

Reading Magic



*This article was published under the title '*More books - the secret to smarter children*' by the *Herald Sun* February 2016. You can find the original article [here](#)*

HAVE you ever wanted a potion that will make your kids more intelligent?

It's called "a book."

Books create new neurons in a young person's brain. Reading is muscle-building for the mind.

Ever wanted to give your kids the confidence to tackle life's hard bits? Give them books on history, to show them humanity has faced challenges and survived.

Want your kids to have the imagination to mine the asteroids? Give them books to build their minds.

Want kids with empathy and compassion? Every book teaches kids to understand other people (and themselves) as they will be every character in that book.

So how do you get kids reading?

In the past two years I've asked about 120,000 young people, in person or via video link: "Who thinks books are boring?"

About 80 per cent put up their hands — as long as the grown-ups' eyes are shut. Those adults are the dedicated teachers who've brought them to the literary festival or to meet the Children's Laureate.

I made a bet with every one of those kids. If their teacher, librarian or I can't find them a book they love so much they can't stop reading it, I'll send them \$5.

Mobs of giggling boys plan to pretend to be 10 kids as they copy down my address. But in two years, not one single kid has asked for money. Because books are fascinating — as long as you find the right ones.

We are losing kids as readers when they are between six and eight years old. That's when we stop reading them bedtime stories and say: "You're a big boy/girl now. You can read your own books."

But these are kids who are watching complex movies on TV. They're not going to be satisfied with *Spot's Big Adventure*.

There are some gloriously simple books for kids, like those by Dr Seuss, but even these won't satisfy kids who want a complex story.

The solution? Keep reading to your kids. Because when I ask those kids: "Who'd love to clean their room if someone read your choice of book while you were doing it?" and every hand waves in the air.

Parents are their kids' enablers. Who buys the TV and computer games you worry about your kids watching? Kids can't find books they love by themselves — they need adults to help them.

Let your kids become feral book hunters. Find a library or book shop with a good coffee shop. Bookshop + time + coffee + muffin + a quiet sit-down for the adult = the right book for your child.

Show your kids where the books are — including the non-fiction section because about one in four kids (and adults) prefers reading non-fiction or biographies to fiction. And if they come back with a book on bees, don't say, "That looks a bit boring".

No, they probably won't be interested in bees in a fortnight, but that's what they want to read now.

Like adults, kids' reading tastes vary enormously. But, while adults' reading tastes stay pretty much the same, kids' appetites for books change as they grow. They may go through a two-year dinosaur phase, a year of fairies, a year when they'll read only John Marsden. Then they'll leave those behind.

And read to your kids. Read them the complex books they don't feel they can tackle on their own. You don't need to read all of it.

Read them a chapter and a half, stop at the most exciting part, then say: "We'll read some more tomorrow." And do — but I bet they've read at least a chapter on their own in the meantime. And after six or seven "helped" books they'll tackle books of any size.

Read to your kids every day at least till they tell you it's embarrassing. But be prepared for them never to say the words.

Dad was still ringing me up when he was 82. "Hey, Jack, have you read Keneally's latest? Listen to this." And he'd read a page or a chapter over the phone.

Most importantly: if a book is boring, put it down and get another one. Books aren't like broccoli. You don't have to eat everything on your plate.

The best way to turn kids off reading is to make them finish every book they begin. They won't.

Let kids browse the good stuff. If your kid is bored with books, they just haven't met the right one.

Or, possibly, they may not be a fluent reader. About 40 per cent of Australian kids don't meet international literacy benchmarks. Too few have access to effective reading programs.

In any case, keep reading to your kids. Keep helping them find lots of books. Let them read as much or as little of each one as they like.

By the way, about 80 per cent of kids thought last night's TV was boring too. Try it: offer to read your child's choice of book, a big fascinating book, when they're watching TV. Not their favourite show, but just ordinary TV.

I bet you \$5 they're going to choose the book. And that both of you will find the next hour wonderful, and part of your memories forever.