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## **Empowering parents to encourage children to read beyond the early years**

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**Teaser Text:**

How can we support parents to encourage children to read *beyond* the early years? This article draws on recent research to support our school/home partnerships to keep reading a priority.

**Abstract:**

Enjoyment of reading books is related to reading proficiency, and fostering children's enjoyment of reading is imperative to support continued reading engagement. However, not all children understand that reading is important, and not all children are regularly engaged in recreational reading. Children typically read for pleasure less often as they age, leading researchers to seek effective ways that social influences can support children to be life-long readers beyond the early years. Parents can play an important role in communicating the continued importance of reading, and fostering positive attitudes toward reading. However, after independent reading skill acquisition, parents may become a less potent encouraging and supportive force. We explore older children's experiences of both independent and shared reading, and their perception of parental support, involvement and modelling, to highlight potential roles that parental figures can play to reading beyond the early years.

**Pause and Ponder:**

- How do you currently communicate the ongoing importance of reading to parents beyond the early years of schooling?

- What do you know about your unique school community that can support your efforts to encourage reading at home?
- How might you identify areas in which parents may need additional support to encourage reading at home with older children, and how will you meet these needs?

Josh was a softly spoken eleven-year-old boy who loved playing basketball. When Margaret asked about his reading experiences as part of a study into young people's reading, it was clear that reading was not one of his favourite activities, rather something he did for recreation once every few weeks.

Josh explained that he had received more encouragement as a younger child, reflecting that "they would always give me something that I thought would be fun to read, and it really was fun to read, back then." But once Josh became a competent independent reader, this encouragement was curtailed, leading to Josh's conclusion that while reading is still important beyond the early years, comparatively speaking, "you don't have to read much". He explained that this is "because you already know how to read, back then you're still learning, so you've got to read more to learn."

While Josh read to his mother "just for homework" when he was younger, this practice had "stopped a few years ago". No one read to him at home, and he had only been read to infrequently when younger, though he had a positive attitude toward being read to, stating that "I like to just sit and enjoy". Fortunately, his teacher read aloud to him in class, which he thought was "pretty good actually".

Josh had reached the conclusion that the purpose of reading was simply independent reading skill acquisition. Once he knew how to read, encouragement to continue doing so was withdrawn by his parents, and he assumed that reading was no longer valuable.

However, Josh did not believe he was a skilled reader. When asked about his reading abilities, he was only able to describe them as “middleish” at best; he explained “for one thing, I don’t really read very fast. I like to check myself a little bit, so I know what I’m reading. My sister finishes a book in like five minutes that’s really fast...and it would take me like two days to finish that book.” This hints at possible issues with fluency, comprehension, and perceived self-efficacy in reading, particularly due to sibling comparison. Josh ideally should have been reading more, not less, to further develop his skills. Josh, and perhaps his parents, did not understand the continuing importance of reading beyond independent reading skill acquisition.

### **Influences on children’s attitudes toward reading**

Josh’s understanding of the value of reading beyond independent reading skill acquisition could be viewed as potentially responsive to the social influences of value in his life. We use McKenna’s (1994) model of reading attitude acquisition as a lens for considering these issues, as it retains importance due to the enduring nature of the interplay between social and environmental factors, which may shape children’s beliefs about reading. Children’s attitudes toward reading are thus shaped by “normative beliefs, beliefs about the outcomes of reading, and specific reading experiences” (McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995, p. 939). Despite the parental focus of this paper, we are not suggesting that parents bear full responsibility for their children’s literacy engagement; while research suggests that a range of influences can affect the way children perceive reading, here we focus on the role that parents can play, and how teachers can shape that role. We know that “students show a better ability to read and learn when their parents are involved in their education and when the parents themselves value reading”, leading to the contention that “student learning is most effective when it is the result of a partnership among the school, teachers, parents and the community” (OECD,

2012, p. 13). Where teachers and parents work together to support children's reading, "at-risk children exhibit demonstrable gains" (Darling, 2005, p. 476).

Much of the research on parents' role in supporting reading focuses on the early years (e.g. Darling & Westberg, 2004), where independent reading skill is generally being developed. However, in recent times, greater attention has been given to how parents may support reading as a *lifelong habit* beyond this point, partly in response to our growing understanding of the ongoing benefits of regular reading. As teachers, we work with children and their parents to ensure the best literacy outcomes; this paper will explore the forms of encouragement and support children currently receive to sustain both shared and independent reading beyond the early years, in order to strengthen school/home partnerships.

### **Benefits of regular reading**

While most individuals in Western society have achieved basic literacy skills by adulthood, functional illiteracy, where literacy levels are not sufficient to meet current academic, vocational and social demands, is a widespread issue (Zebroff & Kaufman, 2016). Many adults do not have sufficient literacy skills to make the most of the opportunities they encounter in everyday life, and they may struggle with relatively basic literacy applications, such as filling out a form or writing an email to a work colleague. As research increasingly suggests that literacy skills need to be exercised to be both further developed *and* maintained (e.g. Lawrence et al., 2015), a regular reading habit can play a valuable role in enabling both young people and adults meet the ever-increasing literacy demands of contemporary society.

In addition to offering academic, social and vocational benefits, recent findings suggest that reading may be good for our brains and our personalities. We know that regular reading confers a range of benefits beyond the obvious literacy skill benefits; reading may confer protection against cognitive decline into old age (e.g. Vermuri & Mormino, 2013; Wilson et al., 2013). Regular recreational reading of fiction has also been associated with

developing an enhanced capacity for empathy and pro-social attitudes and behaviours (e.g. Mar & Oatley, 2008). The reasons to keep reading beyond the early years are burgeoning in the research.

While children are often encouraged to read anything, and diverse text types offer valuable exposure to authentic textual experiences, at this stage, the reading of books is more strongly associated with literacy benefit than the reading of other text types. To date, reading graphic novels, text messages, the internet (Baer, Baldi, Ayotte, & Green, 2007), and comic books (OECD, 2010) have not been found to offer equal literacy benefit, and fiction books are particularly associated with literacy benefits (OECD, 2011). As such, while we encourage our children to read widely and across diverse text types and genres for exposure to other possible benefits, it is important that we also continue to encourage them to make books a staple component of their reading diet.

### **Attitude and achievement**

Internationally, attitudes toward reading are closely linked to reading achievement. All OECD countries show a positive relationship between engagement in reading and reading achievement (Kirsch et al., 2002; OECD, 2011). However, as nations continue to grapple with possible approaches to improve overall literacy scores, the power of recreational book reading as an effective intervention is not necessarily well understood. Recent analysis from Western Australian Study in Children's Book Reading (WASCBR) suggests that while age, gender, reading encouragement or having supportive peers were all significant influential factors in children's reading engagement, reading attitude was the strongest predictor of reading frequency (Merga & Mat Roni, 2018). With this in mind, if we want young people to develop a lifelong reading habit, we need to understand the role that social influences can play in fostering a positive attitude toward reading, so that we can support children to have a

favourable view toward reading, and so that it can legitimately and successfully compete with the other recreational possibilities.

Reading is a social activity, and children's reading occurs in specific social contexts, and can be influenced by key social agents such as parents. Recent international research suggests that the majority of those who identify as avid readers in adulthood have had a person exert "a significant positive influence on their attitude toward reading books" (Merga, 2017b), with maternal and paternal figures predominantly featured as key social influences. We found that "when respondents were exposed to a love of reading, whether it be through observation of a loved or respected figure, a social influence taking the time to actively provide access or support choice, or through social interaction and shared enjoyment, a life-long reader could be fostered" (Merga, 2017b).

While we draw from a variety of research sources to explore the role of parents in fostering young people's enjoyment of independent and shared book reading beyond the early years, we make most frequent reference to the mixed methods 2016 WASCBR. This study collected survey data from 997 children aged 8-12 at 24 schools in Western Australia. It was granted institutional and state departmental ethics approvals and rigorously piloted at a local school prior to implementation, with minor changes made to the tools. Data were collected in a visit to each school by Margaret (Chief Investigator). All consenting participants in Grades 4 and 6 took part in the survey, with two children randomly selected from each school to participate in the interviews, controlled only for gender. The qualitative data were principally analyzed using the constant comparative method (Holton, 2011), with quantitative data analyzed using an array of techniques responsive to the research questions. These data provide current insights into this area of interest.

### **Children's reading engagement**

By the time children reach third grade, most are expected to have attained independent reading skill, with high stakes testing requiring independent reading ability often beginning around this age. While literacy skills are expected to increase during the schooling years, research suggests that children's engagement in reading declines over this period. Recent Scholastic (2015; 2017) research found that in the US and Australia, children read less often as they age, reflective of previous reports that reading for pleasure significantly declines as children move through the years of schooling (Dickenson, 2014).

Due to the wide range of aforementioned benefits conferred by reading, both the age related and longitudinal general declines are serious issues that need to be confronted by both parents and educators to ensure that children develop lifelong reading habits. We need to communicate an expectation that children continue to read, and we need to provide support and encouragement to facilitate this reading.

### **Encouragement to read from parents and others**

Given what we know about the relationship between reading encouragement and children's attitudes toward reading, it is important to gauge the levels of encouragement that children receive to read beyond the early years. Our research suggests that children do not necessarily receive strong encouragement to read. When children aged 8 to 12 were asked "Does someone you know encourage you to read?" as part of the WASCBR survey, nearly a third of respondents selected "no" (Merga & Mat Roni, 2018). While age is negatively associated with reading encouragement, more than half (54.5%) of these "no" respondents were nine years old or younger, suggesting that even relatively young children are not necessarily receiving encouragement to continue to read.

Gender can play a role in how parents apportion time for reading encouragement, with recent research suggesting that parents are more likely to spend time reading with young girls than their male counterparts (Baker & Milligan, 2016). We found that girls receive more



encouragement to read than boys, even though boys tend to read with less frequency (Merga & Mat Roni, 2018). As boys tend to read less often than girls, providing girls with more encouragement to read than boys can perpetuate the gender gap in reading frequency, which in turn can re-inforce the inequity in literacy scores between boys and girls which has been broadly recognized internationally.

As children move through the years of schooling, in many cases, reading becomes an orphaned responsibility, whereby parents may assume it is the role of the teachers, and teachers may assume it is the role of the parents to provide continued encouragement in this area (e.g. Bunbury, 1995). However, just as teachers cannot realistically expect that all parents are sufficiently knowledgeable, willing and able to provide this encouragement at home, parents cannot safely assume that schools are carrying full responsibility for encouraging children to read beyond the early years in light of competing and extensive curricular demands (Merga, 2015). In addition, not all teachers are viewed as reading models by young children (Merga, 2016), so ideally parents should strive to be reading models where possible.

After independent reading skill acquisition, parents may become a less potent encouraging force in children's lives. While there are little longitudinal data capturing these changes over time, when we asked adolescent students about their reflections on changing levels of parental support, we found that "for many students, once the skill to read was acquired, parental encouragement also dwindled", which we characterized as "expired expectations" (Merga, 2014, p. 153). We feel that expired expectations are likely to be at least in part a product of poor understanding of the continue importance of reading beyond the period of independent reading skill acquisition.

Our research also found that children were often keenly aware of parental hypocrisy, which affected their reception of encouragement from their parents, highlighting the

importance of parents' modeling keen reading practices. For instance, one child commented that "even though my dad doesn't like reading books, he still wants me to read books" (Merga & Mat Roni, 2018). When parents expected their children to read, but did not read themselves, children were sensitive to this contradiction.

Adolescents' retrospective reflections on parental encouragement has also given us considerable insight into which encouragement approaches are well received by young people. We found that while being responsive to children's unique taste and preferences and actively "modelling keen reading, providing informed recommendations for their children, and facilitating access to books" were all well-regarded forms of encouragement, "parents who make academic improvement the basis of encouraging reading may be compromising their ability to encourage the enjoyment of this leisure activity" (Merga, 2014, p. 161). Encouragement aimed at fostering enjoyment and shared social purpose is more successful than encouragement purely focusses on academic attainment.

That many children in upper primary school were unsure if their teachers liked reading, but were sure that they valued it for testing purposes (Merga, 2016), suggests that schools can inadvertently stress reading for testing rather than reading for pleasure in the current high-stakes testing environment, increasing the importance that parents provide a more balanced view toward reading in home.

### **Children's attitudes toward shared reading beyond early childhood**

While parents can influence their children's independent book reading, they may also exert influence through shared reading. Research suggests that both independent and shared reading experiences offer benefits for children, and shared reading also retains significant value beyond the initial phase of independent reading acquisition. Shared reading enables greater language exposure, fostering the development of receptive language (Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). It has also been found to enhance spelling (Mol & Bus, 2011) and

vocabulary acquisition (Farrant & Zubrick, 2012). Reading aloud offers powerful cognitive benefits, activating brain areas related to mental imagery and reading comprehension (Hutton et al., 2015). Shared reading remains beneficial beyond the stage of independent reading skill acquisition, as older children and even adults can benefit from shared reading opportunities.

Shared reading should not cease just because children are competent independent readers, as some children strongly regret early cessation. More than a third of Australian respondents aged 6 to 11 whose parents had stopped reading to them wanted it to continue (Scholastic, 2015, p. 30). When describing the curtailment of this practice in his life, one boy explained, “they kind of stopped when I knew how to read. I knew how to read, but I just still liked my mum reading it to me (sic)” (Merga, 2017a). Recent US research suggests that parental reading aloud at home decreases significantly as children move through the years of schooling; while 59% of parents read to their children aged five years or less, only 38% read to their children aged six to eight years, and only 17% read to children aged nine to eleven (Scholastic, 2017). When investigating shared reading beyond the early years, decisions around cessation may be responsive to both parental and child attitudes and ideas about the value of reading beyond this point. As such, parents’ attitudes can influence those of their children, and the reverse (Baker, Scher & Mackler, 1997), so cessation cannot always be simplistically attributed to either parent or child.

When children were interviewed about their experiences of shared reading beyond the early years, we found that quality emerged as an issue. The quality of the experience can be influenced by the time and environment in which it is conducted. The reading experience could be detrimentally impacted when haphazardly inserted into part of a busy domestic schedule, where a child may find themselves reading aloud to the back of a parent who was busy cooking, cleaning or caring for other children (Merga, 2017a).

A poor-quality experience, in which parents and children plough through without interpersonal connection, or in which children are repetitively and relentlessly corrected for every minor error, may actually inhibit the fostering of a life-long reading habit in children, due to its potential to associate reading with stress and assessment, rather than enjoyment and engagement. We suggest that “whether at home or at school, interactive reading experiences are about more than completion of a set task; social interaction and nurturance during this time are also invaluable, and play a key role in establishing positive attitudes toward reading, which are essential for encouraging life-long reading, and also beneficial to facilitate skill acquisition” (Merga, 2017a).

However, we also understand that contemporary life is full of challenges, and that many parents, particularly those who have to work extended hours to ensure economic sufficiency, simply would not be able to find time to read to their children. This is a time *availability* issue which can genuinely be insurmountable. However, where this is a time *allocation* issue, parents may wish to reconsider their priorities to ensure that their children experience optimal literacy advantages.

A range of other genuine barriers may influence parents’ ability to participate in shared reading, such as low parental literacy and health problems. While low literacy can pose a notable barrier to parents’ capacity to read aloud to their children, children appreciate the efforts of their parents, even when the reading aloud experience lacks competence and fluidity. Where we have collected data about adults’ reflections on being read to as children, parental effort even where there was low reading aloud competence powerfully communicated a valuing of reading which was motivating in itself.

For example, a respondent described how her mother, who struggled with dyslexia, nevertheless read to her to the best of her ability, and how this inculcated a life-long love of reading in her (Merga, 2017b). Similarly, a respondent described her mother being a poor

reader compared to her father, however the opportunity for closeness and shared experience during shared reading meant that the experience was still highly valued (Merga & Ledger, in press). Some parents found novel ways to work around their own literacy barriers, such as listening to audiobooks with their children. As such, while we recognise that low literacy and reading disorders will pose a significant barrier, the barrier is not necessarily immutable. Parents may persist, finding ways to mitigate these issues; further research that goes beyond identifying barriers to participation, to focus on how to mitigate these barriers, is needed.

While a few children were pleased when shared reading was ceased, as they were frustrated by the reading aloud experience with the parents as they desired to read autonomously, many more regretted the end of this opportunity. Although some children related this cessation to a perceived disadvantage for language acquisition and reading practice, others were more concerned about the loss of valuable social time with their parents (Merga, 2017a). Parents also value this social time; most parents in a recent study who read to their children enjoyed doing so, and when asked why they did, reasons tended to relate to enjoyment, interpersonal connection, and recognition of the learning opportunity (Merga & Ledger, in press).

### **Mothers and fathers as reading models**

We would also like to share new insights into the role that mothers and fathers can play in modelling positive attitudes toward reading for their children. As part of the WASCBR, we collected data around children's perception of their parents as reading models which we report on here.

Most of the children who took part in our study felt that at least one person in their family liked reading. A strong 93.4% of children felt that this was the case. Students who answered "yes" on this survey item were then asked "who in your family likes reading books?", and permitted multiple selections. The responses can be seen in Table 1 below.

[Insert Table 1.]

As per Table 1, mothers are far more likely to be modelling positive attitudes than fathers. This is reflective of earlier research which suggests that the intergenerational transmission may be perceived as a maternal role, which in turn transmits the notion that reading is a feminine activity (e.g. Morgan, Nutbrown, & Hannon, 2009). While some fathers are doing an excellent job of modelling positive reading behaviours for their children, it is mothers who are most likely to be perceived as reading models. We are aware that these findings are significantly constrained by solo parent and other emergent non-traditional family forms, and these qualifications need to be taken into account when considering our findings. This pattern was further observed in the interviews, with mothers more frequently described as reading models than fathers.

We also wanted to know which attitudes and behaviours were perceived by children as evidence that reading was enjoyed, or not enjoyed by their parent(s), to determine how a parental reading model was perceived. We asked children if their parents read, and how their parents felt about reading books, in order to explore their perception. We found that children were generally quite highly observant, and most did not hesitate to give a clear description of their perception of their parents as readers. We subjected these data to iterative thematic coding to analyse key trends.

Children commented about their parents' reading routines, reading volume and frequency. For example, when asked about her mother's reading, Samara explained that "she's always looking for a book that she can read. She always looks for audio books so that she can listen to them while she's driving. And then she always finishing books and she always has a book that she's started reading". Many children were aware of their parents' daily and nightly reading habits, and they felt that being able to see a parental reading routine established them as a keen reader.

In some cases, some parents liked to openly share their love of books, by telling their children about their reading, and parental reading was perceived to be the preferred form of recreational activity. For instance, Luke explained that his mother would read “whenever my dad’s not nagging at her to do stuff”, and Sarah described her mother’s love of reading as limited her ability to meet her domestic work:

...she loves to read, she sometimes bans herself from reading ‘cos she won’t do any of the washing, or doing anything like that. Like last night when we were meant to be getting ready for camping, she got a book and started reading outside, and got told off from Dad.

Sarah’s mother’s attempts at self-regulation around reading were duly noted by her daughter, who was herself a daily reader. Demonstrating a preference for reading above other possible activities was keenly perceived to indicate a love of reading.

Similarly, children discussed negative attitudes toward reading, and fathers were overrepresented in this discussion. For instance, Marco explained that “I’ve never seen him read in my life”. Other children characterized reading as outside the acceptable identity or practices that their father would engage in. For example, when explaining why she felt that her Dad did not like reading, Justine explained that “my dad’s more like, I’m going to go and build something or something because my dad’s like, all building and stuff like me”, whereas Jason’s father was felt to be “not really a reading person; he’s mainly a math person”, and Naomi’s father was “more of like, a TV person, watch football, my mum’s more of a reading person”. Children often made excuses for their parents, explaining that they felt that work commitments prevented them from reading. As per Table 1 above, mothers were typically more likely to be seen as reading models, and while children were not asked to compare their parents as readers, they sometimes did during the interviews, tending to view their mothers as

a more avid reader. Being a reader was deemed outside the paternal reading identity in many cases, with reading seen by children as more than an activity, rather, as part of a personality.

### **Concluding comments**

There is much that parents can do to in order to foster a love of reading in their children beyond the early years, and teachers can play a powerful role in sharing this knowledge and skill base. While both independent and shared reading are highly beneficial practices, independent reading is in decline and parents may curtail shared reading experiences prematurely. Not all young people are receiving encouragement to read independently, which can inadvertently communicate to them that reading is no longer important or necessary. In addition to sharing reading with their children for as long as possible, parents who effectively support young people's reading beyond early childhood tend to know their children's preferences, model positive reading engagement, recommend books to their children, and help them to access books.

Children tend to appreciate shared reading experiences with their parents, and can be disappointed when there are perceived to be curtailed while they are still valued. However, the quality of the experience can be highly variable, underscoring the importance of remembering that this activity is a social exchange which fosters enjoyment in order to influence attitudes toward reading, as well as support skill acquisition.

A continual demonstration of habitual reading by the parents can form a long-lasting impression for the children to imitate as they progress in their lives. While most children were exposed to a positive reading model in the home, 78% of mothers and 55.6% of fathers were seen to enjoy reading.

Where possible, fathers could take increasing responsibility to model positive reading engagement, and show that reading part of an acceptable masculine identity. Ideally, Dads can be a "reading person" too.



While this paper focusses on the value of reading encouragement as valuable for fostering reading engagement in children, we have also highlighted some of the many ways that encouragement can be demonstrated. Children benefit from:

- talking about books and sharing book recommendations with their parents, keeping reading for pleasure in focus rather than academic testing
- having access to books in the home
- sharing quality reading aloud experiences with their parents
- having parents or guardians who actively model a love of reading, and expect their children to devote some regular time to reading

The supportive strategies highlighted above need not be deemed exclusively the role of parents; teachers can also enact all of these strategies. In addition, as reading expert, teachers can make the most of their position to support parents to effectively encourage continued engagement in reading beyond the early years. As we contend elsewhere, “teachers may have the greater responsibility, as parents may face additional challenges such as low literacy, or other issues such as high workloads leading to high home absenteeism, or health conditions that impact upon their capacity to support intergenerational transmission of literacy” (Merga, 2017a, p. 12). Schools need to work more collaboratively with families from all backgrounds, as children’s disengagement from reading cannot be situated as an issue to be purely dealt with in the domestic space, and as previously contended, fostering reading engagement is a shared job in which teachers can play a vital supporting role. We would particularly like to suggest that teachers and schools avoid transmitting messages about reading that locate the practice solely with testing, so that the activity is not perceived as divorced from pleasure, and as we have outlined, there is educative benefit in keeping pleasure in focus.

## **Take Action!**

1. Let your parents know that it is important that they continue to encourage their children to read independently right up until adulthood, reading aloud with them until they no longer wish to do so.
2. Low parental literacy does not have to be an immutable barrier to shared reading; listening to audiobooks with your child is one possible way to maintain a shared reading experience with them.
3. Provide access to books in the home either through classroom libraries, school libraries or a local library.
4. Highlight the importance of making time to share the experience in a comfortable, calm atmosphere. You may also need to model how to read with a child, as not all parents will have experienced this when they were children.
5. Suggest that parents find out what kinds of books their children like to read; this can also be done in class, with findings sent home e.g. a poster about the books I like
6. Encourage parents to talk about the books that they read with their children, and make recommendations where appropriate. Where parents are not able to read, they can still ask their children about the books they enjoyed.
7. Encourage parents to be seen to be a reading person where possible; when parents model positive attitudes toward reading, their children are the beneficiaries.

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### **More to Explore**

<http://www.abc.net.au/radio/perth/programs/wa-afternoons/reading-aloud/8852954>

<https://theconversation.com/research-shows-the-importance-of-parents-reading-with-children-even-after-children-can-read-82756>

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/books-and-arts-thursday-14-september-2017/8944110>

<https://thewest.com.au/news/wa/never-too-old-for-a-story-ng-b88580019z>

**Table 1****Perceived positive attitudinal models**

Answer options	Responses (%)	Responses ( <i>N</i> )
Mother	78	723
Father	55.6	515
Stepmother	5.2	48
Stepfather	4.4	41
Grandparent	40.9	379
Brother	36.8	341
Sister	47.4	439
Other family member (please say who):	14.2	132