

Parents: Creating Joyful Reading Routines at Home

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We sit together with a book between us carefully piecing the words together. Sometimes they come haltingly. Sometimes they flow. Learning to read is hard work, but loving to read is not, not right now, not for most of our kids. We are a household of readers, all on a separate journey. All growing, exploring and learning, some more quickly than others. I am one of several bookworms in our household with books wherever we go, with a to-be-read pile bigger than we have hours in the day. We are a household of readers, and yet, even for us, in the hustle and bustle of the holidays, we haven't done much reading lately. Not planned anyway, I know we cannot be alone.

So how do we keep reading front and center, even when life gets really busy? How do we try to create joyful reading experiences at home? It turns out, that many of the same things we do in our classrooms to create passionate readers also work at home.

Flood your home with books if possible. To be readers we need things to read. There has been a lot of research on the harmful effects of students living in [book deserts](#) and what the unintended consequences are when kids don't have access to books. This is why book ownership is so important; kids who own books are 15 times more likely to read above the level they are expected to be at according to the [National Literacy Trust](#). And more importantly, it sets the tone; reading is valued at home, reading is something we believe in by spending our money or procuring reading material somehow. However, this is also an equity issue. It is easy for someone to say "buy books for your kids," but if you don't have disposable income, then that can become a challenge. [Yet, finding books and other reading material for kids to have where they live is vital in creating readers](#). So if you have the money, buy books and other reading materials. If you do not, reach out to your child's school, visit a little free library if possible, visit a public library if possible, or get connected with a book charity. Here in Madison, we have the [Madison Reading Project](#) whose mission is to get books in the hands of kids – what do you have where you live? (A great book to read on book access and how it helps students become readers is the book [Game Changer – Book Access for All Kids by Donalyn Miller and Colby Sharp](#)).

Leave reading materials everywhere. We have books everywhere at our house, which is a privilege in itself. Books are in our kitchen, bathroom, living rooms, cars, and, of course, bedrooms. But not just books, magazines, newspapers and other fun things to read. Lately, we have been loving MAD magazine which I grew up on in Denmark. Our kids gravitate toward the books, picture books and everything else because they are visible. So if you can leave books wherever your kids are: the car, the bathroom, the living room, their rooms. If you do not have access to a lot of books ask their school for help, scour garage sales, or visit the library if possible.

Sneak in more reading. Because we remind our kids to bring books in the car, to family gatherings, to appointments, grocery shopping, and yes, even sometimes to lunch, we sneak in a lot of reading. Our kids don't sit on iPads or phones on a regular basis, they sit with books. In fact, this has been one of aha moments, every time we pull out our phone to check Reddit (#ThereWasAnAttempt) or other social media, we could be pulling out a book. I am often asked how I read so much in a year, this is one of the ways. While we love sitting down for long chunks of time to read, there is a lot of value in the minutes that can be snuck in, and those minutes add up.

Create a reading routine. One of the biggest things I discuss with those at home is to find a routine for reading and not leaving it to chance. Is it that everybody reads before getting out of bed? Is it the last thing that happens at the end of the day? Find a time, space, and then make it an expectation. We have the kids read after school with us when I get home, on the weekends we have them read before TV. This isn't because it is a punishment but because it shows importance. Create a drop-everything-and-read time and then abide by your own decisions and join in with your own books, because we know that children who see adults read, read more themselves.

Read yourself. This is an often missed step where we, adults, claim that we do not have time to read. I cannot tell you how many parents have sheepishly admitted that they do not read themselves and then wonder how they can best help their own kids become readers. My advice always; read with your kids. Go on your own quest to find incredible books. Abandon books that don't work. Set yourself up to have incredible reading experiences just like you would hope your kid(s) would. Be a reading role model because kids need to see what real adult reading looks like. Read in front of them. While Brandon, my husband, has been a slow convert to reading for pleasure, he has been very deliberate in sharing his reading journey with our kids. I think it is incredibly powerful for kids to see their parents or caregivers start to embrace reading for pleasure finally as adults.

Visit places where books are present. Build visits into the library, bookstores or even friends' houses where there are books visible into your reading lives. Seeing books within reach often entices reading and there is something about the promise of a brand-new crisp book that cannot help but be exciting. And browse online as well. What are people sharing on the #BookADay thread? Which books are being shared on Instagram under hashtags like the one I use (#pernillerecommends)?

Give books. Despite the abundance of books that our kids already have we still give books at Christmas and birthdays. We make it a big deal. Which book do you wish for? What is the one special book you would love right now? We go to the bookstore so they can browse and then we secretly buy them the book only to be wrapped and handed as a gift. We also have book giving traditions in our family, on lille juleaften (Little Christmas Eve) we host our family at our house for aebleskiver and instead of a nameplate, each guest is gifted with a brand-new book handpicked for them. And yes, even I get books. This year I was lucky enough to get [Becoming](#) and [Art Matters](#) (Signed by Neil Gaiman – argh!) as well as a few others.

Build excitement through book shopping. Go book shopping with your kids at your local bookstore, browse the displays at the library, look up the bestseller lists to see what is hot in literature right now, order from the book catalog that comes home (I get as excited as the kids). Countdown the days together for that sequel or an amazing new book to be released, order it if you can or go to the bookstore on its release date. Build excitement for the act of reading together much like you would the release of a movie. If you need ideas for release dates, see [Mr. Schu's calendar of book releases](#).

Have your own to-be-read list. I get super excited when new books show up or when we go to a bookstore together and my kids know that my to-be-read pile (or bookshelf because let's be honest here...) is a neverending quest of great reading experiences waiting to happen. They see how big it gets, they see how I have piles in different places, I discuss how I pick a book at times if it comes up and I encourage them to have their own. What will they be reading next?

Embrace audiobooks. We do a lot of driving as I travel to speak and as we visit others, so audiobooks from the local library are a constant companion. The kids select the text or we do when we know a book may be a great discussion for our family. This is also a great way to start conversations about social justice topics, such as when we listened to [George by Alex Gino](#) and we discussed gender identity, yes, even with our youngest. Overall, audiobooks cut down on our kids arguing, creates conversation, and become a part of our reading memories.

Embrace real choice. So your child wants to read the same book all the time? Ok. So your child wants to read super "easy" books all the time? Ok. So your child wants to read only one type of book all the time? Ok. Reading at home is for great reading experiences, for having fun with your reading, for keeping the joy of reading alive. We can recommend, we can purchase, we can entice, but I would never force certain texts on kids. I have seen too many kids stop their reading or fake it because of forced choice, usually through the eagerness of parents to share their favorite classic texts with their kids. While I love the sentiment of that, I am not always sure it is done well and can end up doing more harm than good. Perhaps, our focus instead should be to discover new classics instead such as [The Poet X by Elizabeth Acevedo](#) or [The One and Only Ivan by Katherine Applegate](#).

Be invested and interested. Ask genuine questions about their reading experiences. Share your own. Embrace your reading slumps together and do something about them together. Ask questions about what they plan on reading, whether they like the book or not, or what made them pick that book. Keep it light but keep it constant.

Keep it joyful. When kids come home from school, they are often tired and ready to do everything but read. I get it, after being at a conference all day or even teaching, reading is pretty far from my mind as well. We often lose readers at home because we see it as one more thing to do, rather than an experience waiting to happen. So keep it light, keep it fun. Don't assign journal prompts or summaries to go with it. Don't make it homework, but instead revel in the joyful experience that reading a great book can be. Read aloud to your kids. Even if they are

older, this is one of the things many students report they miss the most with their parents. Celebrate new books, celebrate finishing books, celebrate abandoning books.

There is so much we can do to support our children as readers, and while it may seem like a lot of work, it isn't. It is a chance for us to sit down with our kids, with something to read, and to create memories. But it starts with routines. With decisions that will support and not hinder. And with being readers ourselves.