

Motivating Your Child to Read

By Joan Kuersten

Many of us have heard the axiom: Young elementary schoolchildren learn to read while older schoolchildren read to learn. What that means is that children in grades 1 through 3 are instructed in the reading skills of word recognition, while older students who have mastered these rudimentary skills now apply them to gain knowledge in the various disciplines they study. However, as several studies and reports in recent years attest, middle and high school students often lack the skills and motivation to decipher the more complex reading materials demanded by upper-grade academic disciplines.

According to a 1998 report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 60 percent of high school students cannot read well enough to negotiate high school texts. In a 2000 study conducted by the Southern Regional Education Board of 50,000 career-oriented high school seniors, only 11 percent read well enough to continue their education and advance in a world where new and often complex information will demand sophisticated reading comprehension and mental processing skills.

"Preteens and teens don't automatically extract meaning from a text simply because they can say the words on a page," writes Cathy Roller, director of research and policy at the International Reading Association, in an article in the February 2001 issue of NEA (National Education Association) Today. "The lesson we have to learn is that it really does take good reading instruction from kindergarten through grade 12 to produce the kinds of sophisticated readers we need for an information society." Although information is available to middle and high school teachers on how to incorporate reading comprehension and study strategies in the teaching of their disciplines, many veteran teachers may be unaware of it. In addition, many teachers are not aware of the reading demands their discipline places on students, Roller stated.

So, what can school professionals, parents, and PTAs do to help upper-grade students comprehend and think critically about what they read, as well as encourage them to read outside of school?

What teachers can do to improve students' reading

Teachers often acknowledge that one of their principal goals is to keep kids reading as a recreational pursuit. To encourage recreational reading or reading for pleasure, teachers should allow students to choose their reading material, whether books, magazines, comic books, or song lyrics. These materials should be available in the classroom for students to check out.

To help students understand and productively study academic reading materials, Greg Kurek, a classroom teacher and a member of the NEA's Task Force on Reading, identified several strategies teachers can use to facilitate reading comprehension. Kurek offered these tips in the February 2001 issue of NEA Today:

- Identify for students the steps in the reading process: focus on the text, select and organize information, and integrate and apply what you've learned.

- Emphasize **KWL** when reading for information: Students should ask themselves, what do I **Know**? What do I **Want** to know? What have I **Learned**?
- Read and think aloud. Read difficult passages aloud while students follow along, and model thinking about the text by predicting what may come next, and so forth.
- Provide suggestions for note-taking such as highlighting text and writing responses to the text in the margins.

What parents can do to motivate their children to read

Parents can have a very strong influence on their son's or daughter's motivation to read, says Rosemary Miller, coordinator of the Literacy Initiative at the University of Minnesota. Miller cites parental modeling as a critical ingredient in motivating kids to continue reading on their own through middle and high school. Young people should see parents reading, and reading materials should be in clear view around the house. Miller also recommends that parents set time every day or week when the family reads together. "You can make it a family book club where each member gets a chance to recommend a book to read," she said. All book choices should be honored unless a choice would be inappropriate for younger children.

Other things parents can do to motivate their kids to read include playing audiotapes of books in the car and carrying reading material when traveling and/or waiting to see the doctor or dentist. Encouraging preteens and teens to read nonfiction also can bolster their reading comprehension, as people learn how to extract information and make inferences from nonfiction, said Miller.

Parents can help their children with academic reading, too. For example, if you notice your son is struggling with his science reading assignment, you might say, "How's the homework going?" and then with him read the title of the chapter, scan the chapter by reading the subheads plus any highlighted material, and read the questions at the end of the chapter. Then together you can pose questions about what you want to know, or what you hope the chapter will provide, said Miller.

How PTAs can help

PTAs can reinforce what the teachers are doing in the classroom to support kids' reading efforts by organizing book clubs or sponsoring after-school tutoring programs. It might mean working with a business partner to donate funds or books to classroom libraries or sponsoring book fairs at school where students can purchase books. PTAs also can advocate for teen reading literacy by doing some of the following:

- Encourage school administrators and school boards to integrate reading across the curriculum in middle/junior high and high school.
- Suggest that policy makers make adolescent literacy a priority by increasing funding of middle and high school libraries, and supporting professional development of teachers in the area of instructional reading across the middle and high school curriculum.
- Encourage governments to support research on adolescent reading literacy so that more information can be made available on how to motivate and support student learning in this area.

Parents and PTAs can strongly influence the promotion of reading literacy in the middle grades and beyond, according to Frank Sopper, a former reading teacher and school administrator, who is now vice president of product development for an educational software publisher. "When I began teaching reading in 1979, I found many 3rd- and 4th-graders who couldn't read or write, but that doesn't exist anymore, and in large part that's due to parents cooperating with teachers in promoting literacy. We do very well in teaching reading and reading readiness from preschool through grade 3, but then explicit reading instruction drops off; we shouldn't abandon in later years all the excellent work that has been done in the early grades," Sopper said.

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