

The Washington Post

Kacie Reads To Her Aunt Giving Children A Love of Words

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Special to The Washington Post
Monday, February 28, 2000; Page C04

Many of us can recall discovering the topsy-turvy world of "The Cat in the Hat" and learning to count with "One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish."

Thanks to Theodor S. Geisel--better known as Dr. Seuss--we learned that reading can be fun. Wrapping your tongue around his nonsensical verse was far from boring, which was precisely his intent.

Dr. Seuss, whose birthday is celebrated Thursday, lives on in our memories as helping us look forward to reading books.

In the days leading up to visiting my niece Kacie, who just turned 8 and whom I hadn't seen since before she could read, I looked forward to sharing storybook tales with her. I hoped it would be a way for us to bond and, it also just might be fun.

I was exhausted when I finally arrived at my sister's, and reading wasn't on my mind. But as I fluffed my pillows, little Kacie shyly walked toward me and held out a book.

"Would you like me to read to you?" she asked. Read to me? It wasn't exactly how I had planned things, I thought, but it sure did sound appealing.

"Sure, Kacie, I would love for you to read to me."

She snuggled up next to me, opened up a book of "scary" stories for children and began. I couldn't tell you what the story was. I was too entranced with the melodious sound of this little girl's voice and the delightful bit of role reversal.

She read with the enthusiasm of a child freshly enchanted with words and ideas, and only occasionally asked me about the "big" words.

I wondered what motivational maneuvers my sister had employed to encourage Kacie's obvious love of reading.

The next day I quizzed my sister, Debra, about it and learned that Kacie was one of those children blessed with a natural love of reading. But whether encouraging Kacie or her older brother, Stephen, the technique that did the trick, according to my sister, was flexibility. Although Debra designated regular "required reading" times--a few minutes before sleep each night--she tried not to be too stringent with the children's choice of reading material. Kacie

usually chose one of her many books on any given night, but books bored Stephen most of the time.

Instead, he was drawn to magazines about computers, his growing passion. He still had to read each night, but he could read what he wanted. And most important, because he was reading what he liked, he would come to see reading as enjoyable.

I asked other parents what they did to encourage their children to read more and, hopefully, to enjoy the experience. Here are some of the inventive approaches used:

* **Back-of-the-box fun:** Whether it's mini-stories, recipes, or mazes and other games, the backs of cereal boxes are a treasure trove of reading opportunities. Leave the boxes on the table at breakfast and encourage a little reading over the Cheerios.

* **Magazine madness:** Is your child interested in sports? Pokemon? There are special-interest magazines for every conceivable hobby. Let them read what they love. Hopefully, they'll also learn to love reading.

* **The "Rewards for Reports" program:** A slight twist on the rewards-for-reading concept, this approach rewards not just the reading, but the recalling. Encourage kids to not just zip through a book (or a story or an article) but to pay attention to what they read. No written book report required here, just a verbal recounting of what they read. The reward? This can vary and should depend on the effort. A story or short article might qualify for a trip to the ice cream shop. A book a week for a month might earn a favorite CD.

* **Reading en route:** Street signs. Bus ads. Lettering on trucks. Billboards. Engage children in helping you "find your way" by reading signs. Or create games where they write down the names all the businesses they see along a new route.

* **Enunciation vacations:** When visiting historical sites, instead of parents reading the historical plaques, or everyone fending for himself in silence, let children read them aloud.

* **Share the load:** Take turns reading alternate pages or short chapters. This can work with two children reading together or parent-to-child. Either way, the children learn.

* **Reading becomes performance art:** Instead of the usual off-key singing recital at holidays, let children read to relatives. Have the children each select something--a story, a few poems--appropriate for the holiday or for themselves. Give their creativity free rein; encourage them to "perform" their piece if they like--with costumes, props and, of course, a bit of drama in their delivery.

* **The Big People set the example:** Let your children see you reading--lots of different things--and enjoying it. Daily newspapers, magazines, books and, of course, your children's school papers. Read and then talk about it. Make reading engaging.

My sister is lucky. Each one of those nights I was visiting my sister, Kacie read to me at bedtime.

The sound of a child reading can be a beautiful lullaby.

READ ACROSS AMERICA

Help celebrate the birthday of Dr. Seuss on Thursday by participating in Read Across America, a program developed by the National Education Association. Its Web site provides information on reading-related events taking place in area communities and offers a number of suggestions on how to celebrate Dr. Seuss's birthday: www.nea.org/readacross.

- * Reading is Fundamental: www.rif.org/
- * Time Warner Bookmark has reading tips, book reviews, sample chapters:
www.twbookmark.com/children/
- * Random House's Seussville: www.randomhouse.com/seussville/
- * Reading Connection, a literacy outreach program for children living in shelters, 703-528-8317; www.thereadingconnection.org.