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For the Love of Reading

Engaging Students in a Lifelong Pursuit

By Daniel T. Willingham

How should American teens spend their leisure time? I recently asked[*] American adults this question, after explaining that the typical teen enjoys approximately five hours of leisure time each weekday.[1] The activity with the highest response, irrespective of race, education, and other demographic factors, was reading. Adults thought teens ought to spend about an hour and 15 minutes reading for pleasure each day.

How much time do teens actually spend reading? On average, six minutes.[2]

What prompts a teen to choose reading over a different activity during her leisure time? Several factors would contribute, surely. Reading will hold little appeal if a student has trouble decoding or has problems with comprehension.

But what if a student is a fluent decoder and generally understands texts that she tackles? What if she just doesn't often choose to read? What might be done to motivate her, both at school and at home?

The Science of Rewards

In a nutshell, the problem of motivation is this: we want the student to do something we think is important, but she chooses not to do it. That is, of course, not an unusual problem in classrooms, and a potential motivator is some kind of negative consequence. A student who doesn't do the required work will receive low grades, or perhaps feel guilty for disappointing the teacher, or feel embarrassed should the failure become public. But by the time a student is in middle school, these blades have long lost their edge. Most unmotivated readers have the self-assurance to persuade themselves that reading is not all that important. Teachers and schools are not enthusiastic about punishment in any event, so many turn to rewards as motivators.

We want the student to read, and surely we want reading to be a positive experience. What if I offered a reward? Say I told a fourth-grader, "If you read that book, I'll give you an ice cream sundae!" The student might take me up on the deal, and he'd probably have a positive experience. So won't he then be motivated to read? It sounds so simple that it might be too good to be true.

Rewards do work, at least in the short term. If you find a reward that the student cares about, he will read in order to get it. But what we're really concerned about is his attitude toward reading; we want the student to read even if we're not around to dole out sundaes. Will the reward boost the reading attitude? Research indicates that the answer is probably no.[†] In fact, the reward is likely to make the attitude less positive.

The classic experiment on this phenomenon was conducted in a preschool.[3] A set of attractive markers appeared during free play, and the researchers affirmed that children chose the markers from among many activities. Then the markers disappeared from the classroom. A few weeks later, researchers took children, one at a time, into a separate room. They offered some children a fancy "good player" certificate if they would draw with the markers. Other children were given the opportunity to draw with the markers but were not offered the certificate. After a few more weeks, the markers reappeared during free play in the classroom. The children who got the certificate showed notably less interest in the markers than the children who didn't get

the certificate. The reward had backfired: it had made children like the markers less.

The interpretation of the study rests on how children think about their own behavior. The rewarded children likely thought, "I drew with the markers because I was offered a reward to do so. Now here are the markers but no reward. So why would I draw with them?" There have been many studies of rewards in school contexts, and they often backfire in this way.[4]

We can imagine that rewarding children for reading could work as intended in certain circumstances. What if the child has such a positive experience while reading that it overwhelms his thinking that he's reading only for the reward? In other words, the child thinks, "Gosh, I started this book only to get that ice cream sundae, but actually it's awesome. My teacher was a sucker to offer me a sundae as a reward!" That's great when it does happen—and I think it can—but it means that rewards represent a risk. We're gambling that the book is going to be a big hit.

What about praise instead of a reward?[‡] Generally, praise is motivating to children: they will do more of whatever was praised. But praise can go wrong if it's overly controlling ("I'm so glad to see you reading. You really should do that every day.") or if the child thinks it's dishonest ("You are the best reader at school."). But if the praise seems like sincere appreciation, it's motivating. And one of the advantages of praise is that it lacks the downside of rewards. Rewards are usually set up in a bargain before the action: if you read, you'll get ice cream. Praise is generally spontaneous; you don't promise praise contingent on good behavior. That means that the praised child won't think, "I did that only to get the praise," the way the rewarded child thinks, "I did that only to get the reward." The praised child engages in the desired behavior of her own accord, and then the praise comes spontaneously. The problem is that the child must choose to read on her own before you get a chance to praise her.

Rewards in Practice

As I'm sure is clear by now, I'm not a big fan of school-based rewards for reading. That includes classroom displays of reading achievement—

for example, posting on a bulletin board the number of books each student has read, or adding a segment of a class bookworm for each book. To my thinking, it puts too much emphasis on having read rather than on reading. Some students (I was one) will pick easy books to boost their "score." And as a way to recognize student achievement, it doesn't account for student differences; for some, getting through a book in a month may be a real accomplishment, yet they will feel inadequate compared with their peers. Some more formal programs, like Accelerated Reader and Pizza Hut's Book It, try to make up for some of the problems inherent in a reward system. Books are allocated different points based on difficulty, for example, or each student is assigned a personal, teacher-set reading target.

All in all, I think it's a mistake to be absolutist and say that rewards should never be used. Instead, I suggest they not be the first thing teachers try, and I want educators to be aware of the research literature on potential drawbacks. I know that some districts adapt Accelerated Reader or another program for their own use, ignoring the point system, for example. The research literature on Accelerated Reader in particular is, in fact, mixed.[5] Much appears to depend on how it is implemented.

Such programs bring to mind a conversation I had with a district administrator. Students in her schools come from very poor homes, and she told me that they do not grow up seeing their parents read. A benefactor started a program whereby children earn cash for reading books, and the administrator felt that it was helpful. Children had not been reading, the rewards got them started, and they discovered they really liked to read. I think it would be highhanded and naive to suggest that the district stop the program. In fact, this seems exactly the situation in which to try rewards: when you can't otherwise get a toehold, rewards offer a way to get children to at least try pleasure reading. Children may then discover that they like it, and even when the rewards stop, they keep going.

But if rewards are to be a last resort, what ought to be tried first?

Academic versus Pleasure Reading

Our goal is to encourage children to read so they can feel the pleasure of reading; rewards are meant to be a temporary incentive to start the process.

What if children don't need rewards? What if they already feel the pleasure of reading, but that feeling gets lost in less positive feelings—feelings created by the other demands of schoolwork? We expect students to feel the joy of reading when they get lost in a narrative or feel the pleasure of discovery when reading nonfiction. But as they move through elementary school and on to middle school, we add other purposes to reading. One purpose is learning: the student is expected to read a text and study it so that he can reproduce the information (e.g., on a quiz). A second purpose is to help complete a task—a project, say—which usually entails gathering information. A third purpose is to analyze how a text works—that is, how the author writes to make the reader laugh or cry. I'll use the umbrella term "academic reading" to contrast these purposes with pleasure reading.

My concern is that children might confuse academic reading with reading for pleasure.[6] If they do, they will come to think of reading as work, plain and simple. Sure, we'd like to think that academic reading is pleasurable, but in most schools, "pleasure" is not a litmus test. The student who tells the teacher, "I tried reading that photosynthesis stuff, but it was too boring," will not be told to find something else she'd prefer. Academic reading feels like work because it is work. But pleasure ought to be the litmus test for reading for pleasure.

I think it's a good idea for teachers to communicate these distinctions to students—not that "most of the reading we're doing is academic and therefore not fun," but that reading serves different purposes and that there is a distinction between academic reading and pleasure reading.

In some classrooms, pleasure reading is segregated from academic reading: we read because we love reading, and then we also learn how to work with texts. But the way pleasure reading is handled can still send a silent message to students that reading is work. Coercion sends that message. If a teacher makes pleasure reading a requirement (10 minutes per night, say) or demands accountability (by keeping a

reading log, for example), she risks sending the message that reading is nothing students would do of their own accord.

Pleasure Reading in Class

Drawing a distinction between academic reading and pleasure reading will probably not be enough to get children actually reading. What else might be tried? Schools and teachers can strive to make reading expected and normal by devoting some proportion of class time to silent pleasure reading. Research shows that many reading programs don't actually allocate much time to reading.[7] Successful programs for silent classroom reading tend to have certain elements in common:[8]

Students have adequate time set aside for reading; they need at least a 20-minute reading period to get into their books. Teachers set the duration dependent on their students' reading stamina (i.e., how long they can sustain attention).

Students freely choose what they read. Choice is enormously important for motivation,[9] but there must be teacher guidance and teacher-set limits. Given the chance, some students will pick books that entail no reading at all. (As researcher Nell Duke ruefully noted, "independent reading time" too often turns into "independent find Waldo time.")[10] Teachers must not only monitor text difficulty, but also ensure that students are exposed to a variety of genres.

Students have ready access to a good number of books.

Students have some opportunity to feel a sense of community through reading with book discussions, recommendations, and other sorts of activities that avid adult readers practice.

The teacher actively teaches during this time: fielding questions, helping students select books, and conferring with students. The alternative is that the teacher reads her own book at the same time as the students, with the idea that she's modeling what a good reader does. But students can't necessarily appreciate what she's doing. Teachers actually teaching during in-class reading time seems to be essential to student success. Some of the most careful experiments indicate that without this feature, students don't benefit from silent reading time in class.[11]

Setting aside class time for silent pleasure reading seems to me the best way to engage a student who has no interest in reading. It offers the

gentlest pressure that is still likely to work. Everyone else is reading, there's not much else to do, and a sharp-eyed teacher will notice those who are faking it. Freedom of choice also allows the greatest possibility that when the reluctant reader does give a book a try, he'll hit on something that he likes.

Given that I'm recommending this practice, you probably think there must be good research evidence that it's effective. In truth, I'd say the latest data indicate that it *probably* improves attitudes, vocabulary, and comprehension.[12] Some studies show a positive effect, but some don't.

I think the squishiness of the findings is attributable to the difficulty of the teaching method. I'm sure classroom pleasure reading is easy to implement poorly: stick some books in the room, allocate some class time, and you're done. But the teacher's responsibilities when it's done well are heavy indeed. She must help students select books that they are likely to enjoy. That means really knowing each child, and a middle school teacher likely has more than 100 students. If a teacher is going to be able to confer with students about what they have read, she needs to have read the book herself. Hence, she needs comprehensive knowledge of the literature appropriate to the grade level. And although I've said that silent pleasure reading is a good way to gently persuade reluctant students to give reading a try, let's not pretend this is easy. A sixth-grader who believes that reading is boring has a pretty firm sense of herself as decidedly not a reader; a teacher must be a skilled psychologist to work around that attitude and help the student be open to reading.

Reading at Home

I've mentioned that students' reading responsibilities change at school in later elementary years. An important change at home is their greater access to and use of digital technologies. What impact do these have on how much children read and their attitudes toward reading?

Most of the parents I talk to are convinced that digital devices are having a profound and mostly negative impact on reading. The research on this issue is more limited than you might guess. We're predicting a long-term consequence of the use of digital technologies, but these technologies haven't been available all that long. That said, I

think the digital age is having a negative effect on motivation, but not through the mechanism that most parents fear.

Concentration Lost

Teachers may think that students today are easily bored because of digital devices.[13] Why? Some observers—including prominent reading researcher Maryanne Wolf—have suggested that habitual web reading, characterized by bouncing from one topic to another and skimming rather than reading, changes the ability to read deeply.[14] Nick Carr popularized this sinister possibility with the question: "Is Google Making Us Stupid?"[15] In that article (and in a follow-up book, *The Shallows*), Carr argued that something had happened to his brain.[16] Years of quick pivots in his thinking prompted by web surfing had left him unable to read a serious novel or long article. That does sound similar to the mental change many teachers believe they have seen in their students in the last decade or two; students can't pay attention, and teachers feel they must do a song and dance to engage them.

I doubt that reading on the web renders us unable to concentrate, and although a formal poll has not been taken, I suspect most cognitive psychologists agree.[17] Yes, video games and surfing the web change the brain. So does reading this article, singing a song, or seeing a stranger smile. The brain is adaptive, so it's always changing.

If the brain is adaptive, couldn't that mean that it would adapt to the need for constant shifts in attention and so maybe lose the ability to sustain attention to one thing? I don't think so, because the basic architecture of the mind probably can't be completely reshaped. Cognitive systems (vision, attention, memory, problem solving) are too interdependent for that. If one system changed in a fundamental way —such as losing the ability to stay focused on one thing—that change would cascade through the entire cognitive system, affecting most or all aspects of thought. A shorter attention span would not only affect reading, it would affect our ability to reason or solve problems, for example. The brain is probably too conservative in its adaptability for that to happen.

More important, I don't know of any good evidence that young people are worse at sustaining attention than their parents were at their age.

Teens can sustain attention through a three-hour movie like *The Hobbit*. They are capable of reading a novel they enjoy, like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. So I doubt that they can't sustain attention. But being able to sustain attention is no guarantee that they'll do so. They must deem something worthy of their attention, and that is where digital technologies may have their impact: they change expectations.

"I'm Bored. Fix It."

Despite the diversity of activities that digital technologies afford, many share two characteristics. First, whatever experience the technology offers, you get it immediately. Second, producing this experience requires minimal effort. For example, if you don't like the YouTube video you're watching, you can switch to another. In fact, the website makes it simple by displaying a list of suggestions. If you get tired of videos, you can check Facebook. If that's boring, look for something funny on TheOnion.com.

Watching television offers the same feature: channels abound on cable, but if nothing appeals, pick something from Netflix. If you have a smartphone—and about 80 percent of teens do—then all these amusements are with you all the time.[18]

The consequence of long-term experience with digital technologies is not an inability to sustain attention. It's impatience with boredom. It's an expectation that I should always have something interesting to watch, read, or listen to, and that creating an interesting experience should require little effort. The mind-boggling availability of experiences afforded by digital technologies means there is always something right at hand that one might do. Unless we're really engrossed, we have the continuous, nagging suspicion that "there must be a better way to spend my time than this." That's why, when a friend sends a link to a video titled "Dog goes crazy over sprinkler—FUNNY!" I find myself impatient if it's not funny within the first 10 seconds.

In other words, we're not distractible. We just have a very low threshold for boredom.

And this low threshold is not due to long-term changes in the brain. It's due to beliefs—beliefs about what is worthy of sustained attention and

what brings rewarding experiences. Beliefs are difficult to change, but they can be changed.

The Displacements

There's no time for reading! This idea is not new. It's called the displacement hypothesis, and though it comes in several varieties, the basic idea is that when a new activity (like browsing the web) becomes available, it takes the place of something else we have typically done (like reading). Evaluating whether that's true is tricky because lots of factors go into our choices. For example, if you simply ask, "Does television displace reading?" you're expecting a negative correlation: people who watch more TV read less, and people who watch less TV read more. But research shows that the wealthier you are, the more leisure time you have. So even if television does bite into reading time, we may not see the data pattern we expect because both activities are facilitated by free time.

So has reading been displaced by digital technologies? On balance, the answer seems to be no, although most of the research in this country has focused on adults, not children.[19] Researchers have examined correlations between time spent on the Internet and time spent reading, statistically controlling for other variables like overall amount of leisure time. The correlation in most studies seems to be nil or slightly positive (in the direction opposite that predicted by the displacement hypothesis). Research on television viewing does indicate that heavy viewing (more than four hours each day) is associated with less reading.[20]

Given the enormous amount of time devoted to digital technologies, how is it possible that children don't shove reading aside? One answer is that most people read so little, there isn't much to be shoved aside. In 1999, when they had virtually no access to digital technologies (outside of gaming), children (ages 8 to 18) spent an average of just 21 minutes per day reading books. In 2009, when access was much greater, they averaged 25 minutes.[21] These data are a little deceptive, however, because they are averages. It's not that every child in 1999 read for about 21 minutes. Rather, some read quite a bit and some (about 50 percent) didn't read at all. So for half of kids, there was no chance for digital technologies to displace reading.

For the kids in 1999 who did read, it may be that reading provided a sort of pleasure that digital technologies didn't replace. They liked the fun that digital technologies provide, but it was a different sort of fun than they got from reading. Notably, magazine and newspaper reading did drop during the decade that followed, arguably because that sort of reading can be done on the Internet.

I'm offering a mixed message. Good news: I doubt digital activities are "changing children's brains" in a scary way, and I don't think they soak up reading time. Bad news: they are leading children to expect full-time amusement, and for some, reading time isn't soaked up only because there's little to soak up. It's already dry as a sun-bleached saltine.

Which leads to a rather glum conclusion: most children don't read, and even if digital devices aren't directly absorbing time that might otherwise be devoted to reading, they might be making children expect instant gratification from leisure activities. But don't despair. Parents and teachers can take positive steps that might even tempt a sulky teen to read.

How Parents Can Help

A lot of students mistakenly believe that reading means books written by dead people who have nothing to say that would be relevant to a teen's life. Nevertheless, students are expected to pore over these authors' words, study them, summarize them, analyze them for hidden meaning, and then write a five-page paper about them. To children, that's reading. It's not contemporary. It doesn't have characters a student can identify with. It's not nonfiction. It's not magazines or graphic novels.

If a student hates reading, what might tempt her to give it a try? One entry point is a book with a story she already knows, for example, a novelization of a movie she loved. Or perhaps a book of trivia and backstage gossip about a television show she enjoys. Or you might branch out by seeking a book with less familiar content but related to her interests. For example, my niece (along with millions of other teens) got interested in forensic science through the television show CSI.

Parents should consider books that *look* fun. A thick book with small print looks intimidating to less-than-confident readers. Go for books that have short chapters or go for graphic novels, which look easy because of the pictures. (But be advised, many are challenging.) Children in their mid-to-late elementary school years might appreciate a collection of a comic strip they enjoy. And older kids may be interested in manga (pronounced mayn-ga), a variety of comic from Japan. Manga are published in just about every genre you can think of: adventure, mystery, horror, fantasy, and comedy, but note that mature themes (sexuality, violence) are not rare.

Another source to consider: websites like Wattpad and Figment. These operate a bit like social networking sites in that users "follow" people who post content. Users can also upvote (or "like") content and comment on it. On these sites, the content is fiction. Amateur writers post stories, hoping to gain an audience. Much of the content is aimed at teens and preteens, and people often serialize their content; they don't post an entire novel, but rather post a chapter at a time. These bite-size portions might appeal to a reluctant reader—3,000 words can be read on your phone during a bus ride.

Parents may object that this sort of reading material is poorly written and glorifies aspects of popular culture that they find distasteful. That's a judgment call, of course. I would not let my children read material that is misogynistic, racist, or the like. But if my teen avoided all reading, I would be fine with him reading "junk." Before he can develop taste, he must experience hunger. The first step is to open his mind to the idea that printed material is worth his time. I believe parents will further their own goals by showing curiosity about their children's interests rather than disdain. Taking your child seriously as a reader—by, for example, taking a reading recommendation from him—might make him take himself more seriously as a reader.

Use social connections. How do students learn about movies they want to see or video games they want to play? Through media advertising and their friends. Save a few highly successful series, there is no advertising for print material. It's all word of mouth, and most kids don't read.

Parents can try to correct this knowledge deficit directly by telling their children about content they think they'd like, but it would likely be more effective for students to hear these things from peers. For adults, reading is often social. Part of the success of Oprah Winfrey's book club is the feeling of being part of a group. Teens are hypersocial, so reading ought to be social for them as well.

Technology can help. There are countless book groups on the web— boards where kids discuss books, trade recommendations, post fan fiction, and the like. Booksellers offer online book reviews and discussions that are heavily populated (see www.amazon.com/forum/book (http://www.amazon.com/forum/book) and www.barnesandnoble.com/bookclubs (http://www.barnesandnoble.com/bookclubs)). Social cataloging sites, such as www.goodreads.com/genres/young-adult (http://www.goodreads.com/genres/young-adult), www.shelfari.com (http://www.shelfari.com), and www.librarything.com (http://www.librarything.com), allow users to comment on other people's posts, let others know what they read or plan to read, get recommendations, offer commentary, engage in discussions, and so on. Goodreads also allows the posting of pictures and animated GIFs, which teens do in abundance. And for serious readers, several websites offer reviews, blogs, author interviews, and other information that might provide a welcome home for teens who like reading but don't have friends who do. For example, see www.readergirlz.com (http://www.readergirlz.com), www.guyslitwire.com (http://www.guyslitwire.com), and www.teenreads.com (http://www.teenreads.com).

A child is not likely to dive into one of these communities. The most probable entry point would be through that rare book that does capture her imagination; that's the moment parents should make sure she knows that there are websites where other enthusiasts are discussing the book.

Make it easy to access books. Will an electronic reader help motivation? There are a few scattered studies on this question, showing mixed results.[22] Honestly, I'd be surprised if an e-reader made books appealing to a child who hates reading. Pleasure reading is just not that different on an e-reader, and when asked, students say they actually

prefer paper; 80 percent who have experience with e-books say they still read print more often.[23]

Yet these same students say they think they would read more if they had access to e-books, and I tend to believe them. I don't think e-readers make reading more fun, once the device has lost its gee-whiz luster, but an e-reader improves access. Being able to download virtually any book you want as soon as you want it (barring cost considerations) is a great advantage. If a child has just finished book two of a trilogy and is eager to read the final book, or he has just heard from a friend about a fantastic new title, that's when he's most excited to get it. But if he has to wait a few days to get to a bookstore or library, his interest may have moved on to something new. Older students can download an e-reader for their phones. It's free, and that way they can always have a book with them.

What Teachers Can Do

A friend of mine works for a program that provides information and services to low-income parents. My friend told me of a young mother saying that she appreciated the books the group had provided for read-alouds and wondered if she could have more. My friend was pleased but surprised, as the mother had already received a large number of books. As they chatted, it became clear that the mother had been discarding each book after her child had heard it once. She didn't know it was permissible (let alone desirable) for her child to hear the same book more than once.

You may have students in your class who have parents like this mother: they want to do the right thing but need a lot of help, down to details of execution that others take for granted. Teachers also tell me of parents who are less open to the idea of a central place for reading in their homes. They did not grow up in reading homes, and they feel that they turned out just fine. Or they like the idea in principle but are not confident about their own reading. What can teachers do to promote reading in children with parents who don't know how to support it or perhaps aren't eager to do so? I can offer three suggestions.

Offer parent workshops. Research shows that telling parents about research-based practices in reading does lead to improvement in

children's reading.[24] A team of teachers might develop workshops that:

> Offer information about the impact of parents' attitudes on children's
> success. Even though literacy is important to a child's success in school,
> reading at home should focus on pleasure. Teachers should teach;
> parents don't need to. Parents should support reading as a gateway to
> pleasure. Research shows that parents who view reading as fun
> actually have kids who read better than parents who view reading as
> an academic skill.[25]
>
> Offer information about how to read to a young child: how to fit it
> into one's day, what to do when the child is fidgety, how to find
> interesting books, and so on. For parents of older kids, provide
> information about how to support the emergent reader: when to
> offer support and of what sort, how long the child should read, and
> what sort of material he should read.
>
> Offer information about how to include more reading in daily life—
> for example, encouraging the child to bring a book for the ride to
> school—and suggestions for ways to reduce television watching and
> video gaming.

If workshops are to have an impact, parents must attend, so organizers
might consider ways to make it as easy as possible for parents to do so.
In addition to good publicity, strategies might include providing
childcare, holding the workshop on the first floor so parents with
strollers aren't thwarted, and scheduling with sensitivity to working
hours (or better, scheduling the same workshop at different times).
Organizers might also consider an initial parent-child event that has
nothing to do with reading at all but is meant only to establish the
school as a welcoming place. I visited a school that held a mother-
daughter nail-art night for this purpose.

Provide books. Suppose you simply gave kids free books? Would they
read them, and would their reading improve? Research on the impact
of free-book programs has typically focused on the summer months
because that's when kids who don't read really fall behind those who
do.[26] It's a special problem for low-income kids,[27] as they don't have
the access to books (either at home or at libraries) that wealthier
children do.[28] Summer school programs meant to encourage kids to
read at home are known to be effective,[29] but they are expensive.

The less expensive alternative is to provide books and hope for the best, and there is some indication that doing so does prompt reading and, in turn, boosts reading skills.[30] As you might guess, free-book programs seem to have a bigger impact on low-income kids than middle-income kids.[31]

A number of organizations provide free books to children in need (see the "Resources" box on the right). A small team of teachers might take on the task of contacting these organizations to procure books that can be distributed directly to students.

Plant a seed. Even if parents won't come for a workshop, you can still use the brief snippets of time you have with them to try to plant a literacy seed: if they come for a parent-teacher conference, great, but if not, perhaps it's an opportune moment at pickup when the child is struggling into his jacket. What might such a seed be? If parents seem very reluctant to accord a larger role for literacy, a greater emphasis on conversation at home may lay the groundwork for literacy later.

Much has been written about the importance of talking to children, but the dictate "talk to your kids" says nothing about the quality of the speech.[§] Child-directed talk composed mostly of directions (e.g., "Go get me the milk") or prohibitions (e.g., "Stop that") is not what we have in mind, but that may be what the child receives if a parent sees conversation with children as frivolous. A way around this is to suggest that parents share with their children stories of their own childhood. Stories provide structure for extended talk that is social, family-oriented, and not directive. From about age 5 until pubescence (and sometimes into the teen years), children often enjoy hearing stories that verify the remarkable fact that their parents were once young.

Another option is to suggest that parents ask their child questions. Hearing adult speech is a useful model, but the child also needs practice in formulating and expressing her ideas. In addition, asking questions sends an important implicit message about the nature of speech. The parent who uses speech mostly to tell his child what to do silently communicates to the child that the purpose of language is to make one's wishes known to others. The parent who asks questions shows that another purpose of language is to gain new information, to learn things from others.[32] It's a way to model curiosity.

A natural topic for questions is what happened during the school day. Teachers can help by letting parents know when a student was particularly excited about some work during the day, and suggesting that the parent ask about it. For willing parents, a teacher could even arrange to make such communications regular, for example, by sending a text message every few days that tells parents something about classroom life that they could ask their children about: which book was read aloud, for example, or what the writing prompt was that day.

* * *

What parents and teachers really want for children is to experience reading pleasure. What sort of reading pleasure? For me, reading affords a pleasure of understanding. Food writer Ruth Reichl, for example, can snare in words the elusive subtleties in the flavor of toro. Other writers make me understand things about myself, not always appealing things. After reading the memoir *Clear Pictures*, I remember reflecting on how lucky Reynolds Price was to have grown up among such wise and interesting people, only to realize that it was Price's acumen and sensitivity that made them so; had I known them, I would likely have missed their finest qualities. As an adult, I get great satisfaction from, at long last, coming to a better understanding of ideas that I've often encountered but only dimly comprehended; most recently, it's been the tensions among the founders of the United States.

An altogether different sort of pleasure comes from being carried to distant times and places when I read. How better to see the French Riviera during the 1920s than through the debauched, exhausted eyes of Dick Diver in *Tender Is the Night*? How could I enter the alternately solemn and boisterous world of New York's Hasidim if Chaim Potok did not take me there? And then too sometimes the pleasure lies not in the charms of a new world but in escape from my own. During graduate school, I read Herman Wouk's two-volume World War II epic *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance* nearly daily at lunch; I used it like worry beads to manage the anxiety consequent to my demanding academic program.

I maintain that these joys cannot be experienced through television or other media. Only reading elicits *your* contribution to the experience by

demanding that you mentally create the world described. Only fiction demands that you live with the characters as long or as deeply. And with few exceptions, prose stylists show greater love of language than artists in other media.

I want my children—and yours—to experience those joys, or ones like them. And that's the goal you must keep in the forefront of your mind. As someone who has spent all of his professional life around 18- to 22-year-olds, I'll offer my impression as to what causes the greatest conflict between parents and teens: Parents are under the impression that they want their children to be happy. Children are under the impression that their parents want them to be happy the way their parents think they ought to be happy.

The danger lies in children feeling pressured and unhappy about reading. Remember that your goal is that they enjoy reading, not that they enjoy reading as you do.

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*The survey was conducted on MTurk, a website where volunteers can perform brief computer tasks for pay. We paid each of our 313 participants (53.4 percent female, mean age = 35.2 years) 35 cents. All were Americans at least 18 years old. The instructions said, "The average American teenager between the ages of 15 and 19 has 5.1 hours of leisure time on a typical weekday. How would you hope that your child would allocate his or her 5.1 hours (that's 306 minutes) among the following activities? Enter the number of minutes in the box next to each activity." The wording varied so that respondents without a teenage child were asked to answer as if they did. (back to the article)

†For more on the effectiveness of rewards, see "[Should Learning Be Its Own Reward? (//www.aft.org/ae/winter2007-2008/willingham)](//www.aft.org/ae/winter2007-2008/willingham)" in the Winter 2007–2008 issue of *American Educator*. ([back to the article](#))

‡For more on the effects of praising students, see "[How Praise Can Motivate—or Stifle (//www.aft.org/ae/winter2005-2006/willingham)](//www.aft.org/ae/winter2005-2006/willingham)" in the Winter 2005–2006 issue of *American Educator*. ([back to the article](#))

§For more about the word gap between low-income and more-affluent children, see "[The Early Catastrophe (//www.aft.org/ae/spring2003/hart_risley)](//www.aft.org/ae/spring2003/hart_risley)" in the Spring 2003 issue of *American Educator*. ([back to the article](#))

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–D.T.W.