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“Reading to children is so powerful, so simple and yet so misunderstood”

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Subject:
Literacy

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Alison David, consumer insight director at Egmont UK, discusses some of the challenges with encouraging parents to read to infants...

There can be few things as powerful as regularly reading to a young child. It has astonishing benefits for children: comfort and reassurance, confidence and security, relaxation,

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happiness and fun. Giving a child time and full attention when reading them a story tells them they matter. It builds self-esteem, vocabulary, feeds imagination and even improves their sleeping patterns. Yet [fewer than half of 0-2-year-olds](#) are read to every day or nearly every day by their parents.

So, why don't more parents do it?

Screen time on the rise

The position of reading as a staple of entertainment and relaxation is challenged by hectic family lives, lack of time and some parents' perception that reading to their child is a chore. It can also often take a backseat to screen time. And there is too much emphasis placed on reading as a skill and not as a pleasure. This emphasis permeates even the very early years, because reading is often seen as a skill to learn later at school. [Current data](#) illustrates this very well: 45% of 0-2s are read to daily or nearly every day. This increases to 58% of 3-4s, in part to get them 'school ready', and by 5-7 years, parents reading daily to their children drops back to 44% as the notion takes hold that reading is a subject to learn at school. By this age, parental involvement can often be simply ensuring reading homework is done.

Our work with Nielsen on consumer data shows that time spent on a screen, even at very young ages, is increasing rapidly. In 2014, 88% of children 0-2 spent up to one hour a day on screen but by 2019, spending up to one hour a day had dropped to 48% of 0-2s. Meanwhile, those 0-2s spending 1-3 hours a day on screen grew from 11% in 2014 to 42% in 2019. When used appropriately with a parent, technology can provide an important route in to reading. Our challenge is engaging parents with this, because data shows that 0-2s use a tablet 'most often' to visit YouTube (26%).

Regularly reading to a child for the love of it provides a connection between parent and child from the very early days and helps build strong family ties. Lines from favourite stories enter the family lexicon. Families who enjoy reading together have more opportunities for discussion, developing empathy and attachment. Reading to their infant is one of the greatest gifts parents can give. By starting the journey of building a lifelong love of reading for pleasure, parents are giving their child the opportunity to be the best they can be: children who read for pleasure do better in a wide range of subjects at school and it also positively impacts children's wellbeing.

However, many parents don't seem to understand this.

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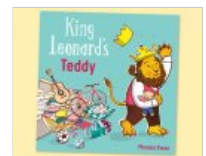
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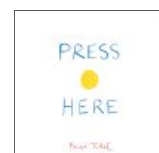


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Parents are aware of how important reading is as a skill in relation to children's literacy and academic performance, but what about reading for pleasure? Parents, as a wide cohort, have typically not been explicitly told about the importance of reading aloud to their child, the benefits of relaxation, time together, the importance of building a routine and a love of reading.



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Many early years settings provide parents with information about the importance of reading with their child and advice for enabling shared reading at home, while many reading charities do sterling work with targeted groups of people. But the numbers show it's not only families from disadvantaged backgrounds who need help: [55% of all 0-2s](#) are not read to daily!

Another key thing to consider, to ensure reading with children is an enjoyable and productive experience, is the environment in which families share stories. A quiet and relaxed environment works best, with few distractions.

To really understand the power of reading with their child, parents need to experience it. Research projects I've conducted at Egmont have been able to change parents' and children's minds about reading, simply by encouraging families to adopt intervention tactics and ensure they regularly read together. One of the powerful outcomes of these interventions is parents' realisation that sharing a story is a deep joy for them as much as for the child. If we can overturn the notion that storytime is yet another chore in a busy day we can help families build reading routines.

Reading is a great habit. Like all habits, it needs repetition and regularity to establish itself. Because it needs quiet time, and our lives today are very short of this, parents need to create it for their children. This means consciously making time and keeping interruptions to a minimum.

The earlier parents can start, the better as it allows the maximum time for their child to grow up with reading and for the love to take root, grow and become part of their life. And what an enriched life that will be.

Alison David will be speaking at the National Literacy Trust's Talk To Your Baby 2020 conference in Birmingham on 27 January. Click [here](#) for more information and to book your ticket.

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