

Fun ways to get your kids to read

Reading is undoubtedly the most important skill your children will learn during the elementary years. With time and practice, children first learn to read and then transition these skills into reading to learn. When they learn to read well, all their other learning—both in and outside the classroom—becomes much easier.

Research shows that children who read frequently are more likely to do well academically. According to a report by the National Center for Educational Statistics, students who read for pleasure every day scored almost 10 percent higher on proficiency tests than those children who don't. Specifically, those who read a wide variety of styles and genres are more likely to have fun reading and in turn become life-long learners.

The way children become readers can seem a little mysterious at first. One day they aren't able to recognize their names in print, and then, as if someone flicked a switch in their brains, they are reading everything from street signs to chapter books. In reality, learning to read is a complex process that typically works best when teachers and parents come together as a team.

The importance of reading with your children

Strickland Gillilan Research has shown that reading together with your children for even a few minutes a day can help them learn basic reading skills more quickly. By reading to your children, you also encourage them to make reading a life-long habit. Unfortunately, after-school activities—although important pursuits—along with round-the-clock children's television and portable computer games often leave little time for families to read together each day. It may take some creativity, but even with these challenges you can incorporate reading into your daily lives. Here are some suggestions:

Read aloud every day, and have your children read to you. Reading aloud to children has been called the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for reading success. Reading aloud helps children learn about written language, about the world around them, and about the connection between spoken and written words. Some families carve out a half hour of reading time before bed; others enjoy a book in the morning along with their breakfast cereal. Remember, too, to talk with your children about the books they read. Ask them

to tell you details of the story they have read, and help them with any new vocabulary words they may have encountered.

Practice reading aloud to “all” family members. Don’t forget that the family pet can be a great listener—especially for readers who might be nervous or anxious about reading aloud. Studies show that children who practice their reading skills by reading aloud to their pets demonstrate more confidence, are more relaxed about reading aloud, and are less likely to view reading as a chore. Don’t have a pet? They can read to the neighbors’ pets, a stuffed animal, or other favorite toy.

Become a critic. Involve the whole family by playing book-to-movie critics. Read a book together that has been made into a movie. Then rent the movie and discuss whether the movie portrayed the book accurately, if anything from the book was left out, if the book or movie was better, etc.

Eat your words. Who says reading has to happen at bedtime? Getting to eat a delicious and healthy snack you and your child baked or cooked after reading a book about food can spark a lot of enthusiasm. Some great books to try with your children include:

- “Sun Bread” by Elisa Kleven
- “Mr. Belinsky's Bagels” by Ellen Schwartz
- “The Little Red Hen (Makes A Pizza)” by Philemon Sturges
- “Everything on a Waffle” by Polly Horvath
- “It's Disgusting and We Ate It!: True Food Facts from Around the World and Throughout History” by James Solheim
- “The Little House Cookbook” by Barbara M. Walker
- “Knead It. Punch It. Bake It. The Ultimate Breadmaking Book for Parents and Kids” by Judith Jones.

Start a family book club. Often times when children become independent readers, parents tend to lose touch with what books their children are reading—or not reading for that matter. Start a family book club where everyone is reading the same book—either a book chosen for pleasure or a school-assigned reading project. Reading together enables children and parents to connect by discussing details of the book, such as the characters, the overall theme, etc.

Let children choose what they want to read. Maybe you'd like them to fall in love with the “Chronicles of Narnia” just like you did as a kid. But to spark their interest in reading, you need to let them make their own choices, too. If your child is a sports buff, there are any number sports-related fiction and non-fiction books, magazines, and even articles on the Web available to read. Is your child a budding musician or music fan? The amount of music-related reading material is unlimited—musician/band biographies, song lyrics, books about instruments and music genres, etc. Maybe you have a comic-book lover at home. Try introducing him or her to age-appropriate graphic novels. These books have illustrations and text, often with sophisticated visuals and storylines. Try these series: “Artemis Fowl” by Eoin Colfer; “Redwall” by Brian Jacques; or “Bone” by Jeff Smith

Make reading a game. Once a week, challenge everyone in the family to find an interesting, far-fetched, or wacky article online or in a newspaper or magazine. At the end of the week have all family members read their articles aloud. Then vote on who found the most interesting or bizarre story—don’t forget to award the winner with a zany prize!

Next stop, the library. Work in weekly trips to the library to stock up on books, and take advantage of the programs available for families. Introduce your children to the librarians, and ask for their help finding stories your children will like.

Tie reading to vacation activities. There are so many wonderful fiction and non-fiction books that celebrate the seasons. A few about the spring/early summer include:

- “Come on, Rain!” by Karen Hesse
- “Sun Dance, Water Dance” by Jonathan London
- “Summer: An Alphabet Acrostic” by Steven Schnur
- “A Camping Spree with Mr. Magee” by Chris Van Dusen
- “Fudge-A-Mania” by Judy Blume
- “Letters from Camp: A Mystery” by Kate Klise.

If your family will be going on vacation this spring, consider taking along some books that relate to your journey. One parent whose family was headed for a week in Washington D. C. to see the famous cherry blossom trees in bloom, among other sites, stocked up on picture and reference books about the White House, the Capitol, and other historical sites from the library.

Fighting primetime (and Nintendo DSIs)

Becoming a good reader, like any other skill, takes time and practice. By limiting television, computer use and video games, you give your children that much more opportunity to read along with you or by themselves. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children's use of TV, movies, and video and computer games be limited to no more than one or two hours per day.

Some facts about TV and reading:

American children watch nearly four hours of television every day. Watching movies on tape and playing video games only adds to time spent in front of the TV screen. Children spend more time in front of the television each year than they do in school.

A study by Nielson Media research found that students who watched TV or played video games six or more hours per day earned the lowest average scores on reading proficiency tests, while students who watched an hour or less per day earned the highest average scores.

Learning disabilities and reading disabilities such as dyslexia make it harder for children to learn to read through conventional teaching methods. While intervention at school is essential to help these children become successful readers, families also play an important role. If your child has been identified as having a learning disability related to reading, here are a few additional tips to keep in mind:

- **Tap into your children's areas of strength.** Although some children can have great difficulty reading, they might easily understand through listening. Take advantage of their strengths. Rather than forcing reading, which can set your children up to fail and lead them to develop a disliking for books, let them listen to you read or play a book on tape.
- **Make sure their books are at their reading level.** Most children with learning disabilities will be reading below grade level. Today, there are plenty of good books that will keep their interest without frustrating them. Confer with your child's teacher to get an idea of appropriate books for your child.
- **Practice makes perfect!** The more exposure your child has to reading, the more strategies he/she will learn in order to decode unfamiliar text.

Reading resources for parents

On the Net:

- Read Write Now! Age-appropriate activities for reading and writing fun from the U.S.

Department of Education: <http://www.udel.edu/ETL/RWN/Encourage.html>

- The Children's Literature Web Guide <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/lists.html>

Books:

- “How to Get Your Child to Love Reading” by Esme Raji Codell
- “The New York Times Parent's Guide to the Best Books for Children” by Eden Ross

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- “The Read-Aloud Handbook and Hey! Listen to This: Stories to Read Aloud” by Jim
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