



Let's talk about literacy

The importance of reading to children – on a daily basis, from birth and beyond – has never been more imperative, writes Karen Fontaine

Since 2002, the University of Melbourne's Centre for Community Child Health has run a Let's Read program in partnership with The Smith Family. Its aim? To make reading to young children "an integral part of early childhood development," the Centre's director, Professor Frank Oberklaid, told me in an interview 11 years ago.

"In the same way that we immunise children against the possibility of getting infectious diseases, we are arguing that reading to young children in the first few years of life is the best way of immunising them against poor literacy later on," he said.

More than a decade down the track, the report card for the children the Let's Read program is trying to reach isn't exactly glowing – and that isn't my appraisal, it's that of Peter Garrett. Before he resigned as the federal Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth, Garrett penned a newspaper article headlined 'We cannot be proud of our literacy levels'.

"Australia's overall literacy results have not been improving, and we are well behind many other countries in literacy tests," Garrett wrote in *The Daily Telegraph* in April 2013. "Reading is the core skill that every student needs to succeed in school and in life. But too many Australian kids are not getting the basics they need to progress through their schooling confidently, and to get a job when they leave school."



Garrett offered as examples the fact that around 75,000 students who sat NAPLAN tests in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in 2012 didn't meet national minimum standards. In Year 4 reading, one in four students are not meeting international benchmarks. In the most recent tests conducted in 2010, Australia performed worst out of all English-speaking countries; our score was lower than that of 21 other nations. This result is made worse when you consider that literacy is defined by the United Nations as a basic human right.

In response, Garrett unveiled a series of reforms, one of which was that hundreds of thousands of children would be assessed in their first year of school to find out whether they are at risk of falling behind and require extra help. In addition there would be a three-year 'reading blitz' for 1.1 million students from kindergarten to Year 3.

But the \$64 million question is this: will these reforms actually improve Australian children's literacy levels?

One expert, Annemarie Laurence, a clinical educator in speech pathology with the Speech Pathology in Schools (SPinS) program run by the University of Newcastle, fears not.

Identifying 'at-risk' children at the age of five is "two years too late", warns Ms Laurence, who works every day with children struggling with literacy.

In *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Ms Laurence painted a wretched picture of the plight of the children with whom she works. "In the years before they started school, an outing for these children was being pushed around in a stroller at the local Westfield [shopping centre]. They have an iPad. They rarely have a book read to them. Their language is not stimulated regularly by conversation and questioning. They may have a speech delay so perhaps both familiar and unfamiliar people might have difficulties understanding what they are saying. They arrive on the mat on the first day of kindergarten with a mild receptive language delay



(comprehension) and a severe expressive language delay (expression). If you think I sound a bit doom and gloom, my own research shows that in the schools I work in, about 40 per cent of the kindergarten children will present this way.”

Although disadvantaged children are certainly at a higher risk of lower levels of literacy, even in higher socio-economic circles there exists a misapprehension that a child will succeed at school whether he is read to or not – just because both of his parents can string sentences together.

In a joint article in *Scientific American* magazine in 2002, a group of five US researchers – professors of psychology, linguistics and paediatrics – noted that “although many parents might think that innate intelligence will govern how well their kids learn to read no matter what type of instruction is given, the evidence suggests otherwise”.

Indeed, as Professor Oberklaid points out, the foundations for literacy are established long before children start school. “Young children who are exposed to words and language develop language but literacy is a learned skill ... and so by the time children get to school, when the brain is well on its way to being developed, children who are vulnerable find it very hard to catch up,” he told ABC TV’s News Breakfast program.

Professor Oberklaid went on to say that while reading books to children is important, creating a “language-rich environment” to establish strong literacy building blocks is also crucial. “The theme is ‘anytime, anywhere,’” he said. “It can be a walk in the park; it can be looking at street signs (and) introducing children to the idea that words have meaning.”

The underlying message could not be clearer: make reading to kids a habit as non-negotiable as the ritual of brushing teeth.

As Paul Jennings, author of *The Reading Bug ... and how you can help your child to catch it*, puts it: “Our happy ending is to know that no matter where they go, children lost in books will always find their way home”.

“The fire of literacy is created by the emotional sparks between a child, a book, and the person reading. It isn’t achieved by the book alone, nor by the child alone, nor by the adult who’s reading aloud – it’s the relationship winding between all three, bringing them together in easy harmony.”
Mem Fox, author of *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever*.

Fox, a literacy consultant and the bestselling author of such classic children’s books as *Possum Magic* and *Time For Bed*, has spent much of the past 20 years urging parents to read aloud to their children – particularly in their first few years of life.

Her book for adults, *Reading Magic*, espouses the many benefits of doing so – such as developing children’s ability to concentrate at length, to solve problems logically, and to express themselves more easily and clearly.

These are Mem Fox’s 10 ‘Read Aloud Commandments’ for parents and caregivers:

1. Spend at least ten wildly happy minutes *every single day* reading aloud.
2. Read at least three stories a day: it may be the same story three times. Children need to hear a thousand stories before they can begin to learn to read.
3. Read aloud with animation. Listen to your own voice and don’t be dull, or flat, or boring. Hang loose and be loud, have fun and laugh a lot.
4. Read with joy and enjoyment: real enjoyment for yourself and great joy for the listeners.
5. Read the stories that the kids love, over and over and over again, and always read in the same ‘tune’ for each book: i.e. with the same intonations on each page, each time.
6. Let children hear lots of language by talking to them constantly about the pictures, or anything else connected to the book; or sing any old song that you can remember; or say nursery rhymes in a bouncy way; or be noisy together doing clapping games.
7. Look for rhyme, rhythm or repetition in books for young children, and make sure the books are really short.
8. Play games with the things that you and the child can see on the page, such as letting kids finish rhymes, and finding the letters that start the child’s name and yours, remembering that it’s never work, it’s always a fabulous game.
9. Never ever *teach* reading, or get tense around books.
10. Please read aloud every day, mums and dads, because you just love being with your child, not because it’s the right thing to do.