

Hangin' on Every Word

The digital world has our kids reading like crazy . . . on screens. Where do books fit in?

By [Sylvia Barsotti](#) | May , 2010

Back in the day (before Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube), I actually had to needle my oldest son to “go play” on the computer. I thought the latest educational games might give him a learning boost. Flash forward ten years and I can’t peel my youngest son away from the screen. But instead of playing skill-building games, he’s checking out e-mails, status updates, video clips, blog posts, and tweets — often all at the same time. True, his social circle multiplies at lightning speed, and you could say he’s mastering technology. But I’m left wondering if his time online is doing anything positive for him as a student. I know he has to read to process all that info, but is it helping his overall academic skills?

Only to a certain extent, says Maryanne Wolf, author of *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* and a professor of developmental psychology at Tufts University.

Quality Counts

“All reading is good,” Wolf explains, “but not equal.” While online reading helps kids become excellent at decoding small bits of information like chat messages and fast facts, it doesn’t help them develop critical analysis skills — the basis of all those essays we write growing up and the stuff employers love.

Kids get easily distracted on the computer, jumping from a Web site to an IM to an e-mail and back in minutes. The kind of reading in which a child must imagine, analyze, and make inferences happens when he sits down with a book — which develops what experts call “deep” reading skills. In a head-to-head match-up, deep reading wins over superficial reading. Why? Take a look at a few of the skills reading a book can build.

Concentration “Often, we don’t read a book all in one sitting,” says Francie Alexander, Scholastic’s chief academic officer and a former teacher. “You have to concentrate, so that you remember the characters and story over time.”

Comprehension Every time your child reads a book, he is building his knowledge base, says Alexander. That knowledge base is what allows him to make comparisons and generalizations and to keep learning more and more.

Critical Thinking Your child may not even realize it, but when he reads a book, he asks himself questions about what the author is trying to say, checks to see whether he’s understood what he’s read, and may look for information elsewhere — like in an atlas or an encyclopedia — to help him understand.

Perseverance Books are not about instant gratification; your child has to return to it over and over, picking up where he left off. He has to keep going (even if he doesn’t always want to) in order to get the satisfaction of reaching the end.

Executive Function Your child has to focus so he can understand, remember, organize his thoughts, and plan to finish the book.

I could go on: Reading books develops a larger vocabulary. “Kids need to know hundreds of thousands of words to succeed in college and in a career,” says Alexander. “They’re only going to get that by deep reading.”

Books are a blast — there’s nothing as enjoyable, insightful, and absorbing as a good book. One of the coolest feelings in the world is getting completely lost in a story. A book can transport you to another place, and every kid should have the opportunity to have that life-changing experience.

Hot Time for Books

Most of us grew up reading books and have tried to hand that joy down to our kids. That's great. But if you're looking to pump up the excitement, summer may be the best — and most important — time for books. Why? Research shows that children who read four or more “skill-appropriate” books (the reading level is not too easy or too hard) over the summer maintain or even improve their reading skills come fall. Kids who read fewer than four tend to lose ground.

The good news is that the Scholastic Summer Challenge can help inspire your child to “read four or more” books during his summer vacation. Plus, there are other ways to make reading exciting for your children. Try these suggestions from developmental psychologist and mom Michelle Anthony, M.A., Ph.D.:

Make a movie date. Choose a book together that has been made into a movie. It might be a classic, like *Winnie the Pooh*, or something more recent, like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. As soon as your child finishes her book, take her to the theater or enjoy a night in with the DVD.

Bring the story to life. If your child is reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, set aside an afternoon to make (and eat!) chocolate creations. Find a way to make the story jump off the page.

Turn the lights out. At bedtime, tell your child she can read or write for 20 minutes or go straight to sleep. What do you think she'd rather do? Give her a flashlight to make it fun.

Make him an expert. During dinner, ask him about what he's read — the characters, the plot, the setting — and encourage his siblings to do the same. Kids love to feel in the know.

About the Author

Sylvia Barsotti is a freelance writer who lives in Hasbrouck Heights, NJ, with her husband and three children.