

The other day, I was dining at Burger King here in town with my wife, daughter, and three of my grandchildren. Having finished, I filled a tray with the papers and cups that accompany such meals and left my seat in order to take it to the garbage can by the door. My oldest granddaughter, Emily, asked to go along. Well, what more fun thing can there be than walk to the garbage can with your grandfather? (Step aside, Disney!) But, of course, I agreed, consistent with my general rule about assenting to every request from a grandchild.

So with tray in one hand and her mittened-hand in the other, we made our way to the BK waste receptacle and just as I was about to tip the tray's contents into the can's gaping maw, she called out in an alarmed voice, "No, Papa, no!" I froze. Was there a stocking cap or some other small article that festoons the lives of small children on the tray that I had missed? I could see nothing so I lowered the tray back down to her, hoping that she could point out the cause of her concern. She said nothing, but pointed first to the receipt for the meal that lay on the tray and then to the large sign on the garbage can which said 'Don't Toss Your Receipt!'

Rather than explain to her that this was a marketing technique in which one could go on Burger King's website to complete a customer satisfaction survey, using a number on the receipt, and thereby receive a free sandwich, I simply said "Whew!" and handed her receipt. This she happily carried back to our table.

But the experience gave me a sudden realization: Emily was reading. I knew she had been working on it. I knew she had her phonics down pretty well. What I didn't realize was that she was now translating these 'sounding out' skills into comprehension. (At least on a literal level. She will have to learn the nuances of the written word, especially in advertising, later.) I had been reading children's books to this little girl for years and so many other people in her life—parents, other grandparents, aunts, and uncle—had been doing so as well. In fact, if reading research holds any water at all, one of the largest factors in this child's mastery of early literacy was the fact that so many people she loved and who loved her read to her on a daily basis. That hasn't changed. One really important way to help your child become prepared for school, be prepared for life, is to read to them...a lot. It isn't necessary that this occur at bedtime, though that seems to work very well. It's common for a reason.

I can't say that I am a perfect example of this. I was often not at home at bedtime when my children were small but, when I was, I always tried to read to them...a lot. I did so at least enough to become very weary of their favorite books. I can still recite from memory *Dr. Seuss' ABCs*. I read *The Berenstain Bears Meet Santa Bear* so many times to my son Alex—and, oddly, through every season of the year--that pulling it free from the box of Christmas books during the recent Yuletide left me feeling slightly nauseous, as if I feared my 24-year-old son home for the holidays might ask me to give it a read. I would rather read the minutes from every Mitchell school board meeting ever held since the school district was formed in the 19th Century plus every document I signed the last time I bought a house including the mortgage papers, plus the full user agreement for my computer's software package, than open that book again, but if that was what a child wanted for bedtime story, crack it open I would.

Because it would help them to learn to read and to want to read.

More recent research also has a few other things to tell us about reading and small children. One of these is highly relevant to Emily and all children who have recently learned to read. Parents shouldn't take this as a sign that the child can now read to herself, that the parent-reading-to-child routine may be or should be abandoned. The time and attention and physical contact you give to your child when you read to them is still important, primarily because it maintains that wonderful, fundamental relationship of parent to child, and also because it reinforces the value of reading. The child associates that treasured time with their mother or father with reading. Out of this a love of reading often grows.

Another research conclusion is that children seem to prefer reading and being read to from an actual book. It is even possible that reading from a book, rather than a tablet or some other device, is more strongly correlated with a later love of reading. Researchers posit that since a book really has just one purpose and one which comes with a positive connection, it bears a greater relationship to literacy than a reading device which can have so many diverse uses. It may be, as well, that, because children are highly tuned in to physical connections with their world—the touch, the feel, the texture, etc.—that the written page and the cloth cover have a feel which we find comforting. (I know I certainly feel that way. The heft and feel of a book are part of the richness of the reading experience.)

None of this research is particularly novel. It reaffirms, rather, what parents have known for generations. But affirming, with evidence, what we think we know has value as well. Just not as much value, apparently, as a Burger King receipt.