



WE SHOULD ALL BE READERS
PARENTS AND EARLY CAREGIVERS HOLD THE KEY
Maya Payne Smart

The question is not whether we can afford to invest in every child; it is whether we can afford not to.

—Marian Wright Edelman

Heavy rain once filled our local water supply with so much silt and debris that treatment systems failed. Local authorities and media raised the alarm that residents should boil their water for seven days straight or risk illness. Restaurants shut down. Families bought bottled water by the shelf-full. Hospitals procured truckloads of certified water and switched operating rooms to alternative sterilization methods. Once the boil notice was lifted, we all flushed our pipes, dumped ice machines, and resumed life and work as usual.

The crisis was obvious and urgent. The response clear and immediate. The end apparent.

What's happening with our nation's pipeline to reading, if you can call it that, is just as urgent, yet hidden. There is no infrastructure in place to raise a nation of readers, let alone a coordinated response to breakdowns.

Judged by international standards, two disturbing findings characterize U.S. adult literacy in recent decades: basic skills are weak overall (despite relatively high levels of education)



and unusually persistent across generations. About one in six U.S. adults have low literacy skills, compared to, for example, one in twenty in Japan. That's approximately 36 million U.S. adults (roughly equal to the combined populations of New York, Michigan, and Minnesota) who can't compare and contrast written information, make low-level inferences, or located information within a multipart document. And, worse still, socially disadvantaged parents in the U.S., compared to those in other countries, are more likely to pass on weaker skills to their children.

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But here's the part that all parents must understand: this crisis brews early. Much of the tragedy of low adult literacy has its roots in infancy, when early experiences launch lifelong learning trajectories. During this time, more than a million new neural connections are formed per second, and future brain development rests on the soundness or fragility of those earliest links. In fact, evidence from anatomical, physiological, and gene-expression studies all suggest that basic brain architecture is in place by around two years old and later brain development is mostly about refining the major circuits and networks that are already established. And, critically, it's caregivers' nurturing, supportive back-and-forth verbal engagement in a child's first years that literally stimulates brain function and shapes brain structure.

For too long, as a nation we've tested school-aged kids, reported the results, and acted like oversight is a reading achievement delivery system. But literacy doesn't flow from federal mandates through state assessments and district policy to classroom instruction and students' brains. Standardized assessments are valuable, but limited, alert systems. Mere indicators, they can sound when our educational system fails to meet certain expectations. But they don't illuminate the root causes of that failure or tell us what to do about them. Alarms ring; they don't teach. And often when an alarm rings for too long, we tune them out.

Today, alarms abound. In the U.S., 5-year-olds have "significantly lower" emergent literacy than kids in other countries that have comprehensive early-childhood education and national paid parental leave. In a 2019 reading assessment, only one-third of a nationally representative sample of U.S. fourth- and eighth-grade students scored at a proficient level. Reading scores of the lowest performing 9- and 13-year-olds have dropped since 2012. And—most devastatingly—just 14 percent of U.S. 15-year-olds read well enough to comprehend lengthy texts, handle abstract or counterintuitive concepts, and evaluate content and information sources to separate fact from opinion.

And don't even get me started on the state of children's reading interest and enjoyment. National surveys reveal skyrocketing percentages of 13-year-olds who say they "never or hardly ever" read for fun—29 percent in 2020, compared with 8 percent in 1984. The sad truth is this: for the past few decades, the majority of American kids have been shuffled from grade to grade without ever reading well enough. And we're not talking about children with profound learning or intellectual disabilities. These are capable students whose reading development is hobbled by a devastating mix of untapped opportunity at home and inadequate instruction in schools.

Incredibly, that's despite the fact that elementary schools devote more time to English, reading, and language arts than anything else—often more than 30 percent of instructional time. Teachers struggle to meet the diverse needs of learners who arrive in their classrooms with little knowledge of the alphabet, the sounds of English, and the relationships between letters and sounds. They have trouble instilling these basics, let alone expanding the oral-language development, vocabulary, and background knowledge that allows kids to decode and comprehend words in print.

We can't afford to continue pretending that a hodgepodge of reactivity and remediation can get millions of children reading well enough to flourish. We can't leave whole populations without the skills, knowledge, and community support that underpin full participation in society and expect things to turn out well for them or for us. We all suffer when we don't muster the collective will, skill, and integrity to ensure that every child learns to read.

To attain the consciousness, solidarity, and equity our society so desperately needs, we must be informed and deliberate in nourishing early literacy. So, too, if we are to engender the level of citizenship, critical thinking, and limitless potential that our children and society deserve. And because the odds of success are set before school begins, we've got to start at home.

Parents and early caregivers hold the key. Period. We will never see the promise of mass literacy fulfilled until parents—our children's first teachers—understand how reading skills develop and how to spur them along.

PREMIUM FUEL

Parents are often said to be kids' first and best teachers. The "first" part is guaranteed, but the "best" part must be earned. When it comes to literacy, evidence (not intuition) is the best way to judge what works.

Literacy is one of the most-studied topics in academia. There were already more than one hundred thousand studies on how children learn to read in 1999 when Congress convened the National Reading Panel, and the number has continued to climb. A search for the phrase "reading development" in the National Library of Medicine's biomedical database finds more than 2,500 papers published in 2021 alone. Conferences, publications, and whole careers are devoted to bridging the divide between what research in linguistics, psychology, cognitive science, and education tells us about how reading develops and the practical matter of sparking and accelerating these developments in children.

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When parents engage with good research and allow it to inform our decisions and behavior, we benefit from the wisdom of evidence and analysis that's far more revealing than our individual experience or perspective alone. Recent discoveries in neuroscience, molecular biology, and epigenetics alongside years of behavioral and social sciences insights can also boost our empathy by giving us deeper insight into the child's environment and experience. I know I always feel better about my decisions as a mom when they marry responsiveness with effectiveness. I want to do not only what feels right, but also what works.

ROUTINE MAINTENANCE

Becoming literate is considerable work for a child's growing brain, but nurturing it doesn't have to be. Beginning in infancy, parents can foster literacy with warmth, responsiveness, dialogue, and turn-taking. Over time these practices can become core habits and make a lasting impact. These are everyday strategies to help you find the perspective and build the muscle needed to relate to your children with intention, consistency, and generosity over the long haul.

The fact is, once parents know what the research says about what kids need (and when), there's a practical matter of doing those things day in and day out... for years. For that, we need parent-tested and -approved techniques that are easy to fit into busy lives. Putting the time and energy into establishing strong practices early on can rev up lifelong benefits and prevent costly breakdowns.

ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE

A lot of parenting media treats families as islands. *Read this and teach that*, the books advise, *and your child will learn*. But in reality, reading develops within a dynamic web of relationships and experiences.

Parents need ongoing support from community members, including friends, family, neighbors, teachers, librarians, and others, to keep their kids on track. There's often also a role for the just-in-time intervention of specialists, from speech and hearing therapists to learning and reading experts, depending on a child's particular needs. This is the equivalent of roadside assistance.

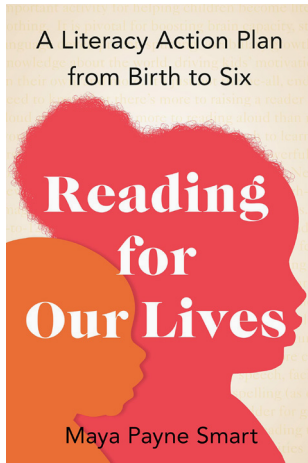
But we'd be foolish to take a back seat, given the indisputable evidence of our power to launch a child's literacy. Every child deserves full literacy to thrive, and instilling the strongest possible base prior to school gives a child a real shot at gaining the skills and knowledge they'll need long term.

When I was growing up, my dad always told me to front-load my effort. He said, "Work as hard as you can to learn as much as you can as fast as you can." That way, when inevitable distractions and unforeseen circumstances arrived, I'd have some wiggle room.

Starting strong creates a chance at recovering from setbacks. So it goes with your child's literacy: you will never find a better time than now to launch a reader. 📖



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