

Read to babies and we'll all be better off



Mem Fox is a literacy consultant who also writes picture books. She is also the author of Reading Magic: how your child can learn to read before school and other read aloud miracles. <http://www.memfox.net>

This week at the supermarket I parked next to a man who was getting out of his car carrying a toddler. He was covered in tats, with several earrings in each ear. He looked like a candidate for my broken-record “read to your children” message so I gave him a copy of Time for Bed.

I said I'd written it and really hoped they'd enjoy it. He glanced at the book, then at me, and said to his daughter: “Hey, Milly! Look what we've got! And we were only reading Where Is the Green Sheep? this morning and this lady wrote that, too!” He may have been covered in tats but I was covered in shame.

The read-aloud mantra is passing rapidly from parent to parent across Australia. Parents understand increasingly that reading to children

from birth to five years is vitally important. (Sadly, that doesn't mean they're all doing it.)

Many parents now know of the particular importance of reading aloud in the first 12 months of life; and also how crucial it is in the first four months when the learning pathways are laid down in the brain. They are aware that during a read-aloud session children's brains develop at a great rate, thanks to the thrilling combined stimulation of words and pictures, touch and smell.

Of equal weight to brain development is another highly positive fact: reading to our offspring creates unique opportunities for a child and an adult to find out who the other person is. Sharing a book with a child is an enchanted time, a time away from the workaday world, a time when parents and children fall in love with each other. The brain and the attachment develop simultaneously: it's the solid beginning of psychological health and educational success. But who cares about all that stuff?

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From
the
Field



Both mum and dad enjoy spending reading time with Haylee and Melanie

A big hit with young mums in Oranga

Books for Babes came to the Auckland community of Oranga about 2 years ago. Its introduction coincided with the launch of Oranga Plunket's Young Mums Group. The group aimed to provide social networks and parenting support for mothers under the age of 25 years.

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The devastating effects of poor literacy include poor health, which strains the health budget; serial generations of single-parent families (not divorced families) who cause a straining of the social services budget and a weakening of social cohesion; crime and un-employment which cost the community dearly; and a lack of self-esteem among the illiterate and semi-literate. This lack of esteem often causes depression, which causes grief for individuals and families, and drains the national purse because the depressed are often unable to work.

All these woes take root in the first five years of children's lives. In a long-term experiment in England children were ranked on their first day of school from best to worst on the basis of their awareness of books and stories, and their skills as readers and writers. They were then monitored regularly until they finished school. The result was as depressing for teachers as it was alarming for parents. Throughout their schooling, most of the children remained in whatever "literacy position" they'd been placed in on their first day. What happens before school is therefore crucial, since it sets the stage for the rest of a child's life.

The literacy ranking was able to be changed only for those children fortunate enough to have had a truly outstanding teacher in their first year at school.

As an academic and consultant in literacy for more than 30 years I know from worldwide research and experience that the children who learn to read most quickly, easily and happily are those who have had joyful, regular exposure to much-loved books read to them by much-loved adults. Nothing that happens at school after the age of five - not even the method of literacy teaching - has a greater effect on children's literacy than their being read to. So here's a simple solution: mount a nationwide read-aloud campaign with continuing support and advice to new parents.

MEM FOX BIO

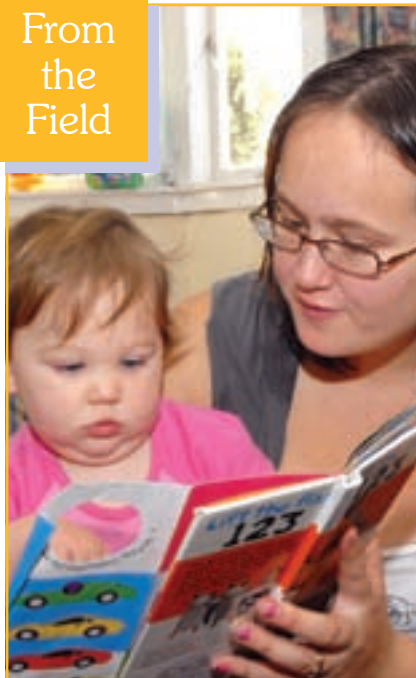


Mem is Australia's most highly regarded picture-book author. Her first book, *Possum Magic*, is the bestselling children's book ever in Australia, with sales of over two million.

Mem has written 29 picture books for children and five non-fiction books for adults, including the bestselling *Reading Magic*, aimed at parents of very young children.

She is now an influential, hectic, grey-haired international consultant in literacy, who has visited the States over eighty times, although she pretends to be a redhead who sits around writing full time.

From the Field



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As many of these young mums reign from an era of PC games, play stations and X-Boxes the opportunity to offer them Books for Babes to assist them to rediscover the magical wonderment of reading and spending quality time with their children is truly amazing.

What's more Books for Babes has helped to rekindle the enjoyment of reading for these young mums, once again unleashing the book worm within.

'A Big Thumbs Up' to Books for Babes from the Plunket Team in Oranga.


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Comments

One Chinese mum says "B4B has a lot of attractions for D. Among her toys she always picks

up her book and she knows how to turn the pages. I am so pleased with her attachment towards the book".

Yes! I would like to support Books for Babes Trust 

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