

Reading

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What would your life be like if you had never learned to read? Can you imagine how difficult life would be if you could not read road signs, restaurant menus, or a note from your child’s teacher? Most of us cannot imagine the handicap of being a non-reader. A study conducted in late April by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy reports that 32 million adults can’t read. That’s 14 percent of the nation’s population! Approximately 21 percent of adults in the U.S. read below fifth-grade level, and 19 percent of high school graduates nationwide can’t read independently with understanding. This data draws more concern when we connect the inability to read with crime.

According to the Department of Justice, “The link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is welded to reading failure.” Statistics from BeginToRead.com support the claim: 85 percent of all juveniles who enter the court system are functionally illiterate, and more than 70 percent of America’s prison inmates cannot read above a fourth-grade level.

A child’s ability to read, more than any other school subject or learned skill, contributes to a child’s future. Literacy touches many parts of life from finding financial security to actively participating in society as a contributing citizen. All of this depends on an individual’s ability to read.

For children to be successful, their journey toward becoming good readers must begin very early in life, even before they enroll in school. Some reading experts maintain that birth to age five is the most important learning time for all children, the time a child needs to develop a love for the printed page. Parent involvement in early literacy is directly connected to future academic achievement. Young children are eager to learn and will thrive in a home filled with books. Parents who read to their child for just 20 minutes three or four times a week can instill a love for reading and build the literacy skills needed to successfully begin a formal education. Reading to children at an early age also stimulates their imaginations to help develop critical thinking skills. The more stories and books children consume before entering school, the more their vocabulary and comprehension will grow. Select books that interest your child or read stories you enjoyed as a child and provide opportunities for your child to read aloud to you. It also helps to stress reading with emphasis, because young children often like to act out stories using different voices.

Look for teachable moments to share the joy of reading. Children need to understand that reading is a part of our day-to-day lives. Let your child read the recipe to you as you mix a cake. Older children can read the instructions aloud as you assemble a toy or tool. Your child will gain a significant advantage when you help them connect reading to their daily lives.

As children grow, they need to have access to a wide variety of reading materials and the public library is an excellent free resource. The Internet is filled with reading websites for children to enjoy. Furthermore, it is important for the child to see parents read for pleasure. Many children and adults today lack the motivation to read and children will naturally follow a parent’s example. Having a child enter school ready to learn will do more than anything as we strive for every child to read on grade-level by third grade. Ask your older student what they are reading and have them summarize those stories. Raise questions about the characters and their conflict in the story. Invite them to tell you why they do (or don’t) like the story. How would they change the ending of the story to make it more exciting or interesting? Maybe let them illustrate the story. Natural, spontaneous conversations with your children about what they are reading will encourage them to learn more.

Writing is the other half of reading, which helps children see how letters and sounds combine to make words and how words connect to make sentences. Encourage your child to write notes to you and write notes to your child. Reading and writing cannot be separated and a note in their lunchbox or message on the refrigerator can always make them smile. Seek meaningful opportunities for your children to write letters to help them see the value of their effort and work. Perhaps they could write me a letter explaining their position on when the school superintendent should cancel school because of bad weather. My address is Dr. Judy Gilreath, 1306 South Thornton Avenue, Dalton, GA 30720.

We live in a blessed nation, yet many of our children struggle through life as non-readers. The knowledgeable, caring professionals teaching in our system do not want this to continue in Whitfield County. They work to make the best use of limited time at school, but they cannot carry the weight alone. This nationwide problem can only be solved when educators, community, and industry together understand the urgent need to support our children. We are fortunate to have community leaders with foresight who see the need for early childhood education, especially the importance of helping every child read on grade level to support literacy in Whitfield County.