

“Getting Children Reading”

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 18 July, 2003 - 09:55

The recent release of the new **Harry Potter** (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/043935806X/takingchildrseri>) book brings to mind some of the extremely strange things that people under the influence of the prevailing educational ~~ent~~ theory are wont to believe. One of the reasons many adults praise Harry Potter is that it gets children **reading** (http://www.education-world.com/a_books/books148.shtml):

“It's wonderful to see kids so interested in reading,” said Susan Polk, manager of the bookstore. “It's a 750 page book and they still want it that much. That's exciting!”

What is good about Harry Potter is not that it gets children reading, but that it is a jolly good read. Like many parents and teachers, Ms Polk apparently thinks that:

- there is something inherently good in early reading that is independent of the early reader's wish to read
- reading is not generally something that people of sound mind would choose to do for their own interest and pleasure
- we need to get children reading
- we should seek out books that “get children reading“ and ensure that children come into contact with said books
- children need to be *made* to learn to read
- children must read, and if they are not interested, they must be pressured to do so, for example, by threats, bribery, positive reinforcement, or by reducing their choices to two, where one of them is reading and the other is something unpleasant such as cleaning the toilet.

TCS parents reject all these ideas and don't think in terms of getting children reading at all. Instead, they take the view that *getting children reading* is a manipulative aim. “So what?”, you might ask. “Isn't it manipulating them into something good?” Not really. Even if it ‘works’, it is also manipulating them into the attitude that reading is something tedious and useless and difficult and painful *now*, even though it will help them in their distant future lives. And therefore, even in the rarely-realised case of a perfectly docile child, the resulting conflict in the child's mind, with the child preferring to do or think about X, but also wanting the conflicting end of satisfying the parent, is quite likely to be counterproductive. How do *you* feel when you sense that someone is leaning on you to do something? The natural reaction is to do the opposite. Even if it is something you would have wanted to do, being pressured to do it can cause you never to go down that path, or to lose any such desire that you already have. It is likely that at least a proportion of people who can read, but come out in a cold sweat at the suggestion that they might like to read a book, react like that precisely because they originally learned to read under pressure.

Compare that sort of tragedy, brought about by the cult of early reading, with the description in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/014039012X/takingchildrseri>), of how the young slaves used to go secretly to reading lessons at night, *after* being worked to exhaustion all day, and despite the risk of being savagely beaten for breaking the law: for it was illegal for a slave to learn to read, and illegal to teach a slave to read. What does it take to extinguish such a desire? Could there be a greater irony than the presence of two

youngsters on the same plantation, one black and one white, the white one being beaten for not learning to read and the black one being beaten for learning?

It is understandable to fear that your children might fail ever to learn to read and thus have a terrible life (and it would be *all your fault* – oh the guilt – we so want the best for our children). But instead of fearing the worst, question your premise that learning to read is difficult and unpleasant. It isn't! Assuming that they have access to a willing helper, children learn to read quite willingly when they have a genuine reason of their own to do so, such as wanting to play certain video games, or wanting to read the magazine Granny brought them. In dark moments when you fear the worst, remember the slaves wanting so much to learn to read that they risked death to do so. Remember the natural enthusiasm children have for Harry Potter books, and remind yourself that it won't help to 'encourage' [euphemism for "pressure"] your children to read: it is more likely to put them off reading for life.



An article about the process of learning to read will be put up on the [TCS](#) web site soon. Look out for it!

to post comments

Comments

Sometimes it's difficult...

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 18 July, 2003 - 11:02

I agree with you and most of the time we don't "encourage" our kids to read..... but sometimes it's difficult -- like when the education inspector is due and you know he'll want to hear the kid read. How can you satisfy the inspector if your kid's not reading to their age level? It feels like we're caught between a rock and a hard place here. Apart from what you say in this post, do you have any advice for parents to make it easier not to go down that road?

to post comments

education inspector

Submitted by Elliot Temple on 18 July, 2003 - 14:16

Why do you have an education inspector? That sounds awful.

-- Elliot Temple <http://curi.blogspot.com/> (<http://curi.blogspot.com/>)

to post comments

Education inspector

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 19 July, 2003 - 08:48

We live in England and have inspections every year. Every year when the inspector is due, we feel the pressure to meet the targets we think the inspectors will expect. It makes us all feel miserable and it's really difficult not to

pressurise the kids to read etc. What do others do?

to post comments

Re: Education inspector

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 19 July, 2003 - 10:44

You do not have to provide evidence in this way in particular, except in exceptional circumstances. There are so many other ways to satisfy the local education authority. You might like to read **[this article \(http://www.fitz-claridge.com/Articles/Evidence.html\)](http://www.fitz-claridge.com/Articles/Evidence.html)** and the other articles linked from that piece.

to post comments

Reading

Submitted by Terra on 24 July, 2003 - 22:18

I'm a kid that didn't learn to read till real late... school was hell for me till I learned to read. I never did learn at school, my brother and mom taught me when I wanted to learn. I was 10 when I learned. My advice is let the kids learn when they want to and don't make them feel like crap if they don't want to yet.

to post comments

I think kids need to learn to...

Submitted by Pokemamma on 25 July, 2003 - 10:24

I think kids need to learn to read before they reach school age. If a kid doesn't learn to read by then it's a whole lot harder later.

to post comments

A man who doesn't read is no ...

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 25 August, 2003 - 07:25

A man who doesn't read is no better off than a man who can't - it's a quote but I don't know from whom. It is more important that a child like reading, than that they are taught how. If they want to read, learning how to read isn't an issue. The same with any learning. Teach them to love learning, and nothing else is an issue. Everything is learning. Creativity and curiosity naturally fuel this unless it is extinguished by pressure - what I have Always thought was wrong with our school systems. How can they call it a success if all they taught was one thing, while killing an otherwise natural thirst for ongoing learning. "Give me a fish, I eat for a day. Teach me to fish, I eat for a lifetime. Teach me the joy of learning how to fish, I might eat more than just fish." If reading is what one truly wants a child to do, one cannot afford to take the risk of quelching it by exerting pressure.

to post comments

Learning

Submitted by Woty on 25 August, 2003 - 21:02

A man who doesn't read is no better off than a man who can't - it's a quote but I don't know from whom. It is more important that a child like reading, than that they are taught how. If they want to read, learning how to read isn't an issue. The same with any learning. Teach them to love learning, and nothing else is an issue. Everything is learning.

I agree that it's wrong and destructive to make kids study. However, I think that it matters very much how we present things and how we explain stuff when kids want help studying. If the only easy books in the house are Dick & Jane books, it's going to be much more difficult for a child to learn to read in a good way. If the only people a child interacts with hate math and don't understand it, it's harder for the child to find an interest in math. If things are explained badly, it is more difficult to learn them.

It's good to throw out the destructive coercion; but that does not discharge the obligation to teach well.

to post comments

Internet

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 31 December, 2003 - 10:27

I hope and sincerely believe that this universal medium; Inter-net, will effect the greatest social change we will have experienced ever.

It will surpass in magnitude and significance the effects of the Agricultural and Industrial revolutions combined.

It will allow status-jumps formerly unthinkable to occur at almost any time.

All needed will be interest; and motivation.

Plan, and aggressive action on the part.

The path, the road, the MEANS is so cheap! So easy! So accessible!

Education has become so accessible, anyone sufficiently motivated can pick up, from wherever they are.

With some decent understanding of Scientific Method, nothing stops the common man from producing his own theories, inventions, etc, save for his own lack of imagination, trepidation, or what have you.

But it is so simple now, to communicate and branch out to a given community focused on a given topic; how long can we expect it will be that the veritable combination-lock of people matched to interest will not yield results in a positive way?

And surely, if nothing else, this Inter-net promises interaction!

So with time, (and mind you, data never perishes, yellows or burns so easily as would paper) collaborative effort (howsoever dubious the quality) is sure to yield magnificent results!

If collaboration could be said to be educational in itself, then surely education will be fostered in collaboration.

Children exposed to this Internet, I feel, will take away from it precisely what they mean to; this means, for great good, and terrible bad, they will seek as they will.

Great thinkers will reach in, and ponder and publish great thoughts.

Marginal of the same, most likely, the same.

Regardless, much as with life itself, you get out what you put in, and so speaking, you make what you make of it,... this internet offers you limitless grow-room, intellectually.

Or perhaps (should you need none? or litte?) -- that too!

Coercion it is not.

But for those who have passion to pursue something, it will offer more than can be found individually anywhere else.

Library it is not, but once every book it inputed, it will be greater than the greatest of Great Libraries.

Children exposed to it will react, inasmuch as I might be inclined to suppose, given an abstract generalization is all I might offer; they will react as they will.

Coercion yields nothing, by its' nature, it seeks to oppress.

Freedom offers everything, by its' nature, it seeks only to be; to observe and learn, but not to intervene, and so in doing; oppress.

The internet offers everything, and asks nothing in return.

By asking for nothing, I have a feeling, that in offering so much (in everything) and requiring so little (in nothing!) -- that everything will come to be offered in return, and for nothing!

This will foster a wonderful spirit of intellectual free-exchange hereforeto unseen in the whole of the human history!

I have great hope for children exposed to such a medium; a medium that offers something on everthing will surely offer everything to those utilizing the medium (hopefully every-one, as well?)

To sum: Introduce, and invite, do not Force and demand; interest will flow naturally thereon in.

The internet inherently is passive, in introducing, inviting.

You supply the other stuff yourself, for yourself.

And learning occurs!

[to post comments](#)

What people hate is being pushed into reading fiction

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 25 October, 2004 - 14:41

I guess this article is strangely confusing the fact many people nowadays think that reading books (specially fiction) is this great thing that develops intelligence or whatever to the fact that being able to read is absolutely necessary in our society, unless you want to be dependent on someone the rest of your life. Nobody hates being able to read. What people hate is being pushed into reading fiction.

[to post comments](#)

Books are being used and considered the wrong way

Submitted by Cyber King (not verified) on 11 November, 2004 - 04:41

I do know for sure that it is one of the most essential components for someone's life to learn to read. I knew how to read by the time I was 4, with my parents working with me in all sorts of reading lessons.

One of the things I don't like about books being included in education is that kids are not only pressured into liking (or maybe they're just pretending to like it just to escape the pressure) and doing reading but also because of the fact that in schools, teachers force you to complete a book in a certain amount of time and write up a book report about it. That isn't even teaching kids to appreciate reading. It's teaching them to hate it, though sadly many people fail to so much as consider that matter. Maybe this can sort of shed light onto the question of why people are campaigning against video games. Since many people learn how to play them, those people may think that the reason for those people being able to learn quickly on how to play video games is because of the false belief that video games are mindless and contain no mindfully productive concepts in them whatsoever. But that is not true. The reason why we can learn from video games quickly is because we are enthusiastic about them. Had many of us not enjoyed video games, we could have done terrible and taken a long time to learn how to play them.

Sometimes, it is the spirit that drives us.

You are hearing this from a 12 year old 7th grade male, also an intellectual. I kindly ask that you do NOT use my age and/or profession as only a 7th grader to make improper judgements about my input on this subject, and that you consider my opinion equal regardless of either concept of age or profession.

[to post comments](#)

Cyber King: Here, of all plac

Cyber King: Here, of all places, I imagine you'll be taken seriously. (And for what it's worth, you're extremely articulate for your age. Not surprising considering the way you talk about learning and thinking.)

I couldn't agree more on the subject of book reports. In retrospect, it seems patently ridiculous to have reading material, especially fiction, chosen for me.

On an unrelated note, I was distressed for a while by the thought that I don't read nearly as much as I did when I was a kid. (I'm speaking of voluntary reading, here--I used to devour libraries whole.) The reason was probably a combination of the ingrained belief that reading is inherently a good thing, and a fear that it was a sign of losing some of the creativity and interest I'm so proud of it.

Then I came across a well-written textbook and it all made sense. I had lost interest in reading for its own sake, but give me a book with something to teach and don't expect to hear from me for a few hours.

[to post comments](#)

desire to read isn't enough

Submitted by Lisa (not verified) on 27 February, 2005 - 13:34

I am a teacher who works with students who have dyslexia and other learning disabilities. Unfortunately, even having a strong desire to read isn't always enough to ensure that a child does learn. My students have struggled for years to learn to read but due to poor memory, poor language processing, poor visual-spatial skills, and other issues, they find it very difficult. It's heartbreaking when they pick up the book they really want to read -- the Series of Unfortunate Events or Harry Potter -- and have to put it down because it's completely unintelligible. Or when they write out a story or biographical piece and then can't read it back and remember what it said.

Many kids do learn to read later than popular wisdom says, and some of them aren't disabled at all -- but my question is how one would catch a disability in a child who hasn't been expected to participate in reading activities? Highly effective specialized methods are available for the child who needs them, so it seems awful to allow a child to labor under the mistaken impression that s/he cannot learn to read when or is "stupid", rather than provide the tools for success.

I think it's important for all people to have a basic literacy so that they can fully participate in societal life -- even basic things like reading a restaurant menu, voting at the polls, examining a contract or other legal document. I worry about my students being dependent on individuals who might cheat them or take advantage of their situation. On a higher level, I also want them to be able to write letters to the editor and to friends, read books about subjects that interest them, use the Internet, and get high school or college degrees to boost their earning capacity and ability to take care of themselves as adults.

My point is not that learning to read is always difficult and painful -- I learned very easily -- but that for some kids, it CAN be. Check out the book "Overcoming Dyslexia" by Sally Shaywitz for case studies and research on how a reading disability can affect a person in all areas of his or her life.

[to post comments](#)

reading as control

Submitted by plaidpants (not verified) on 19 March, 2005 - 13:56

"I know for sure that one of life's most essential components is to learn to read. I knew how to read by the time I was 4."

I have a somewhat different perspective. For awhile I worked in an adult-literacy program. We had many adults who couldn't read, or could barely read, who had held down jobs and raised families. The terrible thing was not that they did not read, but that they had been forced to conceal this fact - to be ashamed of it. Most of them had impressive verbal memories and deductive reasoning skills. But b/c non-reading is a crime in our culture they had been in hiding for years, until they crept away to "remedy" their "lack".

Our schools are not constructed around learning. If they were, there would be an understanding that people learn at different rates, have different skills, process information in different ways. Instead they provide a single method of instruction in a single skill and all subsequent "teaching" is dependent on learning that single skill in the time allotted. Before the allotted time is over, kids are even prevented from having opportunities to learn by other methods - no invented spelling allowed, no writing at all until letters can be "properly" formed, no examples of print on the playground or in the gym other than the exit sign, no music or art except for short doses once a week, no drawing allowed outside of "art", and on and on. But once the time is up - POW! if you haven't caught on you must be defective.

Holding up reading as the number one most important skill has become a means of eradicating "less desirable" cultures and people. Oral history is worthless. Music is "only" entertainment. We are being reduced to a homogeneous "global" culture. Those who "slip through the cracks" are undesirable. Oh, I'm starting to rant, now, but those are some of my thoughts on the subject.

[to post comments](#)

Kids will learn to read in their own time

Submitted by Edith (not verified) on 3 April, 2005 - 11:28

Reading is such an important skill that kids will want to learn to do it anyway, unless they are told that they are incapable of learning to read.

Our whole society is based on reading. Most kids will see adults reading for pleasure, to achieve things (like-can I afford that ice-cream?), etc.

Most kids are also not going to want to be dependent on adults for information indefinitely. I would hate to have to ask my partner to read me the tv listings, or ask for help in the shop to read the prices. Kids are no different except that they are constantly reminded how dependent they are anyway, so are probably MORE motivated to do something about this dependency.

I believe that the only reason a child would not want to read is if the message was communicated to them, reading this is a. a difficult and unpleasant task, (and so) b. one that I must force you to do, because you will not want to do it on your own. Now I would say that this is achieved pretty well by making a child learn at a particular age, rather than waiting for them to choose to read.

I also have a suspicion that a lot of so called reading problems, like dyslexia, MIGHT be caused by forcing kids to learn to read, so setting up phobias. I know I have a real phobia of maths. I can do stats (to degree level even) and arithmetic so long as no-one calls them maths, if they do I absolutely shut down and cannot think through what I am doing. I really was forced to "learn" maths at school.

Incidentally, I have known adults learning to read. Despite years of psychological blocks, and often a diagnosis of dyslexia, my understanding is that a person really can learn to read quickly if they want to, certainly from non-reading to basic survival level competence in a few weeks.

I AM concerned though that a child who is forced to read, and does learn for that reason, will forever see reading as not enjoyable. Now personally I love reading and would hate for a child to be turned off it, any more than I like that so many kids are turned off music, drawing, or whatever-these are all things (along with watching tv, etc etc) from which so much enjoyment can be gained that no-one has a right to take the potential to enjoy them from anyone else.

[to post comments](#)

Why would it cause a whole

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 9 April, 2006 - 23:56

Why would it cause a whole lot of other problems. children learn when they learn and learn better when not coerced.

[to post comments](#)

As to the teacher who works

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 15 June, 2006 - 12:00

As to the teacher who works with kids who really want help reading. Why would a kid choosing when and if to read, at their own pace, prevent them from asking for help if and when they wanted it. TCS isn't about throwing kids out into the world and ignoring them, because they'll figure it out on their own. It is about honoring their desires.

[to post comments](#)

What if a child does not enjoy reading ... EVER

Submitted by lisa (not verified) on 22 March, 2007 - 12:15

Hello

Any suggestions/methods for a 9-year old who simply does not like reading - ever? Have tried subject matter of his passion. At home they all read a lot including older sibs, so it is just a very strange phenomenon to deal with a child who has no natural inclination/love to read at all. One page at night, before it becomes unpleasant. There

should be a balance between 'pushing/forcing and just letting be, but it is becoming very hard. This affects spelling and writing.

to post comments

9 year old doesn't like reading

Submitted by [emma \(not verified\)](http://www.childrenarepeople.blogspot.com) (http://www.childrenarepeople.blogspot.com) on 13 April, 2007 - 17:19

Maybe they want to do something differently from the older siblings for a while.

Help them pursue their passion via other media for now.

Some people enjoy learning through images and making images; others through moving their bodies; others through hearing and talking; others through using numbers. Child should have the freedom to learn in whichever ways they prefer, with your help when asked for.

When they want and need to read, write and spell, they'll ask for any help they need, as long as you back off now rather than nagging.

to post comments

actually ive always hated

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 9 February, 2010 - 01:46

actually ive always hated reading boring biographies or factual books. I like to read purely for entertainment. I think you 're speaking for your own preferences. I would be wonderful if we could find something that children love to read whatever their preferences might be and feed that love. It would also be wonderful that all our children know that reading and learning is beneficial to them financially in the long run and may also give them more opportunities in life if they are well educated but children have to choose education for themselves. However, education does not guarantee happiness.

to post comments

Motivations Hidden Outcome

Submitted by [Steve \(not verified\)](http://www.seoexpert-uk.co.uk) (http://www.seoexpert-uk.co.uk) on 20 January, 2011 - 15:10

My son and daughter both go to the same school.

Reading and literacy is seen in the UK as something that is good and helpful.

Reading and literacy rates are not as good as they should be.

The answer (currently) is to persuade and coerce children to begin reading at an ever earlier age.

Coercion takes the form of gold stars and a reward which they achieve after they get 30 stars.

The result is that our children can read at a younger age than many other cultures.

The other result is that the joy of learning by reading is destroyed.

I know I have generalised here and some children will read at a very early age without coercion but the effects can still be damaging.

There are books written about the use of direct rewards which achieve a particular outcome. In almost every case it reduces the love and joy of doing something into something that must be done or else...

The end result is opposite to what was wanted and we have just destroyed X number of children's natural curiosity and love of exploring in their own sweet time.

Regards

Steve

[to post comments](#)

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