

OUR 8 YEAR OLD SON STILL DOESN'T READ

By John O. Andersen

Our son recently turned 8. He recognizes letters and can write words, but still doesn't read.

By all accounts, we should be panic-stricken. Given our competitive society, many would no doubt feel we are highly irresponsible to let our son fall "so far behind."

Surely, we must be desperately looking for advice on dealing with late readers. Or we must be on the hunt for that breakthrough curriculum which will quickly turn him into a reader.

Nope, neither.

We feel confident when he is ready to read, he will read. And perhaps when that day comes, he will read with passion and purpose. We believe this because we've noticed a lot of interesting things about him.

For instance, when I play him in chess, he usually beats me. I'm no chess pro, but good grief, I can usually make a respectable showing. Honestly, I try to beat him. I give it all I've got. But he usually wins. So I'm left to conclude he has a pretty good noggin.

Our son entertains us regularly with some very imaginative stories. The other night he invented an army tank (on paper) which has all sorts of ways of defending itself against enemy attacks. One of those is a force field which turns incoming missiles into liquid just before impact. Another is a net which catches bombs and tosses them back at the enemy.

This is just the tip of the iceberg of his fascinating mind. He is always asking questions. He is endlessly curious. We suspect before long, his desire to learn more about a given subject will be his motivation to become a reader.

Our approach to educating both him and his older sister, is that of unschooling. In other words, we serve them up regular platters of learning opportunities and then leave them free to sample and dabble.

Of course, we ensure they do some of the 3 Rs each day. For instance, we require our daughter to write in her journal daily. And math is a daily kitchen table event.

But beyond those and a few other basics, the children independently follow their interests.

I didn't enjoy such learning independence until just a few years ago when I finally freed my mind of the notion that self-learning was inferior; that I couldn't truly learn something unless I attended an institution and paid tuition.

That discovery opened a whole new world. My wife had long been a self-learner. She was just waiting for me to catch on. Together, we decided it would be great to "teach" our children self-learning from their early years.

Hence, we unschool. And we don't get too uptight when our children fail to meet society's standards of mastery.

We think passion and curiosity are much more important, anyhow. And we like to believe passion and curiosity have a greater chance of becoming lifelong companions when given enough time and space for development during childhood.

So, we allow our son to spend lots of time in his imaginary world. Who knows, down the road when he finally masters reading and writing, he may have something profound to share with us. Or perhaps, he may not choose to do that, but simply use his reading and writing skills to pursue his passion and curiosity on another level.

Whichever he chooses is up to him. Our only hope is he will forever feel free to learn at his pace and according to his interests.

In terms of learning, it doesn't get much better than that.

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About the Author: John O. Andersen is the spouse of Mandy. They have a 12 year old daughter and a 9 year old son. They do lots of fun things together like travel, tickle fights, and gardening.

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