

Getting into Books: Helping Struggling Readers

How to help struggling readers develop a love of the written word

At this time of year, plenty of kids would rather hoist a hockey stick than pick up a book. But sometimes problems with reading aren't seasonal, which may worry parents who've heard the statistics that correlate poor reading ability with academic underachievement. One website even claims that when the State of Arizona projects the number of beds it will need in its prison system, it factors in the grade-four reading level of the upcoming generation; the less skilled the readers, the more room Arizona makes for inmates. The report is unsubstantiated, but it sure gets you thinking.

While worrying about our children's futures is a perfectly normal parental response, you can use your energy more effectively, and enjoyably, by helping kids develop better reading skills. Here are some approaches you can start using today.

Make it fun

Learning isn't supposed to feel like boot camp. That's something I had to keep reminding myself when working with my dyslexic son, Torben, now 11. As a natural-born reader, I sometimes found it difficult to understand that Torben simply couldn't process printed matter the same way I could.

"Too often, emotion gets in the way" when parents help their kids with reading, says Ron Jobe, a professor in the department of language and literacy education in the University of British Columbia's education faculty. "Reading should be joyful, and too often adults forget that. Don't get really frustrated and put the pressure on. Just be upbeat and positive about it."

Elizabeth Larsen of West Vancouver tries to do just that with her two boys, Sean, 10, and Joshua, 11. She downloads audiobooks for them so they can experience the great stories their friends read, but that are too challenging for them in print (one of their favourites is *Artemis Fowl* by Eoin Colfer). There's no pressure to follow along with the text; Larsen says the boys pick up language as they listen to the stories — and, just as importantly, they enjoy the books they're hearing.

Reading aloud to children long after they can read on their own will also nurture a lifelong love of books, advises librarian Ken Settingington, the Toronto Public Library's child and youth advocate. And family read-aloud sessions don't have to happen at bedtime when you're dead tired. Keep a storybook in the car that you can pick up when your partner is driving, or start the day with an inspiring newspaper account over breakfast.

Seek Out Better Books

Bookstores can be unfriendly places for struggling readers. Finding material that strikes the right balance between skill level and content can be difficult, agrees Betty Schultze, a former literacy mentor with the Vancouver School Board. So take your time and scan the shelves for books that use everyday language (with many phonetic words, such as "cat" and "mat," that are easy to sound out), as well as predictable vocabulary and picture clues to help readers figure out the text. Look for some multi-syllabic words too, for a bit of challenge. Just be aware that if your child is making many errors, the book is too difficult. Also, some publishers specialize in books for struggling readers (see Resources for Reluctant Readers).

Get into a book of your own

When parents love reading, kids are more likely to as well, Settingington says. "One thing children have to have is modelling behaviour in the household. They have to see their parents enjoying reading."

Mix facts and fiction

It's tempting to load up on classic children's novels or highly rated bestsellers, especially if you're an avid reader yourself. But be patient and allow your child to explore what interests him. While I may roll my eyes at the Archie comics that litter our home, I'm thrilled Torben reads and enjoys them.

Non-fiction and information books may also appeal to a kid who isn't into tales. Boys, especially, are often drawn to fact over story, and Jobe says there's nothing wrong with capitalizing on that. Kids will read what captures their interest, especially if there's an attentive adult around who's willing to listen to the odd snippets they discover, Jobe advises. "Every home should have a *Guinness Book of World Records*."

Go To School

Crank up your child's progress by putting his school's reading resources to work with your own. Here are just a few of the ways you can help the school staff and they can help you:

- If your child has delayed reading skills, connect with his teacher and school learning support centre. They may suggest further testing to determine if a learning disability is present; the sooner it's confirmed, the sooner your child can get the help he needs.
- Volunteer in the school library. While it may stock good beginner titles for children in grades one and two, the school library is likely missing appropriate resources for an older struggling reader. (What self-respecting grade-four student wants to be seen checking out *Green Eggs and Ham*?) Team up with the librarian to ensure there are a variety of offerings for all readers. At my children's school, librarian Joan Shaw and I created a Prime Picks section for older readers that's full of appealing, not-too-hard books, including graphic novels, comics and short novels with lots of illustrations.
- Volunteer in the classroom. If your child's school doesn't offer a one-on-one reading program, consider organizing one. Kids who are a little behind their peers can benefit immensely from reading aloud to an adult volunteer a few times each week. Keep in mind it's often easier to work with someone else's child — and your kid will usually perform better for someone else.

Hit The Library

Public libraries offer programs that help parents raise readers (father-and-son book clubs, educational talks for parents, one-on-one tutoring programs for kids, etc.). Libraries also schedule author visits that put children in contact with the creator behind the covers. "For some kids, meeting the author fires them up for reading," Settingington notes.

And, given the wide range of books available in a municipal library, it's not usually a problem to find something that will pique the interest of even the most reluctant reader, as long as you don't rush your way through the shelves. "Make sure the child is there so he has the opportunity to make choices," Settingington advises. "Let him talk to the librarian.... We must meet with the child so he knows we care about him too."

With the help of these approaches, Torben has conquered many of his reading difficulties. Now I'm going through a similar process with his 10-year-old brother, Sam, a high-energy lad who loves stories, but not reading them. Once again, I am trying not to worry (they aren't building Sam's prison cell just yet, I'm sure). I am looking for ways to make reading feel like fun, not work. For example, we rent subtitled karate movies. And when Sam wants to read his classroom-prescribed text in funny voices, that's fine with me. Believe me, you haven't lived until you've heard *Little House on the Prairie* recited, rap-style.

Resources for Reluctant Readers

Looking for appealing materials to get your kids reading? Some of the best resources aren't widely available in bookstores. Here's how to find them:

[Print](#)

- **Classics Illustrated Junior** These comics retell classic stories at a basic reading level.

jacklakeproductions.com

- **We Both Read** These primary school books alternate a page of simple text for a child to read with a page of more challenging text for the parent. webothread.com

- **Usborne Books** Offers dual-level books for reading together with your child, as well as information books that are good for older reluctant readers. usbome.ca
- **Orca Currents (middle-school age) and Orca Soundings (teens)** A line of contemporary, issues-oriented books for struggling readers, written by a range of bestselling Canadian authors. orcabook.com
- **High Noon Books** A wide range of high-interest books for upper-elementary students who are reading below their grade level. academictherapy.com

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