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# Engaging readers, engaging families : how can current research and thinking about reading engagement and motivation translate to the family context?

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Engaging Readers, Engaging Families: How Can Current Research and Thinking About  
Reading Engagement and Motivation Translate to the Family Context?

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## Abstract

Engaging Readers, Engaging Families: How Can Current Research and Thinking About Reading Engagement and Motivation Translate to the Family Context?

By Erin Gordon

The notion that engagement begins and really takes root before the elementary years has led to curiosity about the huge role families play in the development of engaged readers. While there is a tremendous amount of research related to literacy engagement and motivation, very little relates to the role of the family in specifically developing and fostering this engagement. As such, this paper will provide a review of the research that pertains to reading engagement and motivation in general and offer some ways of considering the research through the lens of the family as a part of the larger educational community. In doing so, some needs for high-quality research surface, particularly a deep exploration of the relationship between family and the development of reading engagement. At the conclusion of the review, readers will be introduced to a project that grew out of it, a website for families called *engaging readers* which can be found at [www.engagingreaders.wordpress.com](http://www.engagingreaders.wordpress.com) *Engaging Readers* aims to empower families with resources, information, and opportunities for conversation and collaboration so that they can support their young readers with enthusiasm, confidence, and heart.

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## Rationale

I often wonder why some people gravitate towards reading and others do not. Yes, it sometimes has to do with how easy or difficult the act of reading is for us, but I do not think that is all of it. Why do some of us who can read with ease choose not to read?

I am sure some of it is nature, and some of it is nurture. But, can the nurturing part of the equation over-ride the nature part of it? I think that our earliest experiences as readers must play a significant role in our feelings about and relationship with reading, which makes me think that it can.

In my own life, I have many clear and bright memories of reading. One of my favorites, however, is a partial memory. I clearly recall the place, but the specifics of the story have been told to me so many times, it is more a story that I know than a memory I recall.

When I was three and four, I used to go to the library with my dad on the weekends. I loved this time with him and with the books! It was a small library in a college town with a bright and cozy children's room. Each week, we would go there. My dad would leave me to my "work" of looking at and choosing books, while he went about his work reading his own materials.

There came a day when I realized that I didn't only find the book-looking, page-turning, and shelf-gazing magical, I also was totally wowed by the borrowing system. I loved that I could borrow books every week, bring them home, enjoy them some more, and then bring them back the next week only to start all over again. I realized, however, that I was being left out of this process, and I wanted in.

The library card. I wanted one. I wanted to check out my own books.

My dad thought, sure, no problem.

The librarian... not so much. She informed us that I needed to write my name on the line on the back of the library card, implying that she didn't think that I was going to be able to do that.

Before anyone else could respond, I said, "OK."

Reluctantly, the librarian handed me the card. On the one small line I wrote my first name, E-R-I-N, in all capital letters. While the letters may have sat on the line, they stretched up nice and tall to the top of the card.

My dad reports that at this point a look of disdain crossed the librarian's face as she shrugged her shoulders and muttered, "OK."

Her disdain did not register for me at all, however, because I felt total satisfaction and pure bliss at knowing that I was no longer being left out of this important part of my week. From then on, I got to check out my own books!

My dad believed in me and in what I was doing as a reader, even if others might not have considered it to be "conventional" reading. He saw the pleasure and benefit of my experiences as a reader and supported them. He advocated for me when the librarian implied that library cards were for a different sort of reader. His advocacy sent me a message that what I was doing as a reader was valued, special, and worthwhile. That message, I believe, has stayed with me as a reader and as an educator.

Throughout my childhood, my parents enforced the notion that literacy was a tool for enjoying life and expanding knowledge. As a child, my siblings and I would pile into

one twin bed at bedtime for stories with my dad. While at least one of the stories would be read from a book, we always demanded at least one be a “story by heart”. The stories by heart were stories about all of us, stories that he remembered and told to us over and over again, stories that he knew by heart and told with heart. My dad has an incredible memory for experiences and people, and telling stories is a natural extension of that. But, for my siblings and me, it was more than that. It was the beginning of us understanding that stories were about feeling and connection, and they could be told again and again. Without knowing it, he was encouraging us as readers and writers to let stories live in our heads and hearts.

My parents played an important role in empowering me to identify as a reader from a young age. I never doubted whether reading was something I could do and enjoy. And now, as a parent of two young children, I see more clearly than ever the important role all parents play in nurturing the development of a reading identity in their children.

In an educational climate where parents and teachers are inclined to focus heavily on levels and skills, I look at my children and my childhood to remember that environment, exposure, choice, support, and advocacy matter tremendously too. I believe that families need support in knowing, understanding, and fostering this, for if all that we know as parents of young children is a reading level, the ways in which we engage with our children might be shallow and potentially lacking in joy. Children develop differently, and it needs to be our jobs as teachers and parents to nurture that development, entering where and when we can with support and nourishment. There is no one path to the development of a joyful, literate being.

I worry, however, that families do not have adequate support in knowing how to do this nurturing in a way that is supportive of their children and yet also supportive of the goals present in schools. Worse yet, I worry that parents don't know when to question or challenge the stance a school takes in talking about their young readers. As parents we become programmed, we fall into the alphabetical levelling system to which schools refer without an adequate understanding of the richness and depth that might lie within one of those letters or clusters of letters.

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As a second and third grade classroom teacher, I often asked students to consider their own reading identities. Who are you as a reader? What are your reading likes and dislikes? What are your reading challenges and successes? When and where do you read? What feels great? What feels difficult? What do you hope for as reader? Envision yourself reading, what do you see? feel?

For some children, this reflective work was natural, smooth and easy to access. For others, I knew it was a struggle. They did not really know the answer to many of the prompting or guiding questions. They just knew that if it were their choice, they probably would not read, but they were not going to admit to that in the first month of school. This was important information for me to gather at the start of the year, information that often required swift follow-up thinking and plan-making. Even though I knew that the reality was that some children's reading experience up to second or third grade had left them feeling disconnected, disengaged, and unsuccessful, I just could not fully understand why there seemed to be such a divide between those who do engage and those who do not.

I think that the reality is that for those of us who are readers, who have always been readers, it is really hard to understand why others are not readers. My eight year old son, Oliver, is a reader. We are often late getting out the door in the morning because at some point in our morning routine, he has tucked himself away reading. While I do not like or appreciate being late, I can fully relate to the desire to catch just a few more pages before moving on to the reality of the day. That, I can relate to. I asked Oliver, “Why do you think that some kids don’t choose to read?” He was stumped.

\*\*\*\*

*My child does not like to read.*

*My child only wants to read the same series of books over and over.*

*My child and I argue every night when it’s time to read.*

*My child cries if I tell him he needs to read.*

*My child can not sit still and read for more than a few minutes.*

*My child sits with a book but isn’t actually reading it.*

*My child has the hardest time finding books she wants to read.*

Over the last decade or more, in working as a classroom teacher, learning specialist, and a literacy coach in elementary schools, I have repeatedly heard the above statements and many others of similar character. But, I have worked in selective independent schools, where measures of academic achievement are used in the

admissions process. These schools should not have children who do not or can not read, right? Or should they?

Independent reading is a standard homework assignment in American elementary schools. The irony is that for children who are engaged readers, they probably do not need their reading to be assigned, and for children who are not engaged readers, they will struggle substantially with this nightly task. Their struggles cause conflict, diminished self-esteem, weakened motivation, and negative feelings about reading. I often ask parents whose children struggle with reading engagement, what happens when you read aloud to your child? Often times, the parent responds that the child loves being read to and loves story. So, where is the disconnect?

Only in having children of my own, have I come to believe that culturally we consider children to be readers much too late in their childhoods. By “reader” I am referring to engaging with text more so than decoding text. There is so much to notice, nurture, respond to, and appreciate about how young children (pre-language even) engage with books. Intuitively, we, parents, do many things to support our children in these early stages of developing a reading identity and becoming engaged readers. I see public libraries and bookstores full of children and caregivers, sharing in book reading together. I hear parents talking to their children about the books they read together. Walking on the streets of Brooklyn, I hear parents telling their kids stories, and eliciting stories from their children about their days or imaginary musings.

I have one friend whose son lives and breathes trucks. They have a full bookshelf dedicated to truck books, magazines, and photographs. He looks at these materials. He

uses them when he draws, and he pulls them out when he wants to describe or show something to a friend. This friend and, many other parents, respond to their children's interests, offering them resources and materials that deepen their engagement and send them the message that they can get meaning and pleasure from reading.

Parents need to continue to lean on their instincts, but we also need support. We need a community that talks about young people as literate beings, even when their version of literacy is different than that of an older child, and teaches parents more about how to foster literacy development and engagement from a very young age. Substantial research indicates that the elementary school years are of great importance for shaping subsequent reading motivation and achievement (Allington, 1994; Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995; Turner, 1992 as cited in Gambrell, 1996). During this time, children must be supported and nurtured in both cognitive and affective aspects of literacy development (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Lau & Cheung, 1988; Oldfather, 1993; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991 as cited in Gambrell, 1996). While this all rings true, I would argue, if we wait until the elementary years to do this shaping, we are waiting too long.

Families need to be empowered to engage their young children as readers and to take an active role in maintaining that engagement throughout the elementary years and beyond. Families need to feel like knowledge of their child's growing reading identity is clear and accessible to them before they enter elementary schools. Along side this, schools should be looking to parents, asking them to share who their children are as

readers. Schools and families need to speak the same language and support each other in sustaining and growing engaged readers.

The notion that engagement begins and really takes root before the elementary years has led me to think deeply about the huge role families play in the development of engaged readers. While there is a tremendous amount of research related to literacy engagement and motivation, very little relates to the role of the family in developing and fostering this engagement. As such, I will provide a review of the research that pertains to reading engagement and motivation in general and offer some ways of considering the research through the lens of the family as a part of the larger educational community. In doing so, I intend to highlight and describe an area in need of high-quality research. Finally, I will introduce a project that grew out of this review of research, a website for families called *engaging readers* which can be found at [www.engagingreaders.wordpress.com](http://www.engagingreaders.wordpress.com)

### **Limitations of the Study**

While much research has been done to study aspects of the family and its influence on literacy development, these studies do not specifically target engagement. While aspects of those studies surely influence engagement, this review and the subsequent recommendations will specifically address engagement and motivation. As this work grew out of my work with families in an urban independent school, it, therefore, represents a specific population of families from highly educated and economically advantaged backgrounds.

## What is Reading Engagement?

Seravallo (2014) describes engagement as a reader's motivation to learn and desire to read, coupled with her ability to read for sustained amounts of time.

Guthrie and Knowles (2001) refer to engaged readers as fusing “cognitive strategies, conceptual knowledge and motivational goals during reading” (p. 159). The combination of these three qualities is present in an “engaged reader.” The thinking behind this trio of reading qualities initially surfaced in the coining of and thinking behind the engagement perspective (Alvermann & Guthrie, 1993; Guthrie, 1996 as cited in Gambrell, 1996). This perspective builds on theories of motivation, knowledge acquisition, cognition, and social development and suggests that an engaged reader is motivated, knowledgeable, strategic, and socially interactive (see fig. 1) (Gambrell, 1996).

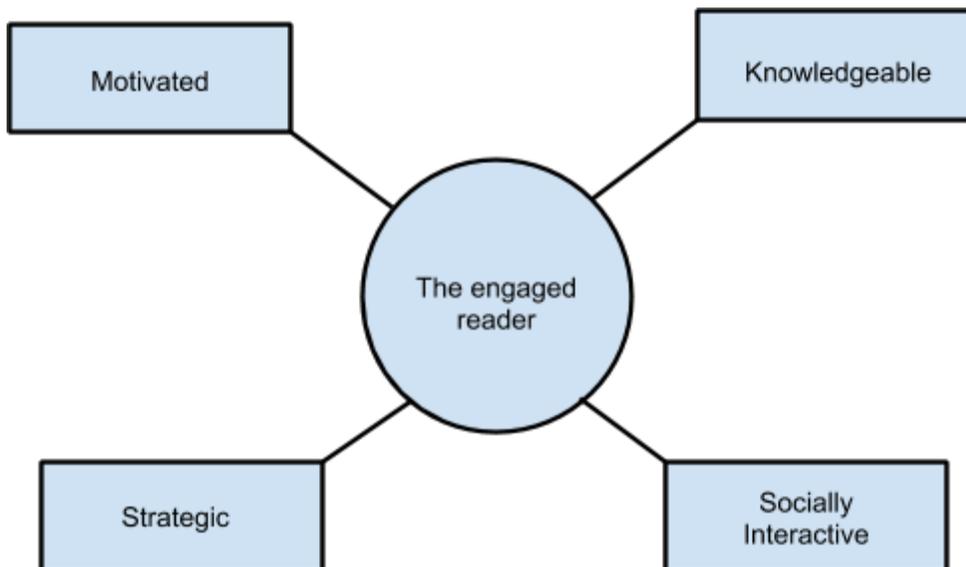


Fig. 1

- The engaged reader is motivated. She chooses to read for a variety of purposes including gaining new knowledge, learning how to do something, or for pleasure.
- The engaged reader is knowledgeable. She can use prior knowledge and construct and acquire new understandings from text and apply this knowledge in personal, intellectual, and social contexts.
- The engaged reader is strategic. She employs cognitive strategies to decode, interpret, comprehend, monitor and regulate the reading process.
- The engaged reader is socially interactive. She is able to share and communicate with others while constructing and extending meaning.

In sum, Guthrie (2001) synthesizes his understanding of engaged reading as a “a merger of motivation and thoughtfulness. Engaged readers seek to understand; they enjoy learning and they believe in their reading abilities” (p. 1).

## **Importance of Engagement**

Why is it necessary to cultivate ongoing reading engagement? Simply put, engaged readers have an investment in reading that transfers to a variety of situations and yields valuable learning. Engaged readers are devoted students who are intent on reading to understand. In focusing on meaning, they avoid distractions and they utilize self-monitoring and inferencing strategies with minimal effort. These students engage with their peers to share ideas and questions about text. These readers are intrinsically motivated to read for knowledge and enjoyment (Guthrie, 2001). Reading engagement is the most powerful instructional activity for supporting reading growth (Allington, 2000 as cited by Seravallo, 2009).

The Program for International Student Assessment (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010 as cited by Gambell, 2011) states in their findings that interest in reading predicted students' reading comprehension. Students who enjoyed reading the most performed significantly better than those who do not read for enjoyment at all. 37 percent of the students reported they do not read for enjoyment at all. Gambell (2011) concludes from these findings that strategy and skill instruction is not sufficient. Students must be motivated to read in order to reach their full literacy potential.

Engagement is strongly linked to achievement. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1996 shows that highly engaged readers demonstrated higher achievement than the less engaged readers. Thirteen year olds with higher engagement achieved at a higher level than less engaged seventeen year olds (Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 1997 as cited by Guthrie, 2001). Engagement can even compensate

for low family income and educational background. Engaged readers from low income / education families achieved at a higher level than less engaged readers from high income / education background. Engaged readers can overcome obstacles to achievement (Guthrie, Schafer, Huang, 2001 as cited by Guthrie 2001).

Engaged readers do not merely have the skills to comprehend, they comprehend in part because they are motivated to do it. Csikszentmihalyi (1991 as cited by Guthrie 2001) describes engaged reading as a state of total absorption. Cambourne (1995 as cited by Guthrie 2001) characterizes engagement as a blending of qualities that involve holding a purpose, seeking to understand, believing in one's own capability, and taking responsibility for learning.

## **Motivation and its Links to Engagement**

Motivation and engagement are inextricably linked, and it is thought that promoting intrinsic motivation to read should be given high-priority in the reading curriculum (Gambrell, 2011). Researchers have found motivation to be multi-faceted. There are many types of motivation. Researchers have primarily focused on two forms of motivation: task-mastery orientation and performance orientation. Those with mastery orientation strive to improve skills and accept new challenges (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck & Legget, 1988; Nichols, Cheung, Lauer, & Patashnick, 1989 as cited by Guthrie, 2001). They want to understand content, and this orientation is seen as intrinsic motivation. Those with a performance orientation are motivated by the positive response they get for their performance (Thorkildsen & Nicholls, 1998 as cited by Guthrie, 2001). Performance orientation is seen as extrinsic motivation and is associated with a desire to complete a task rather than understand or enjoy a text (Meece & Miller, 1999 as cited by Guthrie, 2001). Most motivation researchers believe that the task-mastery orientation is more likely to foster long-term engagement and learning (Ames, 1992; Maehr & Midgley, 1996 as cited by Guthrie, 2001).

Self-efficacy and social motivation are also thought to contribute to reading motivation. Schunk and Zimmerman (1997 as cited by Guthrie, 2001) reviewed research showing that students with high self-efficacy, a belief in one's own capacity for success, view difficult tasks as challenging and use their cognitive strategies productively to work through the task. In addition to self-efficacy, children who like to share books with peers,

participating actively in their learning community are likely to be intrinsically motivated readers (Morrow, 1996; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998 as cited by Guthrie, 2001).

Unfortunately, reading motivation decreases as children go through school. Guthrie (2001) proposes two possible reasons for this decline. One possibility is that children grow increasingly able to process the evaluative feedback they receive which leads to a heightened realization that they are not as capable as others. The other possibility relates to instruction. The instructional practice may begin to focus more on student comparisons with little attempt to spark children's interests, ultimately diminishing the mastery goals and intrinsic motivation, increasing the performance goals and extrinsic motivation.

Guthrie (2001) suggests and graphically depicts the characteristics of a classroom that would influence reading engagement and motivation. He believes that teachers must build a context for increased reading engagement in the following ways:

- Identify a knowledge goal and announce it
- Provide a brief real-world experience related to the goal
- Make trade books and multiple other resources available
- Give students some choice about subtopics and texts for learning
- Teach cognitive strategies that empower students to succeed in reading these texts
- Assure social collaboration for learning
- Align evaluation of student work with the instructional context

Guthrie (2001) also asserts that while he believes that engagement in reading increases the occurrence of reading outcomes, he also suspects that positive outcomes increase engagement.

Gambrell (1996) agrees that motivation is at the forefront of a description of the engaged reader. The research she and others conducted in in the early 1990s in the Literacy Motivation Project at the National Reading Research Center leads her to the question, “How do we create an environment in which this student will be motivated to read?” (p. 17). The research from the Literacy Motivation Project and the work of other researchers (Oldfather, 1993; Ruddell, 1995; Tuner, 1995, Turner & Paris, 1995 as cited by Gambrell, 1996) suggest that there are several key characteristics of a classroom culture that fosters reading motivation:

- a teacher who is an explicit reading model
- a book-rich classroom environment
- opportunities for choice
- familiarity with books
- social interactions about books
- literacy-related incentives that reflect the value of reading

Drawing on more current research, Gambrell (2011) proposes seven research-based rules of engagement, differing slightly from the classroom characteristics she proposed in 1996.

1. “Students are more motivated to read when the reading tasks and activities are relevant to their lives” (Gambrell, 2011, p. 2). Reading motivation is increased

when teachers help students find value and meaning in their reading work (Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, Humenick, & Littles, 2007 as cited by Gambrell 2011). In making connections to their work, students become more engaged and determined to comprehend text (Deci, 1992; Guthrie et al., 2007; Hulleman et al., 2010 as cited by Gambrell, 2011). Motivation is strengthened when instruction focuses on connections between school reading and the personal lives of students. Gambrell (2011) suggests having students keep a reading diary in which they reflect for a few minutes each day about how the material connects to their own lives.

2. “Students are more motivated to read when they have access to a wide range of reading materials” (Gambrell, 2011, p. 2). Motivation and reading achievement are higher in classrooms with rich and varied supplies of reading materials (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1993; Guthrie et al., 2007; Kim, 2004; Neuman & Celano, 2001 as cited by Gambrell, 2011). A rich supply of reading materials communicates to children that reading is worthwhile and valued activity, but teachers must also invite children to read by raising interest and curiosity about books and other reading materials. Gambrell (2011) suggests a weekly “teacher book-selling session” to raise children’s interest and curiosity about the books.
3. “Students are more motivated to read when they have ample opportunities to engage in sustained reading” (Gambrell, 2011, p. 3). Hiebert (2009 as cited by Gambrell, 2011) states that one of the reasons for students’ lack of motivation to read can be attributed to a lack of reading time in classrooms. Studies have also

shown that time spent reading is associated with reading proficiency and intrinsic motivation (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1993; Mizelle, 1997; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990 as cited by Gambrell, 2011). Foorman et al. (2006 as cited by Gambrell, 2011) studied time allocation during reading instruction in 107 first and second grade classrooms. They found a positive correlation between time allocated to text reading and growth in reading proficiency. Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, and Cox (1999 as cited by Gambrell, 2011) discovered that the amount of time spent reading in and out of school predicted reading comprehension. Gambrell (2011) suggests starting unmotivated readers off with shorter amounts of independent reading time at the beginning of the year and gradually increasing this over a period of several weeks until children are able to sustain their engagement in text for longer periods of time.

4. “Students are more motivated to read when they have opportunities to make choices about what they read and how they engage in and complete literacy tasks” (Gambrell, 2011, p. 3). Choice is seen as a powerful force. With choice, students are more apt to take ownership and responsibility for their learning (Rettig & Hendricks, 2000 as cited by Gambrell, 2011). When students are able to choose their own reading materials, they are more motivated to read, put forth more effort, and comprehend more of the text (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie et al., 2007; Schiefele, 1991; Spaulding, 1992 as cited by Gambrell, 2011). Gambrell (2011) points out that struggling readers might struggle to make productive choices on their own. She suggested using an approach called “Bounded Choice”, offering

students a limited selection of books (at an appropriate level) from which to choose.

5. “Students are more motivated to read when they have opportunities to socially interact with others about the text they are reading” (Gambrell, 2011, p. 4). Social interaction includes a variety of peer-peer reading activities or behaviors such as; talking with friends or classmates about books; reading with others; and borrowing and sharing books with others (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Von Secker, 2000 as cited by Gambrell, 2011). Several studies indicate that when instruction incorporates social interaction, children are more motivated to read and their reading comprehension achievement improves (Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, & Igo, 2012; Guthrie et al., 2007; Ng, Van Meter, McCann, & Alao, 1998 as cited by Gambrell, 2011). Gambrell (2011) suggests incorporating some quick sharing time after independent reading so that children have time to tell a partner briefly about what they just read.
6. “Students are more motivated to read when they have opportunities to be successful with challenging texts” (Gambrell, 2011, p. 5). The most motivating reading tasks are moderately challenging. They require effort, but with the effort is some success. This success is critical because it provides children with accomplishment that results in increased feelings of competence and motivation (Schunk, 1989; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997 as cited by Gambrell, 2011). It is thought that struggling readers fail because of the lack of experience with progress and feelings of competence (Becker, McElvany, Kortenbruck, 2010 as

cited by Gambrell, 2011). Teachers, therefore, must scaffold experiences that offer readers the opportunity to experience progress and competence. Gambrell (2011) suggests that teachers could label classroom libraries with language that helps all children view their reading as challenging. She proposes, “hard,” “harder,” and “hardest.”

7. “Students are more motivated to read when classroom incentives reflect the value and importance of reading” (Gambrell, 2011, p. 5). Constructive, clear teacher feedback recognizing achievement provides powerful motivation to learn, and it has been found to be more effective than tangible incentives, such as prizes (Lepper and Cordova, 1992 as cited by Gambrell, 2011). Marinak and Gambrell’s (2008) findings (as cited by Gambrell, 2011) suggest that when a reward is related to the desired behavior, the incentives may communicate the value of engaged reading. Gambrell (2011) suggests having days when you have book “give-aways,” allowing students to choose aged books from your library to keep as their own. She suggests that this shows children that books are the best reward.

## Nurturing and Growing Engaged Readers

If reading engagement is so critical, how can we nurture engagement in our children? Donalyn Miller (2009) makes a compelling argument for the need for reading role models in our country. In following her line of thinking, adults have some work to do as adult readers in order to support children as readers. She writes, “When my students think about me in the future, I want them to remember me as a reader with a book in my hand and a recommendation on my lips” (p. 106). She believes that her students view her as a credible source for book recommendations and advice because they see her first and foremost as a reader.

Miller’s obsession with books, however, is not in line with mainstream America. A 2007 Associated Press Poll reported in the Wall Street Journal states that the average American reads four books a year, and, of those who read more, their average was seven books per year. 25 percent of the respondents did not read any books (Fram, 2007). Miller (2009) reminds us that in looking specifically at teachers, our reading attitudes and practices are not any better. In a study of preservice teachers, A. Applegate and M. Applegate (2004) state that 54.3 percent of their sample were unenthusiastic about reading. They also indicate the manners in which “avid” and “reluctant” readers (also referred to as efferent and aesthetic readers) approach text is drastically different. The avid readers saw themselves as intimately involved in the text, but the reluctant readers took a more efferent approach, focusing on retaining the information included in the text they read. While reluctant readers may be highly motivated, they typically view reading

as an academic task and this can compromise their ability to motivate their students as readers.

If teachers often motivate students to read by sharing their own passion for reading, Applegate and Applegate (2004) ask, "...what if there is not love for reading?" Teachers are asked to share an enthusiasm for reading with their students that they do not have. Applegate and Applegate (2004) began to refer to this condition as the "Peter Effect", drawing on a biblical story of when Apostle Peter stated that he cannot give what he does not have. The danger in this situation is that the teacher's attitudes towards reading rub off on their students, proliferating the problem. While these teachers may be able to compensate for a lack of enthusiasm towards reading, it is more likely that they will approach reading with task-oriented, detail or fact-retrieving focus. Even the most open-ended tasks, like literature circles, could become directive and narrow in focus. Applegate and Applegate (2004) produced a series of seven recommendations to address the "Peter Effect". The recommendations, address teacher education programs, faculty members in these programs, practicing teachers, school districts, and parents.

The sixth of those seven recommendations referred to parents:

"Parents need to be both vigilant observers of their children's reading behavior and role models of engaged reading. Good grades and high test scores are not a worthy substitute for a sense of reading engagement that can transform and expand a child's entire intellectual life" (p. 562).

Parents' belief systems about reading have been shown to have a direct effect on child interest through home practices (DeBaryshe, 1995 as cited by Baker, 1999). Results

of studies exploring the relationship between parental perspectives and reading engagement (DeBaryshe, 1995; Scher & Baker, 1996; Sonnenschein, Baker, et. al., 1996 as cited by Baker, 1999) suggest that parents who emphasize skills over enjoyment and meaning may be sending a message to their children that reading is a dull endeavor. Just as teachers who have an aesthetic view of reading have the greatest influence on their student’s motivation and interest in reading (Ruddell, 1995 as cited by Baker, 1999), it seems the same is true for parents.

Miller (2009) asks why adults in our country are not reading and what this is doing to our children. She refers to our current culture in America as a one of “reading poverty” in which we are allowing students move through childhood without developing a love for reading. Those very children grow into adults who do not choose to read much unless for academic or information gathering tasks. While they might be capable of reading, they do not love and model reading for children.

The trouble is that it is not just adults who are not reading. A National Endowment for the Arts study (2007), *To Read or Not to Read*, indicates that reading amongst school aged children and young adults is on the decline, particularly among teenagers, and that as children age, their investment in reading outside of school also declines.

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**Percentage Who Read a Book the Previous Day (Outside School or Work)**

	In 2004	
	For at least 5 minutes	For at least 30 minutes
8- to 10-year-olds	63%	40%
11- to 14-year-olds	44%	27%
15- to 18-year-olds	34%	26%

Source: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds* (#7251), 2005

While adults, in theory, are needed to be reading role models to our children, adults simply are not all equipped to do so with the same perspective or realm of prior reading experiences. Serravallo (2010) writes about mentoring readers into developing a reading identity. She works to help children feel lost in their books as they read, what Nell (1988 as cited by Seravallo 2010) refers to as “flow”. She aims to “expand their possibilities and concept of what it means to be a reader to give them permission to abandon books that don’t work for them, and to mentor them into reflecting on their own reading tastes so they can better find a book that will keep them engaged” (pg. 71). Adults need some of this mentoring as well. Perhaps the first step in addressing this as a parent community is in recognizing it as a challenge and making it a priority to repair. If adults do not acknowledge and talk about it, it cannot get any better. Similarly, adults must face the reality that many children are not engaged readers.

The good news is that researchers believe that one’s relationship with reading can change. Just as Serravallo (2010, 2014) identifies teaching interventions to address reading engagement, McKenna (2001), believes there is potential for us to adjust and change our reading attitudes which are linked to reading engagement. He believes that readers can reconsider negative beliefs and develop more positive attitudes about reading. He suggests this is possible with instructional techniques that impact the type of experience a student has with reading, the belief the student has about her reading outcomes, or the belief a student has about how others view or value reading.

A child’s home environment provides the child with exposure to literacy practices that can foster knowledge about and interest in reading (Sonnenschein, Brody, &

Munsterman, 1996). Storybook reading, for example, plays an important role in this early development. It can develop interest as well as motivation, both critical for becoming an engaged reader. While these researchers suggest other forms of literacy (pretend play, storytelling, making up word games) are deemed as useful to literacy development, it is unclear from this study whether these have a direct correlation to future reading engagement. There is evidence, however, that children who are read to frequently begin at an early age to attend to books and to show initiative for reading (Lyytinen, Laakso, & Poikkeus, 1998 as cited by Bus 2001).

In addition to reading to children from a young age, families might also draw from the “Rules of Engagement” (Gambrell, 2011). The following “rules,” while based on Gambrell’s, have been modified in order to speak to the parent population:

1. Tap into children’s reading motivation by helping children find texts and reading activities that are relevant to their lives.
2. Provide children with access to a wide range of reading materials. Access can be achieved in many ways - utilizing libraries, school resources, sharing with friends and families, playing games, and reading the world around them (signs, recipes, packaging, mail, etc.). Just as teachers can increase motivation by engaging in “book selling,” parents might employ similar techniques.
3. Support children in having and maintaining ample opportunities to engage in sustained reading. Parents might also try to help children gradually grow the amount of time in which they can sustain engaged reading.

4. Provide children with opportunities about what they read both when they read independently and when parents and children read together.
5. Offer children opportunities to socially interact with others about the text they are reading. This might come in the form of book clubs involving other children or simply in the form of casual conversation between parent and child.
6. Engage with children in some challenging text, something that is more complex than the student typically chooses to read.
7. When developing incentives for the home, consider incentives that reflect the value and importance of reading. Those incentives might come in the form of positive comments or feedback related to engaged reading behavior, but they could also involve tangible incentives that pertain to engaged reading (a trip to the library, a new book, an extra story at bed time).

### **How Do We Know When Readers are Engaged?**

While much can be gained from natural, informal conversation with children, some educators and researchers have developed specific tools to help determine whether a reader is engaged or not. While these tools are designed for teachers, the underpinnings of them are relevant for parents as well.

Malloy, Marinak, Gambrell and Mazzoni (2013), for example, designed The Motivation to Read Profile - Revised (MRP-R) to help teachers design motivating contexts for literacy. This Profile estimates students' motivation to read by assessing both their "self-concept as readers" and their "value of reading." The profile consists of a reading survey and a conversational interview both of which address self-concept as a reader and value of reading. While it seems unnatural for a parent to administer a survey with a child, it does not seem unreasonable to consider inserting some of the survey questions into natural conversation when wondering about a child's reading motivation or engagement. Similarly the interview questions could be used the same way by parents, not in their entirety and not all at once, but naturally inserted into conversation. This obviously does not allow for true "scoring" of the assessment, but it does allow one to consider whether a child has a perceived weakness in the realm of self-concept or value of reading. It will allow for parents to begin to better understand what motivates a child and help to consider the context of the home as a support for literacy development and engagement. If parents recognize weaknesses in self-concept, this also might motivate them seek out additional support for children.

Similarly, Seravallo (2014) suggests that there are ways for teachers to assess reading engagement. She suggests that a book log can give teachers a lens into the different amounts and types of information children are reading. Book logs should involve minimal writing and can look a variety of ways depending on the age and reading ability of the child. The book logs, she says, are not only useful as records of what children read, but they can also help teachers to look for patterns in a child's reading that can tell us about a student's engagement. Teachers can begin to notice whether there are certain books or types of books, certain places or times when children are more or less productive.

Alongside the book logs, Seravallo also suggests a reading interest survey that children either fill out independently or respond to orally in a conference with a teacher. The student's answers can offer insights about attitudes toward reading and might also inform recommendations a teacher makes for the student. Finally, Seravallo recommends an engagement inventory, an opportunity for the teacher to observe children reading and to record their behaviors at different intervals of time.

While none of Seravallo's assessment tools are designed for parents, it seems parents could be supported by knowing to think about noticing what their children read, how often, and when and where they are most productive. Parents could be supported by knowing to think about their children's interests. What engages them? What troubles them? Many of the questions Seravallo suggests teachers ask of students could be authentically included in conversation between parent and child. Finally, parents could be supported by watching their children as they read and observing their behaviors.

Knowing more about children, what they think, do and feel as readers, parents will be better able to connect with them.

### **Development of *Engaging Readers***

While we can generally extrapolate from the research and practices proposed for teachers to promote reading engagement (Gambrell, 2011; Seravallo, 2014; Malloy, et. al, 2013) to consider how families can do so as well, it seems necessary that parents have messages and ideas delivered directly to them. Parents are the first and most consistent reading mentors in a child's life. They deserve and need to know about how they can explicitly support their children's reading engagement. In the flurry of messaging they may be receiving about what it means to be a reader or what is valued in reading education, it is important for parents to know what engagement is and why it is so important. With this in mind, I drew upon prior research and writing about engagement and motivation and translated the messages that were intended for teachers into messages that would speak to parents. Alongside this academic reading, I carried with me my knowledge as a teacher of reading and as a parent of two young children. My goal was to synthesize the three and build a resource for parents that was coherent, personal, community building, and purposeful. [www.engagingreaders.com](http://www.engagingreaders.com) is the result of that work.

While this site is surely a work in progress, this initial stage of the site houses both a blog and some stationary pages. The intention of the blog is to post ideas and content that is responsive to the needs of the parent community, while the stationary pages are intended to house information, ideas, and resources that parents can refer to and come back to as often as needed. These pages might grow or change over time in response to needs or changing times, but they currently house resources for promoting

engagement, ideas for how to find engaging reading material for children, and respond to some frequently asked questions.

The mission of *Engaging Readers* is as follows:

*Families are the first and most consistent reading mentors and supporters for their children, but on our own, we are not nearly so impactful as we can be with the support of each other. Engaging Readers aims to empower families with resources, information, and opportunities for conversation and collaboration so that they can support their young readers with enthusiasm, confidence, and heart.*

*Engaging Readers* is a place where...

- resources can guide families in nurturing their children as readers
- families can ask questions about reading with their children
- families can find information pertaining to struggles they face in supporting their children as readers
- interesting ideas related engaging young readers will be posted
- families can share reading successes and resources they love
- parents can find inspiration to nurture (or find) their own connection with reading
- dialogue about the importance of reading engagement can be accessible and celebrated

*Engaging Readers* believes that families are at the core of soulful, joyful, engaged reading. Together we can bring joy to our children – one book (magazine, poem, article...) at a time.

As a key component of the mission of *Engaging Readers* is to foster collaboration, communication, and community amongst families, soliciting feedback from families was critical. After developing the first incarnation of the website, the site and a survey (see appendix A) was shared with a small group of parents with the request that the parents browse the website and provide feedback (see appendix B). All responses to the survey were anonymous. All parents who participated have preschool or elementary school aged children. The children attend a mix of parochial, public, charter, and independent schools in the United States. All participants are highly educated (college or beyond) and are socio-economically advantaged.

One aspect of the survey was to comment on aspects of the site that feel useful. While there were a range of responses to this question, there were some areas that were consistently mentioned. Parents generally appreciated the tone of the site and found it to offer “encouragement”. One parent commented that the FAQ section addressed many of her questions and offered “comfort to know there are many parents who ‘struggle’ with the same time, energy, engagement concerns that I do.” Several parents commented that they appreciated the links to book lists and resources.

The survey specifically queried parents about what they think they need or would like more support with when it comes to their child’s reading and what else they wish was included in the site. Some key areas of want are:

- Book Lists: organized by age, addressing readability as well as appropriateness of content
- Book Recommendations: by genre to support children who gravitate towards nonfiction as well as those who gravitate towards fiction
- Audio Books: economical ways of accessing them
- Motivation: how to foster reading over other more desired activities, i.e., electronics, particularly as children grow and age.
- Comprehension: ways of supporting comprehension, how much to “push” it, and how to know when kids are comprehending
- Reading habits: concrete ideas of how to increase reading in the house and how parents can effectively model good reading habits
- Research: that exists about amount of time that is effective for nightly reading
- Reading challenges: ways of supporting struggling readers at home
- Community: a chat / forum that parents could use to ask more specific questions about particular reading-related issues with a child
- Socializing: good questions to get child talking more about his/her reading

In response to these expressed wants and needs, there are many potential additions to the site. I intend to devise a bulletin board section of the website where families can post questions, concerns, successes as pertain to reading with their children. I also anticipate writing blog posts that respond to many of the areas of want or need. It has also provided me with the idea that I might find a way (perhaps via the bulletin board) to ask for ongoing suggestions or requests for blog posts. Finally, in thinking of this as an ongoing

project, I look forward to utilizing the guidance of someone with visual and technological skills to help liven up the look of the site.

### **Recommendations for the Future**

A key outcome of this study is the realization that some formal research should be conducted regarding the relationship between reading engagement and the family. This research would ideally look across education, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds. It would look over time at how the relationship between engagement and the family changes over time. It would also offer research-based recommendations for fostering reading engagement at all stages of a child's development. This research might also consider some programs that are currently utilized in some communities, such as Every Child Ready to Read and Ready to Read, and how they might be used or modified or expanded in order to support families in fostering reading engagement.

It also seems necessary to know more about what families do know and understand about literacy development and education and their role in this process. In our current educational climate which is heavily focused on new standards, standardized testing, and teacher accountability, it is important to know how families and schools communicate about literacy development. What models of parent - school communication or involvement support reading engagement? What models do not support it?

Additionally, considering the teachers and parents who do not have an aesthetic stance towards reading, would benefit from programs to foster and develop new attitudes and practices amongst the adults. With regards to teachers, looking more carefully at teacher education programs is important. What coursework or experiences could be offered to support teachers in training to develop a new and more aesthetic relationship

with reading. This might take the form of a pre-requisite reading experience intended to offer future teachers the opportunity to develop a positive and aesthetic relationship with reading. Similarly, libraries, schools, and community centers might offer similar experiences for parents and adults who care for young children. Book clubs that listen to or read stories, news, or other sorts of text could offer social and supportive opportunities to engage with and talk about reading. In order for adults to foster a love of reading in children, it is important that they have positive and rewarding experiences to draw from themselves.

Finally, it seems that more conversation with children is needed. In talking to children who struggle with engagement, we can begin to better understand what is happening in those moments. We can also begin to better understand what situations do promote engagement for these children and consider how this could be accomplished in the domain of reading.

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## Appendix A

### Survey Questions for *Engaging Readers*

1. How many children do you have and how old are they?
2. What type of school do your children attend? (public, private, parochial, charter)
3. What do you feel like you want or need in order to support your child as a reader?
4. What do you wish the site offered that it doesn't currently have?
5. What aspect(s) of the site (if any) feel useful to you?
6. What do you want to know about reading with regards to your child/children that you don't already know or understand?
7. Describe what independent reading looks like at home.
8. Do you agree to allow me to use your responses anonymously in my graduate research paper? The paper will be published digitally and be accessible on Worldcat.

## Appendix B

Survey Results for *Engaging Readers*

How many children do you have and how old are they?	What type of school do your children attend and where is it (or they) located?	What do you feel like you want or need in order to support your child as a reader?	What do you wish this site offered that it doesn't currently have?	What aspect(s) of the site (if any) feel useful to you?	What do you want to know about reading with regards to your child / children that you don't already know or understand?	Describe what independent reading looks like / feels like at home.	Do you agree to allow me use your responses anonymously in my graduate research paper? The paper will be published digitally and accessible on Worldcat.
One child; 4 years old, almost 5	Independent preschool	<p>-Well written stories</p> <p>-Trips to the book store/library--it's always inspiring to read with my child in a book store. He reads, I read, we read together, there are so many choices, we are in an outside setting which creates a different dynamic.</p> <p>-Teacher provided book lists of what's been read at school--these are always home-run books. My son (most kids) loves sharing an experience from school to home--he's introducing something to me, which is a big deal for a 4 year old.</p> <p>-Good, solid time to sit with books...</p>	You cover a lot of ground, Erin. I'm not currently wishing for anything more....	Resources, FAQs, your personal experiences as an educator/parent, opportunities for dialogue with others...	I have the pleasure of reading with children everyday, for my work. My reading time with my son is somewhat of a natural extension of this work. I am fortunate to have knowledge/experience in this area, and I believe that has allowed me to relax into the reading process of my own child. I think we worry when things are unfamiliar or when there is a struggle. For now, reading with my boy is joyful, and fun! I'll let you know where I'm at in a few years, as he develops further into a more sophisticated reader.	<p>During rest time (down time), in the middle of the afternoon on weekends, he'll read his books--look at pictures, thumb through pages, etc.</p> <p>When he uses the bathroom, he loves to read magazines and/or catalogues.</p> <p>We keep books by his bed that he chooses, and by our bed, so that when he wakes up, he can quietly start his day in a book.</p> <p>Before our bedtime read aloud, he spends time looking for/at books each night.</p>	Yes
2- almost 7 and almost 5	Public School; Independent Preschool		I would like a guide on what age it is appropriate to read more advanced books (Harry Potter, etc). We started Lemony Snickett but stopped in the middle of book 2 at my son's request.	easy to peruse the blog posts and read more if they are interesting	Same question as above -what age can I read Harry Potter, Wind in the Willows, Lemony Snickett, etc	It should look like my son sitting in a big chair with a book he likes!	Yes

How many children do you have and how old are they?	What type of school do your children attend and where is it (or they) located?	What do you feel like you want or need in order to support your child as a reader?	What do you wish this site offered that it doesn't currently have?	What aspect(s) of the site (if any) feel useful to you?	What do you want to know about reading with regards to your child / children that you don't already know or understand?	Describe what independent reading looks like / feels like at home.	Do you agree to allow me use your responses anonymously in my graduate research paper? The paper will be published digitally and accessible on Worldcat.
2 children, age 8 and 11	Public School	Less desire for electronics.	<p>-Address the challenges we have to foster reading over other more desired activities (in particular for Tweens)...electronics...</p> <p>-Perhaps I missed it but more economical ways to access audio books</p> <p>-Maybe a time schedule or concrete ideas of how to increase reading in the house and how parents can effectively model good reading habits. Are there studies that show for example that say 20 min of time is effective, nightly or less. The general message of read more to model seems daunting to a non avid reader.</p>	Many resources to find books. Encouragement .	How to determine if child 2 (8) has some reading comprehension issues	Usually in bed before sleep. Sometimes in living room when everyone is reading together	Yes

How many children do you have and how old are they?	What type of school do your children attend and where is it (or they) located?	What do you feel like you want or need in order to support your child as a reader?	What do you wish this site offered that it doesn't currently have?	What aspect(s) of the site (if any) feel useful to you?	What do you want to know about reading with regards to your child / children that you don't already know or understand?	Describe what independent reading looks like / feels like at home.	Do you agree to allow me use your responses anonymously in my graduate research paper? The paper will be published digitally and accessible on Worldcat.
Emilia-age 11 Anna-age 8	Public School, Manhattan	Suggested strategies as kids get older Suggested/recommended titles to engage in with my kids	I think it has everything I'd look for in a resource, but perhaps things like the Engaging Reads page and the subscription option could be more upfront for those folks who may not be as diligent as I was to look around.  Have you looked into Common Sense Media's books recommendations/rating/reviewer? I wonder if that might be a valuable link to hook up to...	FAQ is great. Also, "engaging reads" section was interesting.	Information on how kids' reading abilities develop at various milestones, what that development looks like and how I, as their parent, can support that development	Somewhat erratic. I have thought about allocating a "reading time" at least a few nights a week so that we can all build some habits.	Yes
two boys, ages 6 and 9	Charter School	I think I need to ask my 9 year old in particular good questions to get him to talk more about what he is reading to see what he is getting out of the books. He does enjoy talking about what he's read, especially if I have also read the book, so I am trying to do more of that.	Maybe this can be found within some of the links that you offer, but I would love to know about a website that recommends books for different ages. Sometimes my 9 year old will pick a book that is fine for his reading level but I wonder if the subject matter is a big mature for him. I so sometimes use CommonSense media, which is pretty good for this, but wonder if there are other sites out there like that?	Some of the references seem helpful. I will take a look at them more carefully.	What are some good questions to ask a child about a book he read that can lead to discussion even if you haven't read the book?	My husband and I usually read at night before we go to sleep.  My 9 year old reads quietly to himself for about an hour a day at home.  My 6 year old will look at books for a long time, looking at the pictures and reading what he can -- sometimes he will read a little out loud to himself.	Yes

How many children do you have and how old are they?	What type of school do your children attend and where is it (or they) located?	What do you feel like you want or need in order to support your child as a reader?	What do you wish this site offered that it doesn't currently have?	What aspect(s) of the site (if any) feel useful to you?	What do you want to know about reading with regards to your child / children that you don't already know or understand?	Describe what independent reading looks like / feels like at home.	Do you agree to allow me use your responses anonymously in my graduate research paper? The paper will be published digitally and accessible on Worldcat.
Two - ages 7 & 9	Indendent School	Because I am a teacher/reading specialist, I feel like I am adequately equipped to support my children as readers.	I can't think of anything ;)	Literature reviews	I'm always looking for more resources to use as an educator and reviews of great literature.	It usually takes place in a comfortable, quiet place (couch, bed, fort) in the evening, afternoon, or even early morning.	Yes
I have 2, 7 year old twin boys. They are in first grade.	Public School	I feel that I need more TIME and often just plain energy. Some of the ways I can make a little time is to shorten some of the other routine activities that we do every day and take that extra time to read longer or more often. I could also switch the order of my activities/chores and leave some of them for after their bedtime, so that while they are up I can use a little more time to read with them.	It would be great to have some sort of chat/forum that parents could use to ask more specific questions about particular issues with a child.	I loved the Engaging Reads section. It was helpful and the info on it was great! I also liked the FAQ's section. It addressed many of my questions and had great suggestions and sometimes comfort to know there are many parents who "struggle" with the same time, energy, engagement concerns that I do. So it's great to get ideas on ways to make these better.	I feel lucky to have been very involved with my boys as they've become readers. Thou I feel like I pretty much know what they need to become better readers, I'd love to have more suggestions and support on how to engage them more on their reading, especially for my son Jack (Child 2) who is not yet there. Your website addresses just that. I love it and feel it is something new and very helpful. Thank you!	My boys seem to enjoy reading independently in the morning after they are dressed and ready for school. They lay on the floor or sit on their bed or sometimes they never make it any further than the rug, right in front of their bookcase. Child 1 likes to read every night in bed before going to sleep.	Yes
We have two children; 7 years old and 4 years old (will be 5 in 2 months)	Independent international school; Indendent preschool	Probably time	The site is great	The site/thought process provides a new context for reading and development	The site already provides food for thought on ways to capture interest in reading. Along those lines, we would like to instill/support a love for reading as opposed to something the kids have to do	Reading by themselves or guiding themselves through a book or written material or read without being asked	Yes

How many children do you have and how old are they?	What type of school do your children attend and where is it (or they) located?	What do you feel like you want or need in order to support your child as a reader?	What do you wish this site offered that it doesn't currently have?	What aspect(s) of the site (if any) feel useful to you?	What do you want to know about reading with regards to your child / children that you don't already know or understand?	Describe what independent reading looks like / feels like at home.	Do you agree to allow me use your responses anonymously in my graduate research paper? The paper will be published digitally and accessible on Worldcat.
Two children, age 8 and 10	public school	I think that if my spouse was more of a voracious reader we would spend more time as a family reading. But we are more likely to watch soccer, a movie or play a game as a family than read together. That said, we try to read aloud to the kids four times a week. I am always looking for great suggestions of books to offer my kids so that they will always have a story going.	Original lists and descriptions of books. Ideas for how to talk about particular titles that might lead to better conversations.	Links to book lists	I wish I had some elixir to stir into their breakfast cereal that would make them actively want to put aside their video games or other screen activities to read. I want to know how to help them get to a place where they will constantly search for titles on their own. They seem to rely largely on suggestions from teachers or me.	A child sitting in a comfortable chair, reading. If we are parallel reading, it is incredibly nourishing and comforting to me.	Yes
I have three children ages 9, 7 and 6.	parochial school	I feel very supported by our school and I do know where to do if I need help. I am worried about child 3 over the summer that he will lose everything he has gained over this year so I am looking into finding something for him to do.	I feel like I am always looking for ways to make sure my kids are comprehending the stories they read. I would love to know if there are sites that have comprehension questions for a variety of books.	I personally love the resources section of the site.	I feel pretty good about what I know and understand	Everyone in their rooms reading quietly in their beds. Very peaceful time in our house.	Yes
Child 1 - Girl - 12 Child 2 - Boy - 10 Child -3 - Girl -7	public school	A consistent list of book recommendations. This is hard to find a very good, solid list. Especially, for our twelve year old girl. She devours books and it is hard to keep up the stockpile in the house.	A list of good recommended books, by age.	GuysRead link. I hadn't seen that before.	How much should I push them to explore the reading comprehension piece? How much should I push them to analyze what they're reading. My goal up to this point has been to simply have them love reading (which they do).	Each child with a book somewhere in the house reading. Mornings and evenings are the biggest reading times.	Yes