



The Science Behind Raising Readers

Literacy is one of the main pillars of education. There's a big focus on strengthening comprehension skills, understanding literary devices, and critiquing ideas. Being able to read and understand text is a foundational skill that facilitates learning in all other subject areas. Additionally, the more our children are exposed to books, the greater their reading skills, which in turn encourages them to read more, culminating in greater academic outcomes. This causal spiral creates a gap between readers and non-readers which widens every year. For example, in preschool and kindergarten, print exposure explains 12% of the variance in oral language skills, by university it explains a whopping 34%.

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. However, if your child has moved on from wanting to hear you read aloud to them, try listening to audiobooks! In addition to physical books and ebooks, many libraries also offer audiobooks, making reading even more accessible.

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 step is a visit to your local library! There are thousands of books waiting to be discovered. 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

If you really want to raise a kid who loves to read, they need to be intrinsically motivated. Intrinsic motivation trumps extrinsic motivation by a landslide.

A study of 4000 US students found that if the motivation comes internally (choosing to read because it is enjoyable, etc) there are positive outcomes in terms of reading amount and reading comprehension. However, external motivation (bribing kids to read with stickers, money, etc) has a negative association on reading amount and reading comprehension. In his book, *Punished by Rewards*, Alfie Kohn suggests that the only reward that should ever be offered for finishing a book is the opportunity to pick a new one.

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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