

Reading Just for the Fun of It!

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I remember the day my eldest son Justin discovered that independent reading was fun. Justin had an insatiable appetite to hear stories read, but knowing how those words mapped to printed words on the page mystified him. He hated the books sent home with him from school – books with one or two sentences per page that emphasized word recognition by using and reusing very few words. He was impatient with books that had boring story lines, and was starting to act as if learning to read was invented to torture innocent children.

And then he discovered Magic Tree House – a series of early reader adventure books about two children who regularly visited a magic tree house that transported them to different places and times. The first book in the series grabbed his imagination and motivated him to read even when the going was tough. Yes, he needed help figuring out some of the words, but it was the first full book he happily read all by himself. Justin was hooked. He *enjoyed* reading.

Research tells us that the Ontario education system's focus on literacy skills is paying off. Literacy testing over the past 10 years shows that children's abilities to read and write are improving. Children's increased reading skills, however, have been accompanied with an unanticipated decrease in children's desire to read. In the People for Education 2011 report "Reading for Joy", we discover that the percentage of students who say they "like to read" in grade 3 has declined from 76% in 1998/99 to 50% in 2010/11. During this same time period, students in grade 6 who enjoy reading dropped from 65% to 50%. (For the full report go to: <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/People-for-Education-report-on-students-reading-enjoyment-Reading-for-Joy.pdf>)

Why is this concerning? Reading permeates every area of learning. Students' expertise in science, for example, depends on their willingness to investigate ideas and theories they read. Math problems are only understood by reading with care. Research gathered internationally through the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009 shows that high school students who read for pleasure significantly outperform students who enjoy reading the least.

Reasons for this decline in reading with joy are undoubtedly varied, but parents can have a big impact on children's attitudes toward reading. They can do this by making time for reading together – just for fun. Creating a fun-filled reading atmosphere can be easier than you think.

- Seek out children's books or magazines with topics, genres, authors, photos or illustrations your child finds intriguing. Find reading material your child cares about.
- Make book sharing time a talking time. Slow down with picture books to look at their visual details. Talk about the ideas conveyed through the story or nonfiction book you read with children of all ages. Chat together about how these ideas relate to your child's life.

- Use the internet to look up lyrics to songs your child loves so that you and your child can learn the words and sing along; or look up interesting sports stats or a biography about someone your child admires.
- Read aloud to your child even after he or she has learned to read independently. Many adults know the joy of listening to audio books or podcasts. Hearing a story read well can be equally memorable and valuable to children, especially if the story is shared together.

Since 1999, ABC CANADA Life Literacy Canada has marked January 27th as Family Literacy Day to celebrate and encourage Canadian families to read together. On Family Literacy Day and every day, there is good reason to celebrate families who read together.