

If I could address all our parents on Back-to-School night this is what I would say:

Your teacher needs a child who:

Is ready to learn

Is well-rested

Has eaten a healthy breakfast

Trusts others and is curious about everything

Somebody shares books with often and regularly

Why? Because we need a superbly literate bunch of kids in schools today in order to be ready to make their own living and work in the world they will find when they graduate.

American youngsters who do not develop highly literate minds will live in a 21st century netherworld on the margin of welfare and work. But it is the joy of reading that takes the child from the school primer into the endless world of other subjects and other lives. It is the joy of reading that needs to be re-asserted each day by a nurturing parent.

The child who lives in a home where people have no time, a bookless world, one where the TV is always on, and shopping is the preoccupation of the family, will likely not find it easy to develop much imagination. This can describe millions of American children's lives in both poverty and great wealth. These are children at risk.

Those fortunate youngsters who begin language development early, within the first three years of life, are well on their way to the top of the class. More important the twenty minutes every day spent listening to their mother or father's voice will give them an emotional strength that is irreplaceable.

Children's brains, like their bodies, are not fully developed at birth. Without early exposure to lots of language, playful, repeated, rhyming, and endless language, critical pathways in the brain are not formed. They shut down. Neurons literally wash away. They cannot be re-formed after the first three years. They cannot be helped by anything on a screen.

Storytelling, reading aloud, conversation games, and singing are how to do this. Just a few generations ago children would shell peas and

darn socks and plow fields, all in the company of extended families. Automatically they heard an endless stream of singing, stories, and gossip, old wives tales and preacher's wisdom.

We can still have the benefits of this kind of childhood in America in this century. Any parent rich or poor can do this if they try. Making up your own songs every day costs nothing. Books cost nothing, all you need is a library card.

Books engender curiosity, self esteem, critical thinking skills, and decision making skills. These are the basic abilities necessary for good parents and good citizens.

I wrote *Read to Your Bunny* first as a slogan, then as a book. *Read to Your Bunny* is given away by librarians, teachers, and doctors in every state in the country.

It's about starting at six months old, reading to your baby faithfully every day, spending no money more than weekly bus fare to the library.

In the end the true rewards are about quiet time, privacy, love, and one-on-one attention.

Regular reading to very young children, starting at the age of six months is one of three major factors in their healthy development. It is as crucial as nutrition and inoculation. Hundreds of studies back this up.

Unfortunately reading aloud is not yet part of every young American's day. Respect for others, parent participation, and cutting down commercialism are bedrock values. They need to be the core drive of all media for young children.

The child who sits in a reader's lap is more privileged than the child who is given fancy computer games, state-of-the-art sports equipment, or designer clothes.

This child can be poor. He can live in the meanest streets of a huge city or a house trailer in the far reaches of the rural hills. But if his father sits and reads to him quietly for half an hour a day this boy is not at risk. He is blessed and will grow up smart and strong.

This is the good news. A parent can turn an at risk child around in about a month of intensive regular reading. It takes only a commitment to change to do this.

A Read to Your Bunny program can be anything a teacher or librarian wants it to be.

One of the schools near my home town tried this. On Back-to-School night in October the teacher asked for a show of hands of families who would be willing to read twenty minutes a day to their youngsters, as regularly as they brushed their teeth. They also agreed to limit screen time to ten hours, supervised, a week.

These families kept their promise through thick and thin and through celebrations and emergencies of all kinds. Through job losses, illness, holidays, vacations, house guests, hurricanes, and all else that happened in their lives. After nine months these parents wrote report letters which the school shared with me.

Those families reported three significant changes:

1. Children listened more to what their parents said and parents listened to their children.
2. The kids demanded fewer trips to the shopping mall and whined less. They played better on their own.
3. Their attention spans improved dramatically and they all did better in school.

The good news is, this can work in any community in America. All it takes is willing teachers and parents and a good library. The kids are easy.

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