

READ, READ, READ; RIGHT, RIGHT, RIGHT!

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What can account for the power of reading? In today's Information Society, reading is a basic survival skill. But an estimated 27 million American adults lack this skill. Low literacy is devastating for both the individual and society. *Beyond the School Doors*, the 1992 report of results of a literacy survey conducted for the U.S. Department of Labor, lists three areas key to the day-to-day management of one's life:

- prose comprehension skills (example: understanding printed matter such as a newspaper);
- document literacy skills (example: ability to figure out tables showing health benefits); and
- quantitative skills (example: filling out an order form or managing a checking account).

The survey involved people who were unemployed and seeking work, and government training programs' participants trying to learn skills to advance to higher level work. The sample of these two large groups of Americans showed that over 8 million of them did have the necessary literacy skills for today's jobs.

West Virginia Facts and Figures:

- ◆ 21 percent of W.Va. students who enter the ninth grade do not graduate four years later.
- ◆ According to an IBM study, if the dropout rate remains the same, \$214.2 million in new tax revenues will be needed by the year 2000 to make up for taxes not paid by unemployed and underemployed citizens and to cover costs of state services to help them.
- ◆ School dropouts are 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates.

Keep in mind one thing: If there were no illiterate children, there would soon be no illiterate adults.

The facts clearly show that the lack of reading leads to school dropouts, delinquency, high unemployment, low self-esteem in individuals,

growing social problems, and billions of dollars being spent to try to solve the problem created partially as a result of this one issue.

Why is reading, this most important tool for success in today's society, neglected? It is probably the most studied topic in the field of education. Results of these studies indicate two obstacles to acquiring the lifetime habit of reading:

1. TV viewing heads the list of distractions in the home. This is no surprise because TV viewing has changed the American way of life. American children and young adults do little reading. They don't know very much about yesterday or today unless they've seen it on television. This is not illiteracy (an inability to read on a fourth-grade level); it is ignorance (an unawareness of knowledge), and it is showing throughout the culture. Ninety percent of fifth-grade students spend less than 1 percent of their free time outside of school reading and 33 percent of their time watching TV. Sixty-eight percent of U.S. adults list television viewing as their greatest pleasure, outweighing even friends and vacations.

Experts in the field say that the problem isn't so much television itself. However, the widespread habit of leaving the set on throughout the day is harming children. Studies show that children's energy is so sapped by subconsciously blocking out television's constant babble that concentration for more than short time periods is nearly impossible.

But TV is not the only factor. Many homes lack printed material, and fewer and fewer reading adults provide a reading role model for children. Fewer than one-half of adult Americans read a daily newspaper. When income drops because of job loss or other factors, the first thing a family cuts is printed material.

2. The school system places much emphasis on reading for test and measurement. When students are in classrooms that focus on drill and skill, they are likely to become what is known as "school readers." They know how to read, but do not choose to read.

We should not stop at "viewing with alarm." Do not make the mistake of focusing only on the problems of low literacy skills. We need to look for solutions, and then do what we can individually and as part of local organizations to carry them out.

One of the six national education goals set by the National Governors' Association and repeated in the goals of the West Virginia State Board of Education states: "By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship." This will be difficult. To borrow the words of a popular song: We've a long way to go, and a short time to get there. The only thing that will make it possible is to have a lot of help from a lot of people.

Lit-er-a-cy:
n., Ability to read and write; progress; self-sufficiency; hope; the shortest distance to individual, social, and economic development.

Why can't we "leave it to the teachers?" The need is too great, a literate society is too important, and the stakes are too high. What happens at home and in the community reinforces what teachers are trying to do. The following techniques help teach and improve reading skills:

1. Reading aloud
2. Sustained silent reading (SSR)
3. A "print rich" environment
4. Encouragement
5. Reading models

These will lead to improved comprehension, grammar, spelling, writing skills, and vocabulary. These skills have always been important. Now they are essential.

1. Reading Aloud

The Commission on Reading, formed to look at 20 years of reading research and practice and decide what works and what doesn't, published a report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*. One simple

statement stood out: "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is *reading aloud* to children." The report also says that this practice should continue throughout the grades.

With today's flashy textbooks and computerized teaching and learning machines, what is it that makes the age-old practice of "reading aloud" so important?

You read to a child for the same reasons you talk to a child: to reassure, to entertain, to explain, to stimulate curiosity, and to inspire--and to do it all personally, not impersonally with a machine.

Second, in an age of rising illiteracy, it is established fact that reading to children regularly strengthens their reading, writing, and speaking skills and, at least as important, improves their listening comprehension.

Reading aloud is a commercial for the product called reading, and we need to take a lesson from the masters of marketing: Do it often and early.

- a. You read to children while they are still young enough to want to imitate what they are seeing and hearing.
- b. You make sure the readings are interesting and exciting enough to hold their interest while you are building their imaginations.
- c. You keep the readings short enough to fit their attention spans; gradually you can lengthen both the readings and their attention spans.

2. Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)

It seems that in school children are always practicing to read, but never getting beyond the practice stage. In John Goodlad's seven-year study, *A Place Called School*, he reports that reading occupies only 6 percent of class time in elementary school, 3 percent in middle school, and 2 percent in the high school. (Yes, there are exceptions--many here in West Virginia--and those students are fortunate.) SSR helps provide the answer to the problem of not having enough time to read. This is how it works:

- a. Children should read to themselves for a *limited* amount of time. Teachers and parents adapt this to their individual class or family. Ten or 15 minutes are frequent choices for the classroom. The length of time can be increased as children become more mature.

b. Each child selects his own book, magazine, or newspaper. All materials must be chosen before the SSR period begins. No changing is permitted during the period.

c. The teacher or parent must read also, setting an example. *This is important!*

d. No reports are required and no records are kept. By the time the child is 8 years old, SSR can be the most important vocabulary builder.

SSR allows the child to read long enough and far enough so that the act of reading becomes automatic.

Children also develop a new perspective on reading--reading as recreation. With the older child, there may not be improved skills, but there is definite improvement in attitude toward the library, voluntary reading, assigned reading, and the importance of reading. Younger readers, however, also show improvement in skills.

It is important not to overlook the value of SSR participation by the parent or teacher. They must be seen reading, not supervising.

3. A "Print Rich" Environment

A recent study provided an unexpected response. A significant number of children attributed the great amount of time devoted to TV viewing and the very small amount of time spent in reading to a lack of printed material. They didn't have much to read, so they didn't! Less than 50 percent of adults reads a daily newspaper. In homes with financial problems, the first thing to go is purchase of printed material. Books are viewed as luxuries. The large amount of free and low-cost reading material available makes it easier for parents to provide a "print rich" environment for children. The public library is close enough for many to visit regularly, and a library card is free. With the explosion in numbers of inexpensive children's books and paperbacks, filling a child's bookshelf need not be a big expense.

4. Encouragement

This is the least expensive technique of all! A word of praise to show approval of a child's reading activities provides as much positive reinforcement as anything else we can do. Children will "buy" what a nation's culture "sells." Imagine what our culture would be like if America promoted ideas, words, and books with the same energy and creativity used to sell designer jeans, cosmetics,

and rock stars. Why, we might end up with people whose attention span for the printed word is longer than the time it takes to read a t-shirt.

5. Reading Models

Children are great imitators. Family, friends, librarians, community members, and, of course, teachers play a vital part in providing role models. It is especially important that children see men as well as women reading and that men share reading pleasure by reading aloud to children. The importance of teaching by example cannot be overemphasized. We should not fall into the practice of "do what I say, not what I do."

We have described the problem of poor literacy skills, then looked at techniques leading to reading achievement. Now it is important to look at how these techniques can be applied locally.

Some of the suggestions involve costs. Most do not. They involve that necessary part in any undertaking, the human element.

Reading aloud. This most important activity needs only two things: a reader and a listener.

At Home. Reading aloud to children from birth is the best preparation you can give them for success in school. The child not only learns speaking and listening skills and develops a love of reading but also experiences the pleasure and warmth that come from being in a one-on-one situation with another person. Make sure that all family members are reaping the benefits that come from reading aloud.

In the Community. Participate in Read Aloud activities in the community through the Read Aloud West Virginia program. This program places volunteer readers in schools, day care centers, libraries, health centers, and other public gathering places. There are also parenting programs, classroom enrichment programs, and programs involving students as volunteers. Volunteer to help organize and support these programs, or volunteer as a reader. It can take as little as one hour a week.

Take advantage of the wealth of books by West Virginia authors and about West Virginia. Whether your interest is focused at home or in the community, use these resources to encourage children to take pride in their heritage.

Organize observance of International Literacy Day in your community. September 8 is set aside for this celebration worldwide. Some neighborhoods "light up for literacy" with candles, porch lights, or miniature lights as decorations.

Get involved at your local school as a volunteer. This can be a very rewarding experience, and a way to contribute any special skills and talents you may have. Just call the local school and ask the principal what you can do to help.

Volunteer to serve on the local School Improvement Council. Each school has its own council, and members of the community serve on each one.

Place baskets of children's books in waiting rooms of doctors' offices, health departments, or pediatric departments of local hospitals.

Give books to your local library as a way to honor people or celebrate special events.

Support local literacy efforts, literacy councils, Literacy Volunteers of America, and Laubach; you can be a tutor or supply needed materials.

Buy children's books on tape, or make tapes for semi-literate parents to use with the books. The parent can play the tapes and share time with the child; both will benefit from listening to a good reader and following the printed words.

Help supply books on tape to the local school. Some teachers use them in various ways to supplement classroom activities.

Ask local teachers and librarians what they need. Then provide it. The teachers and librarians also appreciate the expression of support for the important jobs they do.

Make a storybook apron (instructions are available) to use when reading to children. Aprons

may be donated anywhere Read Aloud sessions are provided. The apron becomes a story board when magnets or Velcro strips are attached to hold puppets, toys, etc., to illustrate the stories. Roomy pockets provide storage.

Cooking session. Read recipes together, decide what is required, and follow directions. This is a lesson in practical uses of reading. Plan a menu for a family meal.

Use a shopping expedition to practice reading skills. The child can make the list of what is needed, follow directions in the store to find items, and read labels for nutrition information. This activity can be used in connection with the cooking session.

Plan and carry out a heritage day for a local school.

Give a book to the school library in honor of a teacher, or to celebrate a child's birthday. (Supplying book plates to the library for listing the honoree's name in the book can be another project.)

Help establish a 10-minute SSR period for the entire school.

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