Parents, Children and Reading

Children's Book Review

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A decade ago we lived in a small, peaceful town where Frank Parker, one of our neighbors, worked at John Deere as a mechanic. After hours, Frank used his mechanical skills to restore antique cars. He spent most evenings in his cinderblock shop working small miracles with crippled and rusted wrecks scavenged from weathered farmyards throughout the country.

Last summer we drove through our former town and stopped to visit. At the Parker’s, we learned their oldest son, Steve, was now married and the shop foreman at the Chevrolet dealership on Main Street. He was also in the middle of restoring a 1938 Dodge found in a wheat field.

We couldn’t miss the obvious similarities between father and son, and commented to Frank on his raising a parallel boy. Frank took no credit for his son’s vocation or avocation. He claimed never to have asked the boy to change a spark plug, weld a torn fender, or search catalogs for taillight lenses. (Of course Steve did these things, but of his own choosing.) What Frank did admit was enjoying the work himself, and doing so in his son’s presence. Had he tried to push Steve to be a mechanic, today the boy would be a stockbroker or selling Amway.

Steve’s choice to walk in his father’s shadow would not have surprised Albert Schweitzer. Asked to define good teaching, Schweitzer is reported to have said he could reduce the complex educational process to its absolute essence. When one human being wants to effect a change in another, only three principles are important: (1) example, (2) example, and (3) example. All else is superfluous.

When we try to teach our children to love reading, we often use every method but example. We prod them to read, and they treat it as a chore. We offer rewards, and they read only as long as the prizes hold out. We force children to read, and they become openly rebellious.

To turn children into readers, we need to build upon the practice of Frank Parker and the principles of Albert Schweitzer.
surest way to do so is to consider three different areas of example setting: seeing, hearing, and understanding.

Let our children see us reading. We must read. We must find books that reward us, but actively engaging in reading is not enough. Our children need to see us taking pleasure from the printed page. A mother once asked why none of her four children liked to read when she was an avid, daily reader. Further discussion revealed that she did her reading in two places: (1) the bathtub, and (2) in bed after her children were asleep. They were unaware that she ever spent time with a book. Children learn to value reading more when they find us sitting with a book. No conversation need take place when they come upon us while we read; they simply need to see that we value the reading experience enough to give time to it.

Let our children hear us reading. Reading aloud to young children is loaded with long-term benefits. Regular stories help prepare them for bed, facilitate language learning, forge a bond between parent and child, encourage vocabulary growth, and even humble the medical profession by enabling a severely learning disabled girl to progress far beyond the point doctors said she could function (see CUSHLA AND HER BOOKS by Dorothy Butler). One of the strongest reasons for reading aloud is the scene it provides of an adult enjoying a book and a child. To get maximum benefit from the experience, the adult should choose some books which appeal to him. When books appeal to the adult, the message that this grown-up likes the story is intangibly but surely transmitted to the child.

Let our children understand why we read. I have yet to see people sit down and read just because they know how. When we pick up an unassigned book, we expect to be rewarded for the time we give the title. The rewards vary—stimulation, learning, delight, enlargement, escape—but they are immediate. We can let children know what books mean to us by talking with other adults, within earshot of the kids, about what we liked in last night’s reading. We also get good mileage out of a genuine recounting of what impressed or amused us in a book we are currently reading. Telling about the book for the purpose of instructing or motivating the children is often the kiss of death for reading in general and that title in particular, but a spontaneous reliving of some episode or idea sends a strong message to children about the reasons for reading.

While some things in this world change with disturbing frequency, others remain forever the same. Frank Parker instinctively followed an ancient path, and Albert Schweitzer identified it. In the area of influencing readers, we are wise to line up behind them.