with time, such that by the time the child is 12 (or even earlier), their reading skills are not any better than those who learned to read later. Additionally, children who learn to read later acquire reading skills more readily (requiring about half as much formal instruction). Moreover, a large study looking at the natural variability in school starting age between countries found no evidence for an association between when formal reading instruction starts and reading achievement at age 15.

What does this mean? There is no need to push kids to read early! Any initial gains are lost later on. Additionally, the risk of pushing teaching to read too early or too hard is that it can backfire and can rob the fun and joy out of reading, leading to it being perceived as another pesky task or chore to complete.

Reading is life-changing. A child's curiosity is insatiable, and reading is the buffet that never ends. It is both a passport and time machine - taking readers to new countries, imaginary worlds, across the galaxy, to the distant past or forward to strange futures. Learning to read is good. Learning to love reading is magical.



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