

Helping Kids Learn to Enjoy Reading

By Jen Robinson, Jen Robinson's Book Page

I am guest blogging this month (January 2008) over at *PBS Parents Expert Q&A* (<http://www.pbs.org/parents/experts/>), and I am having a wonderful time. Most of the discussion has centered around the joy of reading, and favorite and recommended children's books. These are things I would talk about all day, if my schedule permitted it, and I'm thrilled to be having such lively discussion.

This week I had questions from two (apparently unrelated) parents each looking to help boys who are not just reluctant to read, but are having difficulty with it. One father called reading a "struggle" for his son, and sought ways to help his son "consider it fun and exciting rather than a challenge." Another mother said that her son finds reading very difficult, and seems to lack confidence in himself as a result. Both of these parents were looking for suggestions to make reading easier and more fun for their children.

I shared a few of own thoughts on this matter (read aloud with your children, let them read what they want to read, etc.), but I wasn't satisfied that I had given these parents enough help. So, I turned for assistance to my friends from the **Kidlitosphere Yahoo Group** (a discussion group for those who read, write, and blog about children's and young adult literature). This is an amazing group. Within 24 hours, I had heard back from about fifteen people, including teachers, parents and authors, with useful, concrete, and creative solutions for helping children learn to enjoy reading. In this article, I compile their suggestions, along with my own thoughts, in the hope of providing some helpful ideas for parents. There is no quick-fix, of course, no pill that your child can take to suddenly become a reader. But there are straightforward things that parents can do.

First and Foremost: Make Reading an Enjoyable Experience

The most important thing that a parent can do to help a child who is struggling with reading is make reading an enjoyable experience. If the child feels like reading is work or punishment, he or she will end up being a resistant reader instead of a joyful reader. Sixth-grade teacher **Sarah** (who blogs at *The Reading Zone* – <http://thereadingzone.wordpress.com/>) says: "As a teacher with a whole lot of reluctant 6th grade boy readers, I can't stress enough - **LET READING BE FUN!** Too many parents use reading as a punishment. If I had to read any time I was in trouble, I would probably hate it, too!" Another contributor, **Jill T.** (who blogs at *The Well-Read Child* – <http://wellreadchild.blogspot.com/>), points out that "parents must be patient and supportive. If parents get frustrated, it will only make the child more reluctant to read."

Read Aloud

The number one thing that parents can do to make reading enjoyable is to read aloud to and with their children. Well-known reading advocate **Jim Trelease** wrote an entire book on this subject (reference below). Reading together should be a fun, comforting, shared experience, not work, definitely not a test. By reading aloud to your child, you can read more advanced stories than the child is ready for on his own. You can stop and discuss the

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ideas in the books, together. You show your child that you value reading, and that you value your time together. The benefits of reading aloud to your child are vast, and will endure for a lifetime.

For parents who have difficulty reading aloud, try reading wordless picture books and telling your child a story based on the illustrations. Or try graphic novels such as the *Owly* books by Andy Runton (suggested by multiple contributors). Another idea is for parents and children to listen to audiobooks together. Just make sure you have a way to pause easily, so that you can stop and discuss things. Also consider listening to an audiobook at home, and following along with the printed book. The site *Just One More Book!* (<http://www.justonemorebook.com/>) features picture book reviews via podcast (audio file), which can also be helpful for parents.

Parent **Charlotte** (who blogs at *Charlotte's Library* – <http://charlotteslibrary.blogspot.com/>) says: “My own son is not taking to reading like a duck to water. So to make it fun for him, we will read books together. I will do the bulk of the reading, but he will be responsible for some of the dialog. When it's his turn, I wait a breath to see if he's been able to keep up with his eyes; mostly he hasn't, so I point, and he reads. Sometimes he'll read it again, with dramatic expression. This way we can read more interesting books without frustration. Shared reading also works well with graphic novels—we've read many *Tintin* books this way. *Ricky Ricotta* and *Captain Underpants* work well also. So do the *Magic School Bus* books--on every page there is something even tentative readers can read.”

Writer and volunteer librarian **Gregory K.** (who blogs at *Gotta Book* – <http://gottabook.blogspot.com/>) echoes the importance of reading aloud, and adds “read EVERYTHING you can, from cereal boxes to store signs to books.”

Let Your Child Read the Kinds of Books that He or She Wants to Read

One of the biggest reasons why kids, especially boys, end up resistant to reading is that they are often encouraged to read books that aren't interesting to them, and they are discouraged from reading the things that they most enjoy. One of the best things that you can do if you want your child to read for pleasure is support your child's selection of reading material. If your child only likes FACTS, get him an almanac. Get sports fans biographies of sports figures. Have a kid who is fascinated by war? Find some accessible nonfiction books. Try comics, joke books, computer game manuals, books of baseball statistics, movie novelizations, sport and car magazines, quizzes and puzzles. Whatever works. Whatever your child finds interesting is worthwhile. Yes, even *Captain Underpants* and *Gossip Girl* novels. Teacher **Mary Lee Hahn** (who blogs at *A Year of Reading* – <http://readingyear.blogspot.com/>) adds that home should be a “safe place for reading books that are at an appropriate or easy level (especially when/if school is a place of stress and struggle).” **Liz Garton Scanlon** (who blogs at *Liz in Ink* – <http://liz-scanlon.livejournal.com/>) adds: “About reluctant boy readers – or girls, for that matter: the *Zack Proton* books seem to work some sort of intergalactic miracle.”

This topic is also addressed, in the context of reluctant teen readers, in a recent *Horn Book* magazine article by **Philip Charles Crawford**. A high-school librarian, Crawford

discusses kids who are not just reluctant, but actually *resist* reading, and says: “To help these resistant readers, I avoid stigmatizing value judgments about reading materials. I try to change the negative experience that occurs when resistant readers encounter books – the immediate revulsion they feel when presented with something they view as academic or boring. This often means putting into their hands books that many librarians, teachers, and children’s book expert snub... these books have the power to engage and excite teens who would otherwise read nothing.”

There are two important sub-points here: **1) fiction is not all that there is.** Women (who still make up the bulk of primary caregivers, librarians, and teachers) tend to enjoy stories. But anything that gets your child reading is valid, and the child should not be made to feel that his or her reading is less valuable because it doesn’t fall into a traditional fiction-sized box. Reading of any sort, if it’s enjoyable, will lead to more reading. That’s our purpose here.

2) Suggested reading levels are guidelines, and may not apply to all kids. Kids shouldn’t be pushed (especially at home, when reading for pleasure) to read at higher levels than they are ready for. There are kids who happily read dozens of *Magic Treehouse* books, to the frustration of parents who would like their children to advance faster. But if the child is enjoying those *Magic Treehouse* books, great. They’ll move past the series eventually. But if you push them to read things they find difficult, you might turn them off of reading forever.

Teacher **Marcie Atkins** (who blogs at *World of Words* – <http://marcieaf.-blogspot.com/>) suggests: “I always tell parents of 4th grade boys that it’s not as much a concern of WHAT they are reading as long as they ARE reading. I tell them get them a copy of *Sports Illustrated for Kids* – anything that they LIKE to read about. Parents often really want their kids to read novels, but that’s not always what boys want to read. My brother was a reluctant reader, but he would cut articles out of the newspaper about the Gulf War (the first one) because he was fascinated with tanks. He hated to read, but he read knew more facts about tanks than anyone I knew.

For a struggling reader (not one who is just reluctant, but really struggling with the mechanics) I would recommend the *HI-LO readers*. There are many good books out there with topics that are interesting to kids that are written on a lower reading level. Sometimes kids get frustrated with the “baby books” because they are not interested in the content but they have difficulty reading anything harder.”

Former reading tutor **Jill T.** weighs in on the topic of age-appropriateness: “I used to tutor students (children, teens, and adults who had difficulty reading), and I can’t begin to tell you how this impacted their self-esteem and how often they just wanted to give up because reading was so difficult. The only other advice I can give is to try to find age-appropriate material that is also aligned with their reading and interest levels. This can be quite a challenge because a lot of the beginning reader stuff is full of bunnies and bears and themes that will turn off older kids and even embarrass them if their peers see what they’re reading. When I was teaching ESL to high school students, I had a hard time finding books that were simple enough for a beginning English learner to comprehend but also age appropriate. I was able to find a lot of nonfiction books and biographies that helped me and

that also interested my students, and I tried to steer clear of the ones that had “Grade 2,” or “Ages 4-8” stamped on them.”

Several responders pointed especially to comic books and graphic novels as a tool for making reading more fun, and a bit easier, for struggling readers.

Kelly Herold (who blogs at *Big A little a* – <http://kidslitinformation.blogspot.com/>) reminded me about this recent New York Times article: *Superman Finds New Fans Among Reading Instructors*. The gist of the article is that “a growing cadre of educators is looking to comics as part of the solution” to literacy problems. The article notes that “Proponents of comics in the classroom say that they can lure struggling readers who may be intimidated by pages crammed with text. They also say that comics, with their visual cues and panel-by-panel sequencing, are uniquely situated to reinforce key elements of literacy, like story structure and tone.” There are people who question the appropriateness of comics in the classroom, but it seems clear that comics and graphic novels can be used at home to help struggling readers find stories that they enjoy, and can read a bit more easily than more dense novels.

Parent and school librarian **Anna W.** also recommends *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, and adds: “Comic books, comic books, comic books! My fourth grade son loves the new *Alex Rider* graphic novels, and a series called *Tashi* (1st or 2nd grade reading, but good enough stories for a 4th grader), and now he’s working through *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (also 2nd grade-ish level). He also worked his way through some leveled non-fiction (step 2 & step 3) because he was captivated by the topic... If a child is significantly below grade level, have him/her listen to grade-level books on CD. It will help develop the vocabulary and narrative skills they’re not getting with reading, and it also helps some with self-esteem, being able to discuss the same books that the stronger readers have read. The trick is to find easy (easier than ability = success, speed and practice) AND interesting. And don’t make it a battle – as long as a child likes the idea of reading, he hasn’t given up yet.

And, if you are stuck for book recommendations for boys, **Gregory K.** reminds us that *Guys Read* – <http://www.guysread.com/>, created by new National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature **Jon Scieszka**, is a must-visit site.

Model Reading Behavior

Another important point about encouraging kids to read is that parents should, if possible, model reading behavior. Parent **Libby** (who blogs at *Lessons from the Tortoise* – <http://tortoiselessons.blogspot.com/>) suggests: “Talk about your reading at the dinner table, go to libraries and bookstores together, let your kids see that you are happy to read, that you get pleasure from it, that it is important to you. Just saying that reading is important won’t cut it; kids do what we do, not what we say. And then, maybe, let up a bit. I think some kids freeze up when they sense they’re not doing well at something their parents value.”

This modeling of reading behavior is especially important for fathers. If the only people boys ever see reading are their mothers and their female teachers, it’s very easy for those boys to absorb the message that reading is a feminine activity. But if even some of the time your son sees his father reading instead of watching television, that message goes a long

way. Author **Barbara Haworth-Attard** (<http://www.barbara-haworthattard.com/>) says that her son “had a special time with Dad which was the half hour before bedtime when he and Dad (and only Dad unless Dad was away) would read together. He did this until he was twelve years old because it was one on one time with Dad, plus Dad did all the voices and they snorted with laughter and it was such a fun time together. I think fun is the key. Make popcorn, get a drink, be consistent in that you do it every night and make it so special kids can hardly wait to read. It also helped that my husband liked reading, too.”

Other Concrete Suggestions

Tricia Stohr-Hunt from The Miss Rumphius Effect (<http://missrumphiuseffect.blogspot.com/>) contributed three suggestions that she likes, all from an article at *Reading Rockets* (<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/192>):

“* Encourage activities that require reading - Cooking (reading a recipe), constructing a kite (reading directions), or identifying a bird’s nest or a shell at the beach (reading a reference book) are some examples.

* Write short notes for your child to read - Write down his/her weekly household responsibilities for him/her to keep track of or put a note in his/her lunch bag.

* Give your child writing materials - Reading and writing go hand in hand. Children want to learn to write and to practice writing. If you make pencils, crayons, and paper available at all times, your child will be more inclined to initiate writing activities on his/her own.

Scroll down to the section on Helping your School Age Child (in the above article) for more ideas.”

Make Words into a Game: **Charlotte** says: “We have a box of words written on pieces of paper, and every so often my son gets them out and makes stories with them. He ends up practicing reading as a result, with the added bonus of writing when he needs new words (and it’s good grammar practice too, because of having to choose the right verb form and punctuation marks.”

Try Reader’s Theater: Author **Barbara Bietz** (<http://www.barbarabietz.com/>) suggests: “Reader’s theatre can be a fun way for parents to help kids with reading comprehension. After reading together, they can act out portions of the story or a short summary. It can be fun, even silly - and no pressure like a book report.”

Visit Your Local Library: **Mary Lee Hahn** reminds us that regular visits to the library help reinforce the importance of reading.

Make Real-World Connections to Books: **Jill T.** points out: “It’s always helpful if parents can find a way to use books to make real-world connections with things that their children are interested in... If I found that one of my students had a particular interest, I tried to find books about it and then point them to a place where they could actually GO to learn more and experience it first hand. For example, one student loved tigers, and the tiger at the National Zoo gave birth to tiger cubs. I found a fact book about tigers that she was able to read and also pointed her to the website where there was information about the tiger and the cubs.”

Be Aware of Possible Learning Differences

If your child is having trouble reading, it may be time to have some tests done, to see if your child needs help.

Gregory K., inventor of the poetic form “the Fib”, notes: “it’s also a good idea to make sure that there isn’t some other issue going on besides just not liking books. By this I mean things simple like a need for glasses or things like dyslexia or other developmental issues. Imagine the frustration for a child who cannot seem to make sense of the words, not knowing that it isn’t a lack of intelligence or desire, but rather a slightly different mental wiring!

Most public schools have a reading specialist (in the district, perhaps) or a program where they can test and see if there is an issue. Talking to the teacher (or principal or someone!) is the best first step, in my opinion. (And that’d be true in private schools, too). I’d note that sometimes kids are clever enough that they can mask reading difficulties from the teacher, so you might be doing both teacher and student a HUGE favor if you mention concerns.”

Anastasia Suen writes: “I am a former elementary school teacher, a children’s book author, and the mother of a child who had a VERY hard time learning how to read. He loved books, that wasn’t the problem! It was reading words that was hard. My son has dyslexia. Dyslexia is very common, 1 in 10 people have it. My son is grown up now and runs his own business (something that is also common for dyslexics!) PBS has a GREAT series about kids who find it hard to learn called **Misunderstood Minds**. The webpage has info about how kids learn and how to find help for kids who have trouble learning. One of the topics is **Learning to Read**. The **Reading Responses** page has lots of practical advice!”

Librarian **Jenny Schwartzberg** adds: “There’s a wonderful new book by Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: the Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, which specifically discusses dyslexia. I recommend it for anyone who is interested in how reading developed and why. It’s absolutely fascinating reading.”

Conclusions

The challenge of helping kids learn to enjoy reading is one that the members of the **Kidlitosphere** (the community of people who write and blog about children’s books) take seriously. While I can’t guarantee that this article is exhaustive (in particular, parents may need to find out more about the last topic, learning differences), I can say that these ideas all have the potential to help. In summary, to help your child learn to read and enjoy reading:

- Make reading fun, not work.
- Read aloud to and with your child.
- Let your child read the kinds of books that he or she wants, even if they are non-fiction, and even they aren’t officially at your child’s grade level. Explore a broad range of genres, including graphic novels.
- Model reading behavior yourself.

- Look for other activities, like going to the library, and performing reader's theater, that make reading enjoyable and relevant.
- Be aware of possible learning differences and vision difficulties that may be compounding the problem.

If you do these things, consistently and patiently, I truly think that they'll help, and that reading will become more enjoyable to your child. And you'll be able to share wonderful experiences along the way. I welcome your feedback.

Contributors

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Gregory K: *Gotta Book* – <http://gottabook.blogspot.com/>

Jenny Schwartzberg, librarian

Jill T: *The Well-Read Child* – <http://wellreadchild.blogspot.com/>

Kelly Herold: *Big A little a* – <http://kidslitinformation.blogspot.com/>

Libby: *Lessons from the Tortoise* – <http://tortoiselessons.blogspot.com/>

Liz Garton Scanlon: *Liz in Ink* – <http://liz-scanlon.livejournal.com/>

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Monica Edinger: *Educating Alice* – <http://medinger.wordpress.com/>

Sarah: *The Reading Zone* – <http://thereadingzone.wordpress.com/>

Tricia Stohr-Hunt: *The Miss Rumphius Effect* – <http://missrumphiuseffect.blogspot.com/>

A Selection of Further Reading:

- **Elissa Gootman**, *Superman Finds New Fans Among Reading Instructors*. New York Times, December 26, 2007.
- **Mark A. Yearwood**, *Boys Miss Out on Joy of Reading*. Toronto Star, January 7, 2008.
- **Beverly B. Swanson**, *Encouraging Your Child to Read*. Reading Rockets, 1998.
- **Jim Trelease**, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, Sixth Edition. Penguin, 2006. See also Jim's website: <http://www.trelease-on-reading.com/>, where there are lots of other great resources.
- **Philip Charles Crawford**, *Why Gossip Girl Matters*. Horn Book Magazine. January, 2008. See also their list of books published in the last year that entice reluctant teen readers.
- **The LD Podcast** (<http://www.ldpodcast.com/>), about learning and learning disabilities.
- **The PBS Parents Guide to Reading and Language** (<http://www.pbs.org/parents/readinglanguage/>), a rich resource that includes both developmental information about the stages of reading and language development and strategies for what parents can do to nurture that development. It is available in both English and Spanish.

- **Laura Amy Schlitz**, *How to Raise a Reader: Twenty-One Opinions from an Opinionated Source*. Park School Library.
- **Robin Smith**, *A Letter to Parents*. Horn Book magazine, September/October 2006.

A Few Recommended Titles for Reluctant Boy Readers (from Sarah):

- The *Cirque du Freak* series by Darren Shan
- *Oh Yuck! The Encyclopedia of Everything Nasty* by Joy Masoff
- The *Bone* series by Jeff Smith
- *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series by Jeff Kinney
- *Stanford Wong Flunks Big Time* by Lisa Yee
- John Feinstein sports mysteries, like *Last Show* and *Last Dance*

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Thanks for taking time to read this article, and for caring about raising readers.

