6 Ways Parents Stunt Child Literacy Growth

By Jennifer Davis Bowman

There's an Autism PSA that is currently running on the radio. It features a conversation between parents about their child's unusual behavior (child does not smile). The parents offer a host of reasons why. They speculate that "maybe he's not ticklish", "maybe he's teething", "maybe he's tired"...

The ad makes me think of other parent concerns—such as literacy development. Specifically, why parent-child reading occurs too infrequently in the home. Some may speculate that maybe kids just aren’t motivated to read outside the classroom. Or, maybe parents don’t have the time...

Just as in the Autism ad, the answer lies within the inquiry process. So, I believed that by talking to parents, I could uncover the answer. As part of my dissertation, I interviewed a small group of parents. They shared the good, the bad, and the ugly features of their reading experiences with their children.

Inspired by the literacy challenges reported in the interviews, I developed a list of 6 issues that sabotage parent-child reading and thus stifle literacy development.

1. The Parent Interprets the Text for their Child

Parents reported frustration with their child not getting the message that they wanted their child to get from the text. Remember that a message is most powerful when the reader is able to find personal meaning in the message. It’s ok if your child doesn’t get your message. Let them create their own meaning and this will help with both comprehension and retention.

2. The Parent Treats Reading as an Isolated Activity

Parents reported concern with reading check assignments that did not allow for discussion of the text. For struggling readers, talking about areas of confusion (while reading) is critical in understanding the text. Helping children make reading an interdependent activity instead of independent task is an important step in supporting reading development.

3. The Parent Overlooks the Potential and Range of Text Application

Parents reported anxiety with how the text influenced child behavior. Because children are natural “copy cats”, they may require help in proper application of the text. Parents should discuss with children if character behaviors in the text are:

a) Realistic
b) Age Appropriate
c) Changeable or Permanent
d) Safe

4. The Parent Wants Text Characters to Reflect Their Child

Parents reported a need for more diverse characters in text. Although it is affirming to read text with characters that resemble the child, realistically this is not always possible (to explore why
writers don't include more diverse characters [click here](#). Parents should encourage children to find similarities with text characters beyond physical attributes (ability, beliefs, emotions, etc.) in order to help build a connection with the text.

5. **The Parent Believes Real Life Trumps ‘Happily Ever After’**

Parents had reservations with text that did not portray realistic story lines or oversimplified conflict. For more on this argument please [click here](#). Exposing children to practical matters and problem solving is useful, but let’s not forget that fiction and fantasy build creativity- [an under-nurtured skill](#).

6. **The Parent Engages in Power Struggles with the Child**

Parents reported stress associated with coming to an agreement in reading with their child regarding:

a) Reading content
b) Reading opportunities
c) Reading application (see number 3 in the list)

Disagreements are natural, but become problematic if they interfere with the reading process. To avoid such conflicts, parents and children should discuss specific reading expectations.