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The Not-So-Magic Steps for Turning Ordinary Children into Readers

Helen Hoopes
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by Helen Hoopes

The other day, I got a survey in the mail that I was asked to complete and return within a few days. It asked only one question: "What single book has made an important difference in your life?" and give "your reasons for choosing this book." At first, I thought this was the easiest survey I had ever had to fill out. But then I tried to decide on that one single book. Not so easy!

My entire life has been filled with books and reading. I have been so influenced by books that I can not even imagine the person I would have been without them. From the time I first learned of their magic, I fell in love with reading. I have many friends and associates who do not read. When I compare my life and my understanding of life to theirs, I am so grateful that I developed a love of reading.

What are some of the benefits that can come to children (and adults) through books? Here are just a few:

1. **Reading Gives People Power.** If you are a reader, you have been able to experience the power that the written word can have upon people. I remember a girl who worked for me in the late '70's. My staff was sitting around discussing some of the current events of the day. Someone mentioned the name of Nikita Kruchev. Sarah looked blank. When one of her peers asked her if she knew who Kruchev was, she floundered for only a moment, then smiled and said, "Oh, yes, he is a famous Russian dancer." There was a stunned silence, a few laughs, and the conversation resumed, but the value of Sarah's opinion went down that day. Even daily reading of the newspaper can bring power.

2. **Reading Helps You to Experience Things that Could Not Possibly Be Experienced in One Lifetime.** Through my reading, I have been to almost every major country in the world. I have met the kings and queens of many
countries from many ages as well as the humble peasant. I have traveled the
land of America through all time periods and have lived in both mansion and
tepee. I have lived with animals and Presidents. I have felt the terror of Nazi
concentration camps and the ecstasy of the wind blowing on my face as I’ve
raced across the oceans in ships of all sizes. I have explored mountain tops,
blazing hot deserts, and the depths of the sea. I have looked into the eyes of
death time after time and experienced true freedom as I’ve rapelled off the
highest cliff in the world. I have felt the heartaches and sorrows of almost all
the peoples of the world as well as their joys. I have traveled in a covered
wagon, through space, and into the fourth dimension. I have lived a thousand
lives, and times, and places—all without leaving my own home. I am a reader.

3. **Reading Together Develops a Lasting Relationship Between Parents and
Children.** Reading allows children to interact positively with their parents and
allows both parent and child to form a close bond with each other. What could
be more lovely to look at than a child snuggled up to a parent listening to the
words of a book. My parents have always read to me and we have always been
able to share thoughts about books. I don’t remember a time when my father
has come into my home that he hasn’t walked up to one of my bookcases and
asked me what new book I have that he can borrow. When the books are
returned, discussions follow and we are able to share our feelings and thoughts.

I’ve wondered so many times, what makes one child a lifetime reader and another
child a non-reader. How can we, as adults, touch the life of a child and open them up
to the wonders of the printed word? Over the years, I’ve collected many ideas (through
my own personal reading) and I’ve developed a list of ideas that, if adopted, will enable
you to influence the children in your life to become readers. See how many of these
ideas you have already put into practice:

1. **Be a Reader Yourself.** Perhaps no one single factor will have a more profound
effect on your children’s desire to read than for them to see the adults in their
life reading from an open book. Children love to imitate. I can remember as
a child watching my dad read. I would get a book and hold it just like he did.
When he would turn a page, I would turn a page. Oh, how I wanted to know
what all those little black marks on the page meant. Research has shown that
children learn to read much more quickly if they first have the desire to read.
What better way to begin to implant that desire!
2. **Read to Your Children.** I remember a magical time when I was about four years old. My mother had acquired a calendar that had pictures of all our favorite fairy tales with the printed story to go along with each one. Every night, before we would go to sleep, Mama would take the calendar down from the kitchen wall and roll it up tightly. She would roll it around and around in her hands, whisper a few magic words over the pages, and then slowly unroll it. Each night, it would unroll to a different page and a different story. I knew that my mother was a fairy godmother in disguise! Then, with us all tucked into bed, she would read those fascinating stories. Her voice would rise and fall until we were all fast asleep, dreaming of the wonderful characters in the stories. I remember taking that calendar down and trying to roll up the calendar the way Mama had, but I could never get it to unroll to another story. (I was in junior high school before I figured that one out!). How I longed to be able to read those words.

Another early memory is in kindergarten. I'll never forget Miss Crane as long as I live. Every day, she would pull up her rocking chair and we would all sit around her on the big braided rug. Then, she would open up a book and read to us. I don't remember the books she read, but I will always remember the comfort I felt. I didn't have a lot of friends—we were new in town—but even sitting at the edge of the rug, I can remember her voice reaching out to me and holding me captive with the power of the written word.

Another happy memory, long after I had learned to read myself, was that of Mr. Ogle, my seventh grade language arts teacher. I had him right after lunch—that is a terrible time when all you want to do is take a nap. As soon as the bell rang, Mr. Ogle would have us put our heads down on our desks and then begin reading to us from his favorite books. That year we listened to many books, but *A Tale of Two Cities* sticks in my memory the most. I loved those fifteen minutes every day. It was the highlight of my junior high days. Once again, the power of the written word had touched my life.

3. **Involve the Entire Family.** I remember so many times, as my three sisters and I got older and learned to read on our own, my mother would gather us around her big overstuffed chair—some on her lap, some on the big arms of the chair, and some sitting on the floor, leaning against her legs—and would read to us. We read *The Five Little Peppers and How they Grew, Little Women, Rose in Bloom,* and so many others. Mama would pass the book around and let those of us who could read take a turn. Even when we became impatient with the
younger ones who could not read as fast as we thought necessary, she still allowed everyone to read out loud. Of course, by this time, the older ones could (and did) read on our own, but we didn’t want to miss that closeness that came when the whole family read together.

Even sitting on Daddy’s lap and having him read the funnies to us every night (especially the Sunday comics) was something to which we looked forward. He was never too tired to take us on his lap and read.

4. **Take Kids to the Library.** Saturdays at our house were always exciting. First you had to get up and get all your chores done so that you would be ready to go to town with Mama. The first stop would be the public library. The children’s section was downstairs, with its own private outside entrance. Mama would take us down and get us started, and then she would leave to go upstairs to get her books and then out to do her weekly shopping. We would settle in for an hour or so of pure Heaven! Depending on how high we could reach, we would pull books off the shelf, sit on the floor or at the tables and skim through them looking for the best ones to take home. It was here that I first became acquainted with *The Bobbsey Twins*. I know that most experts today would probably not recommend these books as great children’s literature, but I adored the Bobbsey Twins! I think I read every book in the series and longed for more. We could each check out six books. Since I had three sisters, we always had lots of books to take home and read.

After we left the library, we would go to the grocery store where my sisters and I would sit up in the front of the store where all of the comic books and children’s books were. I still don’t know how we got away with it, but while Mama was shopping, we would read all the new books. I remember I used to try to hide behind the bags of rock salt so no one would see me and make me leave. As I’ve thought about that experience over the years, I have come to the conclusion that Mr. Kruger, the store manager, must have been a reader himself. He often saw us sitting there reading, but I can’t remember him ever telling us to leave that little haven.

5. **Make Good Books Available to Your Children in Your Home.** I can’t ever remember a time that there wasn’t something to read at our house. It seemed that every time anyone got a little money, it went to buy a new book. We had encyclopedias in our home from the time I was beginning to read. My parents also purchased a set of the *Harvard Classics*. Each of us had our own bookcase
Children’s Book Review

and, in addition to the many books we brought home from the library, we had plenty of our own books to read. My dad was always putting up another bookshelf. A little used niche in our hallway became a place for a bookcase. When the books were stacked on the shelf two deep, Dad built another bookcase. And so it went until we finally converted a spare bedroom into a combination library/TV room. There was always something to read.

6. Give Books as Gifts. At our house, it wasn’t Christmas or your birthday if you didn’t get at least one book. Our parents started buying us books when we were very young and have continued that habit to this day. This past Christmas, in a fit of thriftiness (or was it just tiredness after shopping so long?), my Mom said that they wouldn’t be giving books this Christmas. I looked at my Mom and said, "Then it won’t be Christmas." My Dad overheard our little discussion and said, "Buy them books!" We all got books for Christmas!

A word of caution: Don’t just buy the grocery store books for children. Invest in quality books with quality bindings that will last for a lifetime. To this day, a portion of my own personal library is devoted to those wonderful books I received as a child. There is no greater possession than a beautiful book!

7. Encourage Children to Buy Their Own Books. I still remember the thrill that came to me in high school when we were allowed to purchase books through a paperback book club sponsored by our English teacher, Mrs. Hoff. We would be given the order form and she would go through the list of books giving her impressions of each title. We would be given a week to make our selections and come up with the money. Then that glorious day would come when she would call out our names and we would walk to the front of the class and accept the books that we had ordered. I learned that books cost money and needed to be taken care of. Those books were mine. Paid for with my own hard-earned money. Of course I loved them. Even today, there is nothing I love more than to buy a beautiful new book and delve into its mysteries. The other day, a salesman came to my door. As he looked at my bookshelves, filled with books, he said, "You must be a collector." "No," I replied, "I’m a reader." There is a difference.

8. Help Children Look for Opportunities to Read. As a child, I used to take books to the table when we were called to "Come eat." This was not looked upon as acceptable behavior, but I soon discovered that there was a wealth of
reading material at the table already. I learned to read everything in sight: the cereal boxes, the bread sacks, the syrup bottles, the peanut butter jars, even the poem about "Home" that hung on the wall behind my father's place. There was always something to read. (Yes, I love to read!) But there were other opportunities to read that my parents did encourage.

When we went on trips, we always played word games by looking at the road signs or billboard signs. We read car license plates, signs in windows, banners strung across the streets, and Burma Shave signs. Every trip became an adventure in reading. Mom always packed books and we would read wherever we went. Even today, I can't go on a vacation or business trip without taking along a couple of books.

My home is filled with books. I have several books that I keep in the bathroom, some in my bedroom, one in the bag I take to work so that I can read on the way, another in the kitchen, and many more in the living room. I always have many books going at once, sometimes for only a few minutes here or there. But then, when I get to the exciting part in one particular book, I forget the rest and carry that one around with me, everywhere, until it is finished. My doctor has never seen me without a book, and some of our best conversations have been about the latest book that one of us is reading. There are opportunities to read everywhere. Help the children in your life to see and take advantage of these moments of opportunity.

9. Help Children Make Reading a Habit. Most children, today, spend too much time watching TV. As the adult, you need to help them set aside some time every day to read. I can remember having quiet times when books were around us and we were encouraged to read. Certainly children need to have time to play with friends, to exercise in the fresh outdoors, and to simply play; but the child also needs to be allowed time to pick up good books and relish the joy that comes from reading.

As you can probably tell, books are an important part of my life. I am never too tired to open a good book. I really have to discipline myself to turn off that light, at night, or I would never to be able to get to work in the morning! I have also learned to be discriminating in my book selection. As a child, I thought that if you once started reading a book, you had a moral obligation to finish the book. Not so now! There are too many books in the world, begging to be read. No one can afford to spend time reading a book that they don’t enjoy just for the simple reason that you started it.
Another joy that can come to children who learn to read is to read to your older parents. I think of the many happy hours I spent hearing my parents read to me. Someday, when my parents can no longer read for themselves, I intend to return that gift. It truly was a gift to me.

I suppose that by now you might be wondering what single book I chose to write down as the one which has influenced me the most. I never sent in the survey. I couldn't decide. My life has been influenced by all the books I have read and that numbers in the thousands of thousands. I could never settle for just one title.