

Don't Just Read TO Your Kids; Read WITH Them

Reading to your children will have immeasurable benefits for their academic success. We hear this over and over again in the education world.

So why don't more parents do it? Statistically, only about one-third of parents read to their children at night—and that number is probably generous.

There will, of course, always be those parents who don't place enough value on this activity, or their children's education, for that matter. And then there are those who feel that the reading their children perform at school is probably sufficient.

There's also the exhaustion factor. I get that. After a full day of work, in addition to the evening routine of preparing dinner, cleaning up after dinner, and getting kids ready for bed, there are times when plopping in front of a Netflix show seems a lot more appealing than potentially straining eyes and voice to read. I have found, though, that cultivating reading as a habit is an antidote to this obstacle. As with other activities, when reading becomes routine, it doesn't require a Herculean effort of will every time you think about doing it. And eventually, you start to look forward to it.

But then there's an often overlooked factor: boredom. A lot of parents quickly give up on reading to their children because they feel that they have to read material that could only possibly be interesting to children. The mistake is contained in the very phrase "reading to children." Rather than simply reading to children, we need to read *with* them. If family reading is to remain a fixture in the home, parents need to select books that can be enjoyed by both children and adults.

Of course, when the child is at the toddler stage, you're usually relegated to reading the same board books *ad nauseam*. (How many times have you read the phrase "Goodnight Moon"?) But by the time the child reaches the age of five or six, you can usually step it up with some enjoyable chapter books. By the time my oldest child was six, we had started to work through the *Little House* series.

To be honest, I've been kind of selfish when it comes to reading with my kids, as I try to choose books that I never got around to reading as a child. This isn't too difficult, as I don't think I was assigned a novel to read by my school until I was in ninth grade. Plus, I've always been more of a non-fiction reader, even as a child. Thus, family reading time has become a way for me to bulk up some great novels to which I was never before exposed, such as the incredibly rich *Little Britches* books, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *Johnny Tremain*, and *The Little Prince*.

Reading *with* my children rather than *to* them also has its educational advantages for them. For one, it has enabled them to stretch their minds and legitimately engage with some difficult books. For instance, there is no way my kids could have read *Treasure Island* on their own at the time we read it as a family (I think my oldest was eight or nine). Much of the vocabulary is simply too archaic, and they would have had some difficulty with the historical and situational context. But read aloud by someone who uses the correct cadence, pronunciation, and emphasis, and is willing to become hoarse by doing a pirate voice, and voila, they could comprehend it, to the point that they were jokingly handing me pieces of paper with "black spots" on them (a symbol in *Treasure Island* that means you have something bad coming to you) for a few weeks afterwards.

It has also provided my children with an early experience of the seminar forum they'll encounter more fully later in their school careers, in which teacher and students both engage with

and discuss a book. Many contemporary children's books do not leave much room for discussion. The ideas they communicate are often superficial, and they usually spell these out for their readers in an obvious manner. (Kids pick up on these things, too, by the way.) But the well-crafted stories my children and I have read have raised plenty of questions to which both parties enjoy seeking answers, together, in a mutual pursuit of truth.

One of the greatest children's authors of all time, C.S. Lewis, wrote: "I am almost inclined to set it up as a canon that a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story." Reading books geared only toward children is a surefire way to eventually ditch the practice of reading to your kids. Pick books that both of you can enjoy. That way, you'll not only be reading *to* your children, you'll be reading *with* them.

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