

How do I motivate the early reader?

Motivating The Reluctant Reader

by Carl B. Smith, Ph.D.

“Motivate early and keep at it” should be the motto of every parent who wants a child to be a good reader-learner.

There are children who can’t read and there are those who won’t read. Both are in serious trouble. For lack of practice, the reluctant readers gradually fall farther behind the children who read regularly.

Everyone knows these children. They are the ones who lay their heads on their desks or play doodling games on their neighbor’s backs. Some are rebelling, some are bored, some are nervous, and some don’t know why they are not reading. These reluctant readers cannot just sit, they need to read. Practicing reading, as distinguished from learning reading skills, is so essential to proficient reading that practice itself should be a distinct goal: “Read! Read anything—just read!”

Teasing The Reluctant Reader

Sometimes simply giving a child the freedom to choose will prompt a reluctant reader to take up a book or magazine; for example, the child may choose to read a comic book during a free reading period. More often, however, the reluctant reader

is seeking special attention and not just freedom. I may take all the wiles in a parent’s repertoire for a reluctant reader to succumb to reading a book.

The mother of a nine-year-old girl once told me that she “teases” her daughter into reading to make it fun. By using newspapers, magazines, and books around the

house, this girl’s mother played three little games that all involved reading.

Here are some examples:

1. **“I’ll Bet You Can’t Find”** (newspaper search) I’ll bet you can’t find out who Leonardo di Caprio’s girlfriend is.
2. **“Let’s Make a Deal”** (using children’s magazine) I read the first part of a story in this magazine. I’ll tell it to you and then you read it and tell me how it ends.
3. **“It’s a Secret”** (using a book) You probably won’t like this book. Mary (an admired, older neighbor) says that it has secrets for kids her age in it. She left the book for you to try.

What a clever mother that girl had! And her phrase “teases” her into reading sums up surveys of elementary children’s feeling about reading. They want to include fun and choice.

Here are some other techniques that that you may want to imitate in “teasing” children to read.

The Surprise Challenge

A third grade boy was described by his teacher as a non-participant. He turned in some assignments

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Motivating the Reluctant Reader

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but would never discuss anything with other members of the class. His teacher couldn't determine whether he actually read anything or not. The tease: "Henry, I want you to finish your worksheet in a hurry and then I have a surprise for you." There upon Henry worked rapidly and he quickly handed in his paper.

"What's my surprise?" he asked.

"I want to see if you can read this poem upside down to these three people. I'll bet you can't do it."

Henry scowled but took the challenge, his three classmates followed as he read. The book faced them and Henry labored over it upside down. In halting phrases he read the words of Lilian Moore: "Poets go fishing with buckets of words, fishing, and wishing..." until he had stumbled through the entire poem. Everyone smiled and clapped. Then the teacher asked Henry to explain to his classmates what he thought the poem meant.

Don't Touch

In the back of one 6th-grade classroom sat Charles the Sour. When the teacher said to the class, "Take out your books, turn to page 32, and read the chapter," Charles turned on his most sour look, slammed his book shut, slouched down in his chair, and let his chin rest on his chest. The teacher's command to read was always Charles' signal to turn out all the lights and to let everyone know he was out of business.

The teacher went to Charles' desk and laid a skinny book on top of it and said to him, "I don't want you to read this book. I just want you to hold it here until I am finished working with some kids in the front of the room. I will be back to talk to you in a few minutes." It was said loud enough so that the kids around him could hear the directions (they all knew that Charles would never read in class.)

After a few minutes a couple of kids began waving their hands. "He's reading. He's read-

ing it." And sure enough, Charles was opening the pages of that skinny book and reading its contents.

It wasn't simply that the teacher had written on the book: "Don't touch this book." Stamped across the front cover, as if with a purple rubber stamp, were the words **TOP SECRET**, and printed underneath the "Top Secret" stamp were these words: "If you find this book, please take it immediately to the National Bureau of Investigation. Do not open this book. If you do, you will be involved in secrets that cannot be disclosed (according to the National Secrets Act of Congress, 1937) to any persons other than the National Bureau of Investigation or the President." This little book by Sheila Brown (Macmillan, 1975) had done its work. Inside the book the reader is involved in chasing a crazy spy. To catch him, the reader searches for clues in letters, airline schedules, and traces Dr. Fullnut to various countries. Because Charles decided to read the book and how it was introduced, almost every child in the classroom wanted to read:

TOP SECRET

Persistent Reading

Children do not develop a habit or an attitude of persistent reading unless they see it as being valuable and rewarding. For many the habit of reading starts with a tease or a challenge. Finding ways to entice the reluctant reader is also a challenge to the parent. But if you can gradually lead your child into some brief daily reading activity, it will eventually pay the dividends you seek. You will have broken through the barriers your child has imposed against books and you will have prompted your child to use reading to solve daily problems.

Give Recognition for a Job Well Done

I walked into a first grade classroom in Pittsburgh and saw this boy all decked out in a red sash covered with gold medals. As he marched around the room, the other kids saluted him in military fashion, and he returned the salute. The rules seemed quite clear; even the teacher saluted him as he walked by.

Not to be left out, I walked up to him and saluted. It worked. He returned the salute and paraded onward. By this time I just had to find out who our young general was. I asked the girl standing nearby. She shot me a triumphant look.

“Do you see that chart?” She pointed to one of several charts with lists of reading skills and the names of children on them. “Each reading group has to do ten things,” she explained. “When we finish all ten things on the chart, we get to be ten star generals for two days, and everybody has to salute us. I was a general last week.”

It was obvious the children were proud of their accomplishments. The boy was continuing to prance around with his red sash and ten gold medals, receiving the honors of his classmates for having completed the ten objectives listed on the chart.

Seeing Progress

Children, like everyone else, need recognition for their accomplishments. The Ten Star General award demonstrated the value of helping children see their

progress in reading. Although most children sense the importance of reading, it is not always easy for them to see their own growth.

In a recent survey, we asked children what success in reading meant to them. Many of their answers could be summed up as: “I want to see my progress.” Their desire goes beyond getting a good grade or having a star pasted on the top of a paper. They want to be privy to the secrets of reading and to know where the teacher is leading them.

Making reading visible

Taking something as abstract as the reading process and making it visible to children requires creative thinking. For example, in addition to learning one hundred new words over a defined period of time, children will also read stories containing those words and show that they can use them in everyday reading. The combination of 100 words and using them in reading constitutes a visible chunk of reading. Checking off the 100 words gives children a visible sign that they are making progress.

A checklist is one way to help children see their progress. As shown on the next page, a valuable skill (figuring out words in context) is on the achievement list. In learning how to use context, children may complete workbook pages and then read stories. After completing each page or story, the children mark it off. When they demonstrate their progress to the teacher through a test or through personal reading, they put a plus mark next to the objective.

Making It Work

Create an environment that shouts out: “*Books are important here!*” Time taken for readalongs, when children can take time to listen to a tape recording of a book, for example, creates the feeling that they can read any book they choose. A parent can give the child a place where their writings are displayed (or time spent sharing their writing with others,) other places for quiet reading, time taken for the child to tell stories—perhaps even with an

improvised puppet theater story character can be made from small paper bags.

Use textbooks, theme units, and related library books to promote the child’s use of language. A child then sees books as a means for ideas, ideas to write about, to talk about, to share in a variety of settings. Through this kind of environment, children learn the reading skills and the strategies that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

Ten Star General Awards

Use the Ten Star General chart below (or one like it) for any book that you select, or one that your child brings home from school.

When all the objectives listed below are achieved, let your children enjoy public recognition. That's what the Ten Star General award is, a symbolic applause for progress, as would be a trip to the library or getting a book from the bookstore.

Seeing progress in concrete ways keeps children on task, builds a reward system, motivates them, and encourages them to share their talents and skills with others.

Parents can enjoy complementing and saluting their Ten Star Generals, who are now more independent because they have mastered a chunk of reading.

Seeing progress in concrete ways keeps chil-

★★★★★ Ten Star General chart ★★★★★

Objective	Activity Pages	Practice Reading
_____ 1. Using words in context	_____ page _____ _____ page _____ _____ page _____	_____ Read page _____ to _____ in _____ and answer questions.
_____ 2. Finding details	_____ page _____ (test) _____ page _____ _____ page _____	_____ Read page _____ to _____ in _____ and answer questions.
_____ 3. Using 100 new words	_____ page _____ (test)	

Put a ★ next to the assignments you've completed. Put a ✓ by the objective when you finish all the work. When you have all the objectives completed, you will become a Ten Star General.

STUMP YOUR FRIENDS

For seven-year-old Kim who was always playing tricks on her playmates, her parents chose a "stump your friends" activity to initiate her to read. In this technique, each member of a small group constructs a game or exercise using sentences or phrases out of a book. Given below is an example of scrambled sentences by Kim from the book *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. Can you unscramble them?

- | | |
|--|---------|
| 1. EAT UP YOU I'LL | (p. 10) |
| 2. VERY GREW FOREST THAT MAX'S NIGHT IN A ROOM | (p. 12) |
| 3. WALLS WORLD BECAME THE AROUND ALL | (p. 16) |
| 4. DAY SAILED THROUGH OFF NIGHT HE AND | (p. 18) |
| 5. WHERE TO WILD THINGS ARE THE | (p. 20) |
| 6. ROLLED CLAWS TERRIBLE AND AND THEIR EYES TERRIBLE SHOWED | (p. 23) |

Can you put the unscrambled sentences into an order that makes a story?

Crossword puzzles, finding words in alphabet boxes, and similar games can be constructed by children who think they are doing it "to try and stump their friends."

Early Reading—Who makes it work?

The kids entering kindergarten these days stretch the teacher more than they did fifteen years ago. In today's typical kindergarten class the teacher will have a couple children who can already read first and second grade books, and a couple others who don't know the difference between their back side and their front side.

All of these children have been exposed to the same general world: hundreds of hours of television, stores, cars, toys, people scurrying here and there. But some of them have experienced a number of organized activities that place them on a fast track for academic achievement.

Home Start

That's probably where the early readers come from. They have danced, played music, been in recitals, participated in organized storytelling groups, listened to books at home, may have been coached by their parents in the mysteries of reading. In other words, they have enjoyed rich experiences with groups, with the broad print world, with books—the experiences that prepare them well in advance for school and the books that form the center of schooling.

The other kids, the slow-walkers in the class, certainly have contact with print on television, on billboards, on the many other kinds of reading and writing sources that appear everywhere in our modern culture. But chances are the slow-walkers had to fend for themselves, and they have not yet participated in the highly organized bookcentered world that the fast-runners have.

Parent's Role

Educators use the term *emergent literacy* to describe all kinds of general and specific experiences that help develop our children as readers and writers. The *emergent literacy* idea is that we need to surround children with books, storytelling, and time to talk about books. In that environment and through those activities, children gradually emerge as print-savvy people.

Examples of these emergent literacy activities include reciting a story while looking at its pictures, or writing a story in scribble, or copying the spellings dictated by parents. Most observers of young children agree that successful early readers are those who are “paper and pencil kids.” Book handling and scribbling may begin even before speech has been mastered. “There seems to be an obvious natural and reciprocal

relationship between listening to literature and the opportunity, desire, and ability to read.” (N. Roser)

Time to Stumble

Early reading is a time to experiment. Children must be given the freedom to stumble around and try things out. Perhaps the best thing we can do is to allow the child to explore by making literature and the print world as real as she can make it. If we read, talk, and encourage our children to write and to read, those early trial and error experiments may give them a secure sense and an easy acquaintance with the world of print. In nursery school and in preschool children working together may learn from each other that there are relationships between the print in books and the symbols that they see in advertisements all around them.

Children's experiments with books will stimulate an intrinsic desire to learn how to make those symbols work for them in reading and in writing.

Parents need to provide children with opportunities for bookhandling, listening to stories, scribbling and drawing as an expressive opportunity, and a chance to try their own hand at storytelling to others. Some children will have excellent attitudes and skills when they enter school; others may rely on limited television and billboard exposure as their main source of print knowledge.

Let Literature Take Center Stage

The following was composed by a second grader.

M.T. Went A Courtin'

Marion Toliver Fowler's wife died, leaving Marion all alone. After the proper mourning period he decided to visit a widow who lived over the hill from him. He got on his horse and rode to his neighbor's door. He knocked on her door. She came to the door. He said, "M.T. Fowler is my name and marriage is the game. Do you wanna play?" The widow lady said, "Come back in two weeks, and we will see."

Two weeks later M.T. came calling. This time he came in his carriage with his horse pulling it. They "courted" for a few months, married, and lived happily ever after.

—**Kimberly, 2nd grade**

Kimberly's composition was the culmination of her class' work on folk tales. After they had read folk tales and had discussed the origin of those tales, the teacher asked the children to interview a grandparent or some other older person who might give them a neighborhood tale or a family tale from the past.

Whether or not the children actually produce something that measures up to the definition of a folk tale is immaterial. What is important is that the children gain experience with literature and use literature as a way to think about their world. By engaging in that kind of exploration with one of the

older members of their clan, the children may begin to understand the past and begin to see one of the functions that literature plays in life, that is, filling their world with local, memorable characters. Through this type of exercise, children also learn that different forms of literature serve different purposes.

Integrating Literature Into the Reading Program

Children begin quite early to sense differences in stories they have heard. There are indications that children as young as two-and-a-half use story-telling patterns in imaginative ways. The parents can aid their children in their exploration of literature by asking them to note similarities and differences between what they are reading and what they have read in the past.

—Is this a short story, poem, essay, drama? Why?

—Can you think of something that you have read that is similar? In what ways? And what are the differences?

—If this had been written as a (poem, essay, etc.) instead of what it is, how would it have been different?

—Did this piece contain ideas that will be useful to you? How could they have been expressed more effectively for you?

Parents can help make connections for children by showing how some of the same themes run through fantasy, realistic fiction, folk tale, essay, and poetry. A thematic development across various types of books seems to help children grow intellectually.

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How can I help my child learn to spell?

(continued from page 2)

1) Teaching Spelling Patterns

Since most English words fit one or the other spelling patterns, you can teach your children to make use of the major sound-spelling patterns. With only a little effort, you can give your children control over a large number of words, for example:

at	ut	ot	et	it
bat	but	pot	bet	bit
hat	cut	cot	met	hit
sat	hut	hot	pet	sit

What pattern do you see here? Each of these words has a single vowel which has the short sound of the vowel. Some linguists call it the consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) pattern, a pattern that unlocks hundreds of words for the beginning speller. Look for a spelling program that gives your children the power of these sound-spelling patterns.

2) Choosing a Word List

In the past 50 years, only two published studies have word lists from a national sample of children's writing. These studies provide a basis for the target words used in spelling programs. Other words could come from the personal interests of each child. Personal words combined with a common word list give the child a base from which to write comfortably.

The words that children use change from one generation to another. In a national study in 1945, the word *computer* did not appear. In comparing the 5000 most frequently used words in the 1945 study with the 5000 from 1984, there was a difference of 1650 words. A host of new words has entered the language even since 1984, and are used frequently by children now. These words reflect current technology and sociology: *synthetic, cellular, laptop*. Many words are abbreviated, probably reflecting our fast-food, instant gratification society. Encourage children to learn to spell the words they use in their own writing.

3) Writing Messages

When children write, they don't write words; they write messages. They write letters to their friends, stories to share in class, and reports for their teachers. It is through these communication efforts that children realize the value of learning how to spell effortlessly, a condition that is achieved only through writing and attention to graphic patterns.

Certainly written communication, the message, is the central focus. The conventions of English spelling become important only because they make it easier for all of us to communicate easily with one another in writing. The more we can communicate an attitude of personal responsibility to our children, the more likely they will use a spelling program as a way of improving their writing.