



## Let's Read!

Expert advice on children's reading habits and fun reading activities to engage children in reading



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## Introduction

This e-Book is for anyone who has the desire to help a child discover the delight reading will bring to them.

### WHAT IF All Children Had a Lifelong Love of Reading?

There are several reasons why our world would vastly improve if everyone was an avid reader:

- Reading is central to academic achievement and lifelong learning, and early failure in reading has dire consequences. Over 75% of the children in the U.S. who drop out of school report difficulties in learning to read[4]. Research suggests that the probability of being a poor reader in fourth grade, given that a child is a poor reader at the end of first grade, is 88%[5]
- Reading difficulties are widespread. More than 17.5 percent of American children, a group numbering about 10 million, will have difficulties in reading during their first three years of school [6].
- Children who acquire reading abilities early and efficiently show faster rates of growth not only in reading achievement but also in other cognitive skills [7].
- Research shows that reading success is related to the amount of time that children spend in independent reading, including time spent out of school [8]. Yet by the end of elementary school, the gap in reading outside of school is vast. By fifth grade, children in the top 10% of avid readers read almost two-and-a-half million words per year outside of school. This is *forty-six times* more words than children in the bottom 10%.[9]

*The end goals for learning are those demanded by the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy: creativity, innovation, and the fluencies that children need to be independent learners and producers.*

With regard to literacy, fluency refers to fluent reading of *connected text*: units of text that are at least one sentence in length.

### A Lifelong Love of Reading Starts at Home

In 2004, Dr. John Bransford(UW) and a number of other distinguished learning scientists founded the LIFE (Learning in Informal and Formal Environments) Center, an interdisciplinary collaboration between the University of Washington, Stanford University, SRI International, and several other institutions across the U.S. LIFE's mission is to study and advance learning in a technology-rich, fast-changing world.

Learning scientists at the LIFE Center point out that during a calendar year, children in the U.S. with perfect attendance spend only 14% of their time in school (see chart). Looked at another way, **America's children spend only one-fifth of their waking hours being formally educated.** The remaining four-fifths are spent in their homes and communities – time when they could, and should, be filled with a lifelong love of learning.

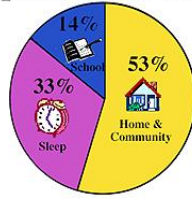
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### Where K - 12 Students Spend Their Time



Avid readers between the ages of 11 and 13 read from 10 million to 50 million words a year. Reluctant readers of the same age – those who can read but usually choose not to – read only 100,000 words [1]. When fifth-grade avid readers were asked why they read so much, most said that they had someone at home to talk with about their reading, often a parent [2]. Similarly, the differences between avid and non-avid readers are highly correlated with the amount of summer reading, when teachers aren't available and parents are largely responsible for reading support [3]. Although there is a strong correlation between reading and income – with lower-income children often reading less – children who are avid readers are found at all income levels. And research shows that low-income children who become avid readers achieve greater school success than high-income children who don't become avid readers [3] – a finding that again underscores the importance of parental support for childhood reading.

### What you'll get out of the chapters in this e-Book

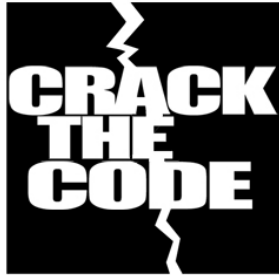
The chapters in this e-Book were written by Dr. Diana Sharp. We are honored to share with you Dr. Sharp's insights into young children's reading. You'll discover very creative ways to plant seeds of a lifelong love of reading in your child. Dr. Sharp has been a key member of the Sabi team since we all started our passionate journey back at Microsoft to create games that are Pure Fun made Educational. Besides being a wonderful human being, she has a very deep knowledge and background on young children's reading. Dr. Sharp is also an excellent author. We have learned so much from her that we wanted to share her thoughts with you. Dr. Sharp's website is [www.dianasharp.com](http://www.dianasharp.com).

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## Top 10 Tips for Helping Your Pre-K Child Crack the Reading Code



*Dear Dr. Sharp ,*

*I love how ItzaBitza helps my preschooler explore words inside sentences. But what's the best way for me to make sure she'll be able to "crack the code" and sound out words herself when she's learning to read?*

One of the things that children need to successfully crack the reading code is an oral language ability called *phonemic awareness*. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear the individual sounds in spoken words and the ability to do things with spoken sounds, like blend them together into a word.

Children without phonemic awareness have trouble, for example, hearing three separate sounds in the spoken word "cat." That makes it hard for them to know which letters to use for writing the word, even if they know the sounds that letters make. It also makes it hard for them to figure out what the teacher is talking about when he or she explains the way readers blend sounds together to read words.

Phonemic awareness is closely related to another early reading skill: knowledge of the alphabetic principle. Children who have developed this knowledge understand that reading and writing work like this:

(1) Printed letters stand for sounds.

(2) When we see a new word, we can say the sounds for the letters and blend them together to help figure out the word.

(3) When we want to write a word, we can say the word slowly and use letters to write each sound.

Fortunately there are lots of fun and easy ways that parents can help children develop phonemic awareness and deep knowledge of the alphabetic principle. Here are my top ten favorites:

### **1. Read rhyming poetry and rhyming stories.**

Rhyming is an early skill that children develop on the road to phonemic awareness. Ask your librarian for some great rhyming classics. Be enthusiastic about rhymes and your child will be too. If you read about a green mouse in a purple house, get excited and say, "Hey, look at that! *Mouse* rhymes with *house*!"

**2. Celebrate rhymes in everyday talk.** If you happen to say to your child, "Come here, my dear," stop right there and say, "Did you hear that! *Here* rhymes with *dear*!"

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**3. Play word-sound games:** in the car, while you're fixing meals, or while eating breakfast together. Make them up yourself, or use these examples:

**Rhyme Riddles.** "I'm thinking of a rhyme for *like*. The clue is that it's something you ride."

**Part-of Party:** What's *yo*? "Part of the word *Yogurt*!" "What's *li*?" "Part of the word *library* -- and also part of the word *like*!"

**Beginning-Sound Riddles.** "I'm thinking of something that starts with the [mmmm] sound. The clue is that it's one of your favorite foods."

**4. Name toys artfully:** If your child likes to give toys personal names, suggest names with minimal contrasts that will focus attention on individual sounds. For example, two dolls might be named *Sally* and *Tally*. Two stuffed dogs might be *Ritto* and *Rotto*.

**5. Get a set or two of magnetic letters** for the refrigerator for kitchen games. Research shows that letter-sound instruction doesn't have to wait until children fully develop phonemic awareness; in fact, it can help this development. Here are a couple of fun games you can play with your letters.

- **Letter-Picnic.** "Boy I'm hungry. Please pass me some peaches." When your child hands you a 'p', say, "That's great! Peaches starts with the [pppp] sound!"

- **Presto-Chango.** Look! I can change 'cat' to 'bat' and 'bat' to 'bit,' like magic!

**6. Use bath time for sound play.** We used to have a ritual where each bath ended with announcement "Attention! The toys are leaving the tub!" Then the floating foam letters would each make their sound as they marched out of the tub. "Here goes the 'F'! [fff] [fff] [fff]!" Each toy object would make the first sound in its name too. "Here goes the car! [c] [c] [c] [c] *car*!"

**7. Explore words in the world.** Talk about the letters and words on signs and buildings, newspapers, magazines that you and your child see together.

**8. Make everyday writing fun.** Let your child watch as you write things down. Point out how the different letters make the sounds in the words. Give your child writing materials to use in playing store, office, or restaurant. Encourage your child to make cards for family members, even if the child can't really write yet.

**9. Write and make memories.** Find a small box and use an index card or piece of paper for each day of the year. At the end of each day, write together a couple of short sentences about something that happened in your family. Talk about how the letters make the sounds in the words you're writing.

10. **Sing songs** that play with sounds . Here are some twists on folk songs, as suggested by researcher Hallie Yopp and used by kindergarten teachers I've worked with:

-- Tune: "Jimmy Cracked Corn." (Say the sound, not the letter name):

Who has a /d/ word to share with us?

Who has a /d/ word to share with us?

Who has a /d/ word to share with us?

It must start with the /d/ sound.

Dog is a word that starts with /d/

Dog is a word that starts with /d/

Dog is a word that starts with /d/

Dog starts with the /d/ sound.

-- Tune: "Old MacDonald Had a Farm." Again, sing the sound, not the letter name.

What's the sound that starts these words

*Daddy, duck and deep.*

(wait for a response)

/d/ is the sound that starts these words:

*Daddy, duck , and deep*

With a /d/, /d/, here, and /d/, /d/, there

Here a /d/, there a /d/, everywhere a /d/, /d/

/d/ is the sound that starts these words:

*Daddy, duck, and deep.*

At a more advanced level:

What's the sound at the end of these words

*Duck and cake and beak*

/k/ is the sound at the end of these words

*Duck and cake and beak*

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With a /k/, /k/, here and a /k/, /k/ there

Here a /k/, there a /k/, everywhere a /k/, /k/,

/k/ is the sound at the end of these words:

*Duck* and *cake* and *beak*!

-- Tune: "If you're happy and you know it clap your hands"

If you think you know this word, shout it out!

If you think you know this word, shout it out!

If you think you know this word,

Then tell me what you've heard

If you think you know this word, shout it out!

(Say a segmented word such as [c] [a] [t], and have children respond by saying the blended word. Later children can contribute the segmented sound for you to blend).

-- Tune: "Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah"

I have a song that we can sing

I have a song that we can sing

I have a song that we can sing

It goes something like this:

Fe-Fi-Fiddly-i-o

Fe-Fi-Fiddley-i-o-o-o-o

Fe-Fi-Fiddley-i-o

Now try it with the /z/ sound

Ze-Zi-Ziddly-i-o

Ze-Zi-Ziddley-i-o-o-o-o

Ze-Zi-Ziddley-i-o

Now try it with the /h/ sound

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Songs from:

Yopp, H. K. (1992). Developing phonemic awareness in young children. *The Reading Teacher*, 45, 696-703.

## What's Your Child's Reading Personality?



*Dear Dr. Sharp*

*When my son started first grade, he was reading words just as well as the other kids. But his reading never took off, and he ended the year reading below grade level. Other kids with the same teacher did fine. What made my son different?*

It's possible that your son's difficulties have less to do with his basic reading skills than with something researchers call *reading temperament*.

Reading temperament is the way that children naturally react to the challenges they face in learning to read. Some children are natural risk-takers: they seek out "harder" books on their own and love to read aloud with expression. Other children avoid risks and become easily frustrated. They may mumble when reading aloud because they don't want to take the chance of reading a word incorrectly.

When it comes to predicting a child's success with early reading, most teachers these days are very knowledgeable about the importance of basic word-reading skills like phonemic awareness and alphabetic knowledge, as well as oral language skills like vocabulary. But a recent article in *The Reading Teacher*

<http://www.reading.org/Publish.aspx?page=/publications/journals/rt/v62/i5/index.html&mode=edirect>

stresses that personality traits like reading temperament are also important. By themselves, skills and test scores don't tell the whole story about which children are successful in beginning reading and which ones aren't.

Anxiety and risk aversion aren't the only kind of reading temperaments that can cause problems for early readers. Children with impulsive temperaments can also find it difficult to exert the kind of self-control it takes to master the English code. Keep in mind that reading is likely the most difficult mental challenge your child has ever faced up to this point!

The good news is that researchers and teachers are becoming more aware that it's important to help children develop the social and emotional skills they need for learning to read as well as phonics and language skills. And here's where new technologies like ItzaBitza might also play an important role.

How? By providing a way for children who are risk-averse or impulsive to spend successful time with print while they gain confidence in their ability to read. ItzaBitza text is carefully leveled, so that the length and difficulty of the sentences starts out short and gradually increases. And the universal word help means that children never have to struggle with a word. Children can also have a fun and meaningful reading experience by skipping around in the game and reading the different sections in any order they choose. You can also do that with some information books, but don't try it with a story!

The important thing when using something like ItzaBitza to help a struggling reader is to make sure that you know *why* you're using it. It's not meant to provide a way that this child can read and live without books. It's to help the child overcome some obstacles that can keep him from having fun first experiences with books and can promote a negative attitude toward reading. If a child's obstacles include a reading temperament that makes it difficult to face the hard work of

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reading sentences, then I'm all for trying something besides books *just until the child has the reading confidence he needs to be successful*.

Don't forget that what every child needs to become a skilled reader is lots of time spent reading, and so *even if you don't start with books, you've got to entice every child into books*. There simply isn't enough child-appropriate print in any other form to supply the amount of reading every child needs.

With all this mind, please talk to your son's teacher when school starts to find out more about what held him back last year and what might help him overcome those obstacles this year. Check out that article I mentioned from *The Reading Teacher* - it's got lots of ideas for teachers on how to deal with children who have different reading personalities, and it uses some great examples from an effective second grade classroom. Here's the full reference:

McTigue, E. M., Washburn, E. K., & Liew, J. (2009). Academic resilience and reading: Building successful readers. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(5), 422-432.

<http://www.reading.org/Publish.aspx?page=/publications/journals/rt/v62/i5/index.html&mode=redirect>

## For Number Lovers: The Case for Reading



Dear Dr. Sharp:

*It makes sense that helping kids to love reading should be a priority in every child's home. But what research supports it?*

Great question. Doing research in this area isn't quite as straightforward as, say, research on a new drug. You can't take a group of kids, randomly assign half of them to swallow "reading love," and then give the other kids a sugar pill and

see what happens. Fortunately education researchers can be quite devious - I mean, clever - and I'm convinced the case has been made. Here are my top-ten favorite numbers from research, what they can tell us about kids and reading, and why everyone involved with ItzaBitza is so passionate about finding new ways to foster reading love.

### 1. #1

You can't talk about the effects of reading without talking about vocabulary. And research shows that vocabulary is hands-down the most consistent #1 predictor of academic achievement.

### 2. 50%

There are 50 percent more rare words in children's books than in adult prime-time TV - or in the conversation of college graduates. Kids who spend more time with books spend more time with more words.

### 3. 1,000 vs. 24 hours

Children in highly literate homes can hear well over 1,000 hours of read-aloud books in their first six years. Children from homes with infrequent storybook reading can come to first grade hearing less than 24 hours of reading at home in their first six years. When you think about what that means for vocabulary learning in particular and cognitive development in general, it's plain scary. I loved hearing about a new effort in Toledo, Ohio, to assign individual volunteer readers to children living in low-literacy households.

<http://toledoblade.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090615/NEWS16/906150323/0/NEWS08>

If you live there, please sign up!

### 4. 45 million versus 13 million

By the age of four, an average child in a professional family has heard 45 million words, and an average child in a welfare family has heard 13 million. That's a difference of hearing 32 million words. The best - and maybe only - way to make up for that difference in experience with words is through becoming a voracious reader.

### 5. 577

This is the number of Maryland fourth graders who were part of a study that looked at test scores on the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress). Researchers found that low-privileged kids - those with low family incomes and low mother-education levels - who read a lot *outscored significantly* high-privileged kids who didn't read a lot. This is great news! Those huge early differences in experiences with words can be overcome if kids love reading enough to read, read, read.

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## 6. 0

This is the number of other studies I've seen where researchers have discovered *anything else* that results in low-privileged kids outscoring high-privileged kids on national skills assessments. Zero. Zip. Nada. It may be out there, but I haven't seen it. Reading is that powerful.

## 7. 4

OK, this is a bit of a cheat, but "four" is the number of tests used in another one of my favorite studies. Fourth through sixth graders who read a lot significantly outscored non-avid readers (with the same decoding ability) on these four separate tests: word knowledge, verbal fluency, vocabulary, and general information. The two groups scored the same on tests of non-verbal intelligence, decoding, and spelling, which strongly suggests they had the same basic abilities to read - it was the amount of reading they did that mattered. As the researchers put it, "Reading makes you smarter."

## 8. 2 days vs. 1 year

By fifth grade, kids who read "a lot" in their own free time - that is, they're in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile in terms of how much they read - are reading as much in *two days* as other fifth grade kids read in an *entire year*. Which group of kids do you want yours to be in?

## 9. 10 to 50 million

The range in the number of words read by middle school students each year is from 100,000 for an unmotivated reader to somewhere between 10 and 50 million for the kids who read the most. Need I repeat, vocabulary is the #1 predictor of student achievement.

## 10. 4 - 6

A highly respected group of researchers recently came out with the recommendation that kindergarten children should read or have read to them at least four to six books a day. No wonder!

## How can reading compete? Answer: Boom-di-yada



Dear Dr. Sharp:

*Aren't you afraid that between video games, social networking, and virtual worlds, there's no way today for books to compete? Even when software like ItzaBitza helps kids learn to read, how in the world can anyone convince kids to choose reading - just plain old book reading - in their free time?*

This is a great question. An easy answer would be, "Ask J. K. Rowling," but I think there are lots of other ways to draw kids to books, especially when they're too young for Hogwarts drama. I've written in previous posts that one way to get reluctant readers to read is to tie books to their personal interests. But please don't wait until kids are reading age to start building those interests and linking them to books. I recently gave a talk to mothers of preschoolers, and number one on my list of tips for raising preschoolers to become readers was... Boom-di-yada.

Have you seen the [Boom-di-yada ad for Discovery Channel?](#)

That's it! Get kids passionately interested in the world, and books will become a way for them to spend time with what they love. They won't be able to resist.

You see, one secret to what people choose to do in their free time is something called "the fun-to-work ratio." (All you have to know math-wise is that a ratio is like a fraction and it works like this: the overall ratio is a "big" number when the number on top is big and the number on the bottom is small. So  $800/5$  is a much bigger number than  $2/9$ . In the case of the fun-to-work ratio, "fun" is on the top of the fraction and "work" is on the bottom. The bigger the overall number, the bigger the overall fun.)



This explains why something like "whitewater rafting" and "watching TV" are both referred to as "fun." In the case of whitewater rafting, there's a lot of work involved, but the thrills add a lot of fun, so the fun-to-work ratio could be something like  $30,000 \text{ (fun)}/200 \text{ (work)}$ . Still a big overall number. In the case of TV, the overall number is big, but it's not because the amount of fun is so high. It's because the amount of work required is incredibly small. So the fun-to-work ratio for TV might be something like  $2 \text{ (fun)}/.05 \text{ (work)}$ . Still a big number overall.



With ItzaBitza the designers not only made the drawing part super-fun with Living Ink, they also made the reading part easier with the universal word help. The result is a really big fun-to-work ratio, even for reluctant or beginning readers, because the fun part is high AND the work part is low enough to avoid frustration. So kids will choose it on their own when they want to have fun.

To get kids to also choose books in their free time, you have to make sure the fun-to-work ratio is also high for books. The "work" in reading a regular book is going to be higher than videogames or TV - so you've got to increase the fun part of the ratio. And one way to do that is to help kids passionately love something and then tie to books to it. If books become a way for kids to spend time with something they're crazy about, then the "fun" part of the ratio will outweigh the "work" part and kids will choose books - because, hey, they're fun!

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That's why I tell parents of preschoolers they can't separate getting kids interested in the world and getting them interested in books. Doing one will naturally increase the other, and you can start getting kids passionately interested in the world long before they're ready to read. If you thought there's nothing kids find more interesting than Barney or Mario, you're wrong: the real world is way cooler, especially if you start helping kids admire it when they're young. All you have to do is look for sparks of interest. Then do everything in your power to fan those sparks. Start as soon as you can to fill your day with Boom-di-yada book-talk. If a child gets interested in a bug on the porch, or a puppy next door, or drawing rockets on ItzaBitza, say things like "That is SO COOL! We have GOT to get some books about (bugs/puppies/rockets)!"

This is also another perfect example of how technology doesn't have to be the enemy of print. When your child asks something like "Do owls have eyelashes?" or "What sound do hippos make?" you can often look something up on-line, maybe find a video, and talk about it, right when their interest is hot. Use the Internet as an intermediate interest-builder that always ends with the "Awesome! We've GOT to get some books about that!" line. Then when you get to the real treasure trove - the library - get the librarian's help to bring home a wealth of books (fiction and non-fiction) about owls or hippos or whatever. Your preschooler will see that books are a fantastic way to further explore what THEY are curious about, and what THEY find awesome about the world. The books, in turn, will further fuel their passions, making it even more fun to spend time with similar books as they get older, even when they have to do the solo work of reading.



So there you have it: my number-one tip to parents who want their preschoolers to grow up to be book lovers is "Start now to build passionate interests." It's a great way to give a high fun-to-work ratio to reading, and it will be your secret weapon to raising kids who love books. Boom-di-yada, Boom-di-yada!

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## Bringing Books to Life (or Why I Ate Cricket Cookies)



Dear Dr. Sharp:

*In the previous chapter, you described your #1 piece of advice for preschool parents who want their kids to love reading. What's your #2 suggestion?*

My next suggestion is: "Do the opposite of Advice #1."

OK, let me explain. In my last posting, I talked about using children's sparks of interest in the world as the starting point for connecting them to books:

*"If a child gets interested in a bug on the porch, or a puppy next door, or drawing rockets on ItzaBitza, say things like 'That is SO COOL! We have GOT to get some books about (bugs/puppies/rockets)!'"*

But you can also make this world-and-books connection by starting at the opposite point: books. Don't *just* pick out books for your children based on their interests. Mix it up! Grab a random bagful of books at the library and see what you get. If you see your child show a spark of interest in something in the book: *bring it to life*. Go out into the world and see/do/smell/taste what you read about together.

There is something inherently powerful about seeing something from a page - or screen - become real. Look at how enchanted children become when they see that miracle happen with their drawings on ItzaBitza. Carry that same enchantment into your children's relationship with books, even before they learn to read on their own.

The year before my daughter went to kindergarten, I started reading her the E.B. White novel, *Trumpet of the Swan*. I chose it because it was a book I had loved. (Never assume there is only one "right" way to choose a book!) Part of the adventure takes place in the Boston Public Garden, where they have boats shaped like swans. By coincidence, while we were reading the book, my cousin invited my daughter to be the flower girl at his wedding - in Boston.

"Oh!" I said to my daughter. "We have GOT to ride the swan boats! Just like in the book!"

And we did. What we read about in the book became real in the world, in our lives. It was a lovely thing...

...unlike the book-world connection proposed by my daughter a short time later. We were reading a book about unusual foods that people eat. Including insects. There was even an Internet link to recipes.

"Oh!" my daughter said. "We have GOT to make chocolate chip cricket cookies! Just like in the book!"

This was not the kind of sweet follow-up to the swan boat adventure that I had imagined. But she was so excited. I called a friend of mine who was always up for unusual entertainment options for her preschool twin boys, and always quick to recognize the potential for a good story. She jumped - like a cricket - at the idea. (Everyone needs a friend like that.)

The next day we were at the pet store, buying live crickets. The cashier smiled at my daughter. "And what kind of pet are you feeding with these, dear?" My daughter happily



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explained the crickets' purpose, while I pretended to search for something in my purse.

We read additional information on the Internet about how to prepare the dry-roasted crickets before adding them to the cookie batter. Apparently crickets develop a nasty taste if they die before being roasted, so you have to put them in the fridge until they are in a kind of stupor. Then you place the zombie crickets on a cookie sheet and - feeling like the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* - pop them in the oven.

It's very macabre. The children were utterly delighted with the entire process. The cookies had a slightly nutty flavor. The worst part for me was having a roasted cricket leg get stuck between my teeth.

It's all for a good cause, I kept telling myself. Later that year when my daughter went to kindergarten, she shared the experience one day at circle time. I heard that the other children were fascinated. "I told them we got the idea from a book!" my daughter said.

Reading can matter to your children, especially if you sometimes bring books to life. What could make a trip to the library more exciting than knowing it just might lead to a real life adventure?

How much did experiences like these help my daughter - now 13 - love books? I can't answer that. I do know she loves them, and when I ask her what she remembers about being a flower girl in Boston, she says, "Not much. Except the swan boats."

Now, if you want a cricket cookie recipe, here's one from the Iowa State University Entomology Club:

<http://www.ent.iastate.edu/misc/insectsasfood/chirpie.html>

Or you could ask Rachel Ray.

Boom-di-yada, boom-di-yada!

## Think outside – and inside – the book



Dear Dr. Sharp:

*My son's first grade teacher has been teaching phonics, and he can sound-out words. But he's very reluctant to go the next step and read sentences, saying it's "too hard." I get the easiest books I can find at the library for our reading time, but he thinks they're boring, and he keeps asking to go back to our "regular" books - the ones where I read to him. What should I do?*

The first thing is to congratulate yourself for getting your son off to a great start. He loves being read to, and that's terrific! Give yourself a gold star.

Next, be glad that he knows how to sound-out words using phonics. Research shows that good readers look carefully at all the letters in a word and match them to sounds, while poor readers tend to look just at the first letter - or first and last letter of a word - and "guess" the word. Give your son's teacher a gold star.

But the biggest gold star goes to you for recognizing that "Houston, we have a problem." Knowing how to sound-out words is just the beginning, and it's super-important that your son get over his reluctance to read. Why? Because the best thing a child can do to become a good reader is --- read! Not do worksheets, not play word games, but *read*.



And your son is completely right - there's a **big** difference between reading a single word and reading sentences. It's hard work, and he's perfectly sensible to expect a payoff for it. Unfortunately, he doesn't think those easy-reader books provide that payoff. Some kids love them, and that's great - those books will be their pathway into reading from the word "go" (or sometimes the words "Go dog Go").

But other kids need a different first path: one with a different payoff that convinces them the work is worth it. Good teachers understand this, and so do researchers - well, some of them. A big-deal research report came out in 2000, by the National Reading Panel.

<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/report.cfm>

It spent a great many pages on the benefits of phonics - and I agree with the value of phonics skill. But buried in the back of the report was this sentence, which I wish had gotten as much press as the phonics part:

***The teacher's job is to create or allow situations where children want to read and are willing to work hard at it.***

BINGO! This is the missing piece for too many readers! They never see enough payoff, so they just read the minimum time with the minimum effort they can get away with, and that's not enough.

OK, now to your question - what exactly should you, the parent, do at this point? Keep in mind my advice in an earlier blog entry about using children's interests to increase the payoff for easy books. But also:

***Think outside the book.***

What kinds of short, easy sentences could entice your son into reading? It's OK to be sneaky here. Try the little trick of *Treasure Hunt* clues. Think of things your son wants - and hide them. When he comes home from school, say "Guess what! I made your favorite chocolate-chip cookies! But you have to find your snack, and here's your clue." Then hand him a message with a very simple sentence like "It is on a



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bed.” Help him sound out any word he needs help with. (Word of warning from experience: Make sure you don’t have a chocoholic dog in the house who might find the snack first.)

Use clues like these often, repeat words often, make the whole thing fun, and gradually expand the length of clues and difficulty of the words.

At the same time:

***Think inside the book.***

As you’re reading those “regular” read-aloud books that your son loves, keep an eye out for simple phrases and sentences that he should be able to read with just a tiny bit of help, especially if these phrases or sentences occur at exciting moments in the story - or, for non-fiction, next to really cool pictures. Be sensitive to just how often you can ask him to do this work and still have your reading time be something he loves. Maybe it’s just once at first. Gradually expand as you go.

And try [ItzaBitza](#). It’s a dastardly sneaky way to entice children into the hard work of reading, because it’s just so darn fun. It gradually expands what it asks kids to read, and it always makes it easy to get help. It’s another pathway into reading that’s *outside* the book. And it might be just what your son needs to get over his aversion to sentences, build confidence, and be a better reader, so you can help him get *inside* books he truly loves.

## Wish we had a Rachel Ray for Reading



Dear Dr. Sharp:

*I'm a new first grade teacher, and parents often ask me what they should do to help their child with reading. I tell them "read to and with your child every day" but sometimes they say "I know that... what else?" What should I tell them?*

Great question. Earlier this week I was in a waiting room and started thumbing through a copy of *Every Day with Rachel Ray* magazine. And I thought, "Wow, wouldn't it be great if we had a Rachel Ray for reading!" I mean, I am one low-skilled cook, but one look at her magazine and I think, "Hey, this is simple, it's only got five ingredients, takes less than 30 minutes, and looks like fun - I can do that!" There are so many great, easy literacy activities that parents could do with their kids at home, and if we just had a spokesperson like Rachel and a magazine to give out --- man, oh, man, we might really have a chance to help all kids become great readers.



We could start a campaign to recruit Rachel. I mean, she's already got perfect magazine title (*Every Day*....). Rachel, are you listening? Think Oprah and her book club....you could help make the readers that would read Oprah's books!

In the meantime, tell parents to help you with the number-one underutilized tactic for getting first graders excited about reading:

Personalization. You can teach kids letters and sounds and decoding strategies all day long, but in the end, the kids have to be convinced that reading is in their own personal interest and will help them do --or get --or know what they want. Otherwise they won't put their hearts and minds into the job, and they also won't comprehend what they're reading.

Educational researchers are finally starting to get this concept. John Guthrie and his team at the University of Maryland focus extensively on both reading skills and motivation in their program - and it's working. <http://www.cori.umd.edu/research/publications/>

A recent study funded by the National Science Foundation found that young readers can understand difficult texts even if their fluency is low. How? They compensate by doing things like re-reading, looking back, figuring out hard words. But - surprise! - the researchers found that "...the willingness to compensate depends on children's motivation to understand."

<http://www.reading.org/Publish.aspx?page=/publications/journals/rt/v60/i6/abstracts/rt-60-6-walczyk.html&mode=redirect>

Researcher Rosalie Fink found this principle in adults too -- adults who had been once been labeled dyslexic overcame their problem mainly by pursuing a deeply passionate interest through their reading.

<http://www.reading.org/Publish.aspx?page=/publications/bbv/books/bk682/abstracts/bk682-2-fink.html&mode=redirect>

Well, at first grade, when you're just starting out learning to read, many, many texts are challenging. Many first grade kids, like older dyslexic readers, can find the whole thing overwhelming and bewildering. A high level of personal motivation to understand can make all the difference.



As a teacher who only sees the kids at school, you're at a disadvantage. If you only knew that last night Johnny was fascinated by a show on Discovery channel about whales, then you could tell

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him, “I’ve got the perfect book for you! It’s about a whale - want to read it?” Or if you only knew that Cory’s mom just told him he was going to have a baby sister, you’d know just the book. Instead, without this knowledge you might give Johnny the book about the baby sister, and Cory the book about whales, because both books have the identical “reading level.” The kids will care little about what the text says, and the effectiveness of their reading time will be slashed.

If we can’t get Rachel Ray to help, we can at least try to channel her secret formula. Apparently there’s a Harvard case study of Rachel’s success where she says:

“I want to give the people what they want”

[http://blog.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/allyoucaneat/2009/01/29/rachael\\_ray\\_goes\\_to\\_harvard\\_an.html](http://blog.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/allyoucaneat/2009/01/29/rachael_ray_goes_to_harvard_an.html)

Tell parents to help you find out what their kids want - to know, to do, or to be - so that you can give it to them...through their reading.

You’ll see we lived this principle in designing [ItzaBitza](#): we thought deeply about what kids want. We didn’t come up with a game that says, “Here, read this so you can get the answer right.” We came up with a game that says, “Here, read this so you can make your drawings come to life.” Kids see the difference - you will too.



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