

Flick the SWITCH

When watching TV is the easy option, it's not enough to teach children how to read; we have to help them understand why it's worth the effort, says Sue Palmer...

Imagine there's something you want really badly. Now imagine there are two ways of getting it: one involves several years of painstaking practice, the second is just a matter of flicking a switch. Which would you choose?

There's something all children want really badly – stories. It's actually programmed into their brains to crave stories, because they're one of the main ways young human beings make sense of their world. If there were only two ways of getting stories – reading them in books or watching them on screens – there'd be no contest. They'd just flick the switch.

Fortunately, there's a third way: a grown-up can read them a story. Even more fortunately, listening to stories prepares children's minds for reading.

Tuning into language

Think about what's happening inside children's

heads when you read them a good story. They're focusing their attention, responding to the flow of the language, soaking up words, earnestly pursuing meaning in the narrative... and turning the whole experience into 'pictures' in their mind's eye. That's a considerable mental effort, especially for young children, but the lure of the story is so great that they're prepared to make it.

And it's a really worthwhile activity, because they're learning to attend to language – essential for school-based learning – and, in making sense of a spoken narrative, they're developing their comprehension skills. The more practice children have at listening to stories, the easier it is for them to comprehend written stories when they read for themselves.

Of course, you don't have to read to children to exploit the developmental benefits of spoken narrative. You could simply tell them a good story (it's

an excellent way of gaining attention and conveying information in any area of the curriculum). But reading stories is important if you want children read to for pleasure. We spend an awful lot of time these days teaching children how to read, but nowhere near enough demonstrating why on earth they should bother.

If children discover the delights of storybooks through listening, they'll be more inclined to put in the practice required for reading fluency. And when adults spend time reading to children, they're showing how much they themselves value books. The best way to encourage 'the reading habit' in children is to demonstrate it yourself every day.

50%

The proportion of 300 primary school teachers surveyed by Oxford University Press last year who have seen at least one child begin formal education with no experience of being told stories at home.

Make time for stories

In today's screen-based culture, it's more important than ever that we turn children on to the rewards of the written word. Watching TV programmes and DVDs requires little mental effort – the pictures come ready-made and there's no spoken narrative to follow. Psychologists describe children's mental state when they're staring at a screen as 'attentional inertia', and the neuroscientist Susan

Greenfield calls screen-based entertainment 'a gratifying easy-sensation, "yuk and wow" environment that doesn't require a young mind to work.'

The more often children flick a switch to get a story, rather than using their brains to process language, the more difficult it will be to turn them into committed readers. So in these days of bedroom TVs and 24-hour children's channels, it's vital that parents understand the educational significance of telling and reading stories to their children. My advice to parents of nursery and primary school children would be:

- Don't put TVs or other electronic equipment in your children's bedrooms
- Read them a bedtime story every night
- Read at other times too, whenever you want to share quiet time
- Carry on reading to them even when they can read for themselves

- Limit screen-based activity to a maximum of two hours a day
- When you're chatting, tell them stories about your childhood, your family, anything that crops up, and encourage children to tell you their stories too.

We need to spread the word that endless screen-gazing at home encourages 'attentional inertia', making it more difficult for children to focus on and process language (both spoken and written) during the school day.

Stories in class

Unfortunately, in today's cultural climate, most parents are unlikely to find time for reading at home (in a 2007 survey, around half said they were too tired or busy to read a bedtime story). So we have to provide plenty of opportunities for children to listen to stories at school, especially in the early years. For teachers of children under the age of seven, this means that 'storytime' is every bit as important as the teaching of phonics:

- > Read to children several times a day (a minimum of 30 minutes altogether) – and don't interrupt the story with 'teaching points'.
- > Give plenty of time for talking about stories you've read, as a class, in groups or with talking partners.
- > With young children, revisit short picture books many times. Build up a collection of favourite reads for them to choose from.
- > Don't always show the pictures. Ask children to listen to a short story (or a longer one in instalments), and draw their own pictures. Or to listen to a story, then turn it into a play.

- > As children build up listening stamina, move on from picture books. By six, they should also be listening to short stories or serialised short novels.
- > Avoid using screen-based technology – the skills it develops may undermine the ones children need to become literate.

Hopefully, once children are seven or eight, most of them will be competent at decoding text. The task now is to encourage them to develop fluency and comprehension through frequent practice. Again, reading to them is by far the best way to enthuse children to become readers themselves. My advice to teachers of older classes is:

- > Always have a class novel on the go, and read an instalment for 15–20 minutes every day
- > Provide 'reading time' (another 15–20 minutes daily) for children to practise reading themselves, ensuring this sometimes involves reading aloud, e.g.
- > Paired reading, when children share a book with a 'reading partner', a page or a paragraph at a time.
- > Give plenty of opportunities to talk about what they've read.

Many KS2 teachers balk at the idea of dedicating 30–40 minutes a day to 'reading for pleasure'. Like those parents in the survey, they feel there isn't time. But reading is arguably the most important skill children learn at school, the essential foundation of all academic learning. We must find time to convince children of the very special pleasure of translating words into pictures in their heads. Otherwise, they'll just flick a switch.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Palmer's book *Toxic Childhood: how the modern world is damaging our children...* and what we can do about it is published by Orion. She talks about literacy and child development on the Oxford University Press website (Oxford Owl for parents and Oxford School Improvement for teachers).

