

Parents can give their children a life-long love affair with books.

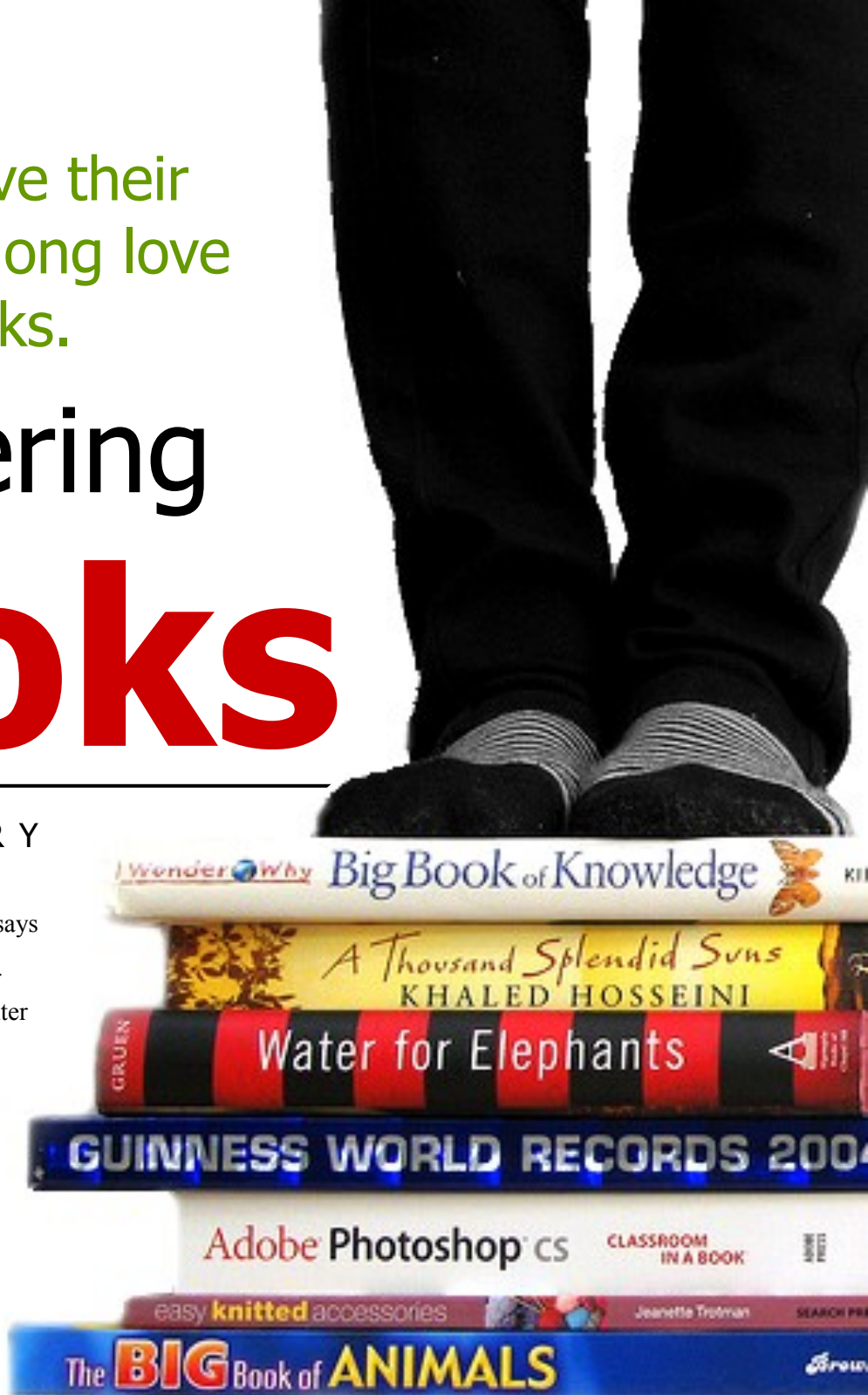
Badgering for Books

BY KARA HENRY

“Just one more, please, Mommy?” says Maddy Blair, age four, to her mother. Melissa Blair is delighted. Her daughter isn’t begging for more TV or another piece of brownie. She wants her mother to read her another book. The “already read” pile is next to her bed, six or seven high, and Maddy is not done yet.

That is a feeling I can relate to. When I was a preschooler, we didn’t have a TV. Instead, from an early age, my mom would read to me. She couldn’t get anything done, because I was a persistent toddler, and reading was my favorite activity. I begged her to read to me, and protested

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when she wanted to stop. Once, she tired of this badgering for books and so she decided to read to me until I was sick of it. Then, she reasoned, she would be free to go about her day without the insistent hounding. I would finally be sick of

reading. It didn't happen that way. She sat down on the couch, snuggled me in her lap and read. Then she read some more. Two hours later, she gave up. I was never going to be satisfied.

By reading aloud to me every day and making it a time filled with fun, joy and love, my mom had ignited in me a love of literature and had set the groundwork for a life-long love of reading. I still have trouble stopping at two hours. This approach worked with each of her four children. Even with vastly different personalities and inclinations, we each gained a love of reading that has stayed with us into adulthood.

A loving parent who reads supports his or her child in every area of life and education by reading aloud is something I wish every child could have. I'm not alone in my thinking; the research backs this up and tells us that the most important activity for parents to do to help build a foundation for literacy is reading aloud together (National Institute for Literacy).

In the US, illiteracy is still a big problem. In 2004, approximately 90 million Americans lacked the ability to read adequately, and two-

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thirds of children in the United States had below grade level reading skills (Weitzman, et al.1248). This disproportionately affects children from socially and economically disadvantaged fami-

lies—children who already have so many things to overcome. It doesn't have to be that way. In a study in the year 2000, the National Research Council found that most of the reading problems faced by today's adolescents and adults might have been completely avoided or resolved in their early childhood years. They concluded that "reading is typically acquired relatively predictably by children who... have had experiences in early childhood that fostered motivation and provided exposure to literacy in use." Parents must take seriously the responsibility of making sure children have these early literary experiences.

A home isn't whole without books. The importance of owning books cannot be overstated and the research bears this out. Jeff McQuillan wrote a book called *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions*. In his book, he examines 275 literary studies, each aimed at finding what activities or conditions correlate with reading achievement. He concludes that "the only behavior measure that correlates significantly with reading scores is the number of books in the home" (McQuillan). When families have more books, they do more reading. More reading

equals more achievement. It's as simple (and sometimes as hard) as that.

Children also benefit from the pride of book ownership. When a

child picks up a book and understands it is his or hers forever, they start to love books. Mem Fox, an author of over 30 children's books and an advocate for reading, describes the importance of



The Blair family says that reading aloud together has given their children a jump start on their literacy skills.

IMAGE BY FOTO S.A.

book ownership:

[An] essential factor in the making of eager, competent readers is that the children have books, and *bookshelves* of their own so that favourite books can be owned and read over and over again. Ownership is important. I know of a child who read a particular favourite book until it was in tatters. His parents replaced it not once, but three times. Being able to own, and therefore able to re-read the book for years made that child into a reader.

There are initiatives happening all over the country to make sure every child experiences that pride of ownership and affection for their own books. The Ferst Foundation for Childhood Literacy in Georgia is one of those programs. The program is available to anyone living in the prescribed areas who wants to sign up their children, ages birth until five years. Every month, a book is delivered to their home, along with a guide for parents and a coloring page that goes along with the theme of the book. As of 2008, they are send-

ing out 41,906 books per month. Each of those books represents a reading experience that will stay with the child long after they age out of the

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program. Programs like these are popping up all over the country.

Reading gives children a whole host of skills. They learn new words. They learn how the world works and how to relate to people. They learn about written language. They learn that there is a connection between what is written on the page and what they hear spoken (National Institute for Literacy). These are all skills that are vital for literacy and for overall success in school.

When babies are born, they are already attuned to the sound of their parents' voices. As they grow, they start building vocabulary and grammatical structure by hearing speech. Pretty soon they are putting words together on their own. This learning needs to happen, but conversational speaking can only take children so far. The next step is hearing books read aloud because it "exposes children to grammatical forms of written language and displays literate discourse rules for them in ways that conversation typically does not" (Bus, van Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini 2). Without frequent and quality exposure to books, children don't learn any of the language that goes beyond conversational speech. If

they only get this exposure to "book" language after they are in school, they are already behind many of their peers.

Parents should start reading aloud when their children are infants. Babies love the rhythms, repetitions and cadences of language. Of course, they don't understand the words, but do they really need to understand? Many nursery rhymes and lullabies are nonsensical. For instance, I didn't really understand the story behind the "Eensy-Weensy Spider" until I was an adult and started singing it to my own kids. Babies don't respond to the meaning, they respond to the sounds, building a foundation for later growth. Reading to infants does not always feel rewarding for parents and too few start early (de Groot

Reader Resources

◆ **Public Libraries**

<http://www.publiclibraries.com>

◆ **Reach Out and Read**

<http://www.reachoutandread.org>

◆ **Raising a Reader**

<http://www.theunitedway.com/matters/rar/index.php>

◆ **Children's Book List**

<http://librarybooklists.org/fiction/children/jindex.htm>

◆ **Mem Fox's Website**

<http://www.memfox.com/welcome.html>

and Bus). There's no such thing as too early.

When you read aloud, get excited! Parents should *not* read things they don't find interesting. That can be difficult when a child wants you to read a book for the hundredth time, but it can be done. My solution? I don't buy books I don't love to read. Read with passion, enthusiasm and drama (Fox, "Ten Read Aloud Commandments"). Jim Trelease, in a pamphlet on reading aloud, points out that reading too quickly is the most common mistake made by parents, and he advises to "read slowly enough for the child to build mental pictures of what he just heard you read. Slow down enough for the children to see the pictures in the book without feeling hurried." It doesn't matter how many different books children read, although varied exposure is helpful, nor does it matter how many pages you get through. Parents should try to create an atmosphere where children can bask in learning, shar-



ing and growing together. That atmosphere, that love, transforms children into children who beg for just one more, like Maddy Blair, and can't get enough of books. They are readers.

Notes

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