

THE PARENT HOOD: INSTILLING GREAT READING HABITS IN CHILDREN

BY WENDY DONAHUE - CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Q: Should children be encouraged to read above their grade level?

Parent advice:

The building of vocabulary and language skills is directly linked to exposure to any and all resources or experiences, provided of course that the storyline is appropriate. My parents fed my desire to learn at a very young age and, therefore, I always read about two to three grade levels ahead, which paid off in all of my classes throughout my school years.

-Diane Beaulieu

Respect your child's individuality. Know what will spark his/her curiosity. Be careful, many "chapter books" may be boring when read aloud. Be satisfied with their reading comfort zone. So what if the family down the street is reading the adventures of Percy Jackson! Frog and Toad have some pretty excellent adventures too! It's important for reading to be a joy, not a chore.

-JoAnne Loper

Reading "above" gives you a chance to introduce them to good literature early. My husband and I read to our boys from a series of beautifully illustrated books about the Greek gods - and what a violent bunch they were. As a result, they knew about Pan and Apollo and Hercules, and were ahead of their peers in many ways because of those stories. The Brothers Grimm fairy tales are especially grim, but our kids loved them as well. This is a perfect opportunity for life lessons. Questions will be asked and you are in a position of controlling what you want them to know and when.

-Marie Grass Amenta

I wouldn't be as concerned with the recommended age as with the content. Before reading any book to a child I would read it myself and determine if it seemed appropriate. As with most things, a little common sense goes a long way!

-Joanne Perpoli

Expert advice:

Out of their own boredom, parents often seek out advanced reading material for a child. But repetition of a favorite book will not, in itself, dull a preschooler's faculties, said Sue Adair, director of education at The Goddard School, a preschool franchise with locations throughout the United States. Repetition is one building block toward independent reading.

Adair suggests reading a young child books with predictable texts, but also those with a richer vocabulary and more complicated plots. Younger children like to turn pages, so consider longer picture books, or "chapter books," can be read over several sessions.

"Reading above grade level is perfectly fine if your child shows an interest in the content," Adair said. "Remember that attention spans vary, so if your child becomes restless, it may be time to move on to another activity - one that is active, to shake those sillies out - and then come back to the book."

Or change to a book that engages him, which may be a familiar one. To enliven it, discuss it: "What did you think of the ending?" When introducing a book, ask your child what he thinks it may be about, based on the cover illustrations. "It's important to make reading fun, so even if you're asking questions, don't make it feel like a test," she said.

As children get older, if you are uncomfortable with a book that they want to read, avoid forbidding it outright, suggested Dawn Lantero, author of "S.P.L.A.S.H. Parenting Principles" (Growth Spurt, \$14.99).

"Just explain that they can read it but not yet, because there are things in the book aimed at older readers," Lantero said. "Then help them get excited about reading something else."

At any age, encourage children to read independently by placing a lamp next to their bed and keeping a variety of books within reach. Let them see you reading for enjoyment too.