

But How Will They Learn Reading and Math?

When my children were young and we were unschooling, year after year would pass and my son was still not reading. To keep myself from worrying, I clung to a story of a boy who didn't learn to read until he was thirteen. This boy (about whom I had read) spent his days fishing. Eventually he did learn to read and later became an engineer as an adult. Sometimes we need stories like that to remember when doubts and worry creep up on us. These stories help us hold our tongue when we feel like coercing our children to learn something they're not ready to learn.

I'm writing this article for any parent who is interested in unschooling or anyone in the midst of experiencing child led education in their home... or for anyone who is worried about their child not learning some skill at the age the school system expects him or her to learn it. I know some of you have your doubts or perhaps you've have in-laws or parents who are asking you when or how your children are going to learn to read. I want to tell you the story of my son in his journey to reading so you too will have a story on which to cling.

While I was waiting for my son to read, I enjoyed learning about Woodrow Wilson who didn't know the alphabet until he was nine and didn't read until he was ten. You should look him up. He was a very impressive guy.

All three of my children taught themselves to read when they wanted to learn to read. They also taught themselves math... Actually, let me briefly tell you their math stories. My daughters wanted to go to high school. My oldest daughter wanted to go to the high school for the performing and visual arts, because she is a dancer. So when she was twelve or thirteen, she decided to teach herself math. She didn't know any math before that time. I bought her a book (a math book that home schoolers used) and she learned math on her own during the next two years. Then she was accepted into the high school for the performing arts, which was ranked number one in academics in our large city. She went on to make straight A's in high school math (algebra, geometry, and trigonometry) in the Advanced Placement classes. She also became a National Honor Society member. She is a dancer, not a mathematician, and has no interest in math. There was no public school in Houston more academically competitive than her school. I mention this in case you are worried about your child and math. If she could do that well, having no math education before she was thirteen, think what your child could do.

My other daughter's math story is basically the same. She also started learning math for the very first time, teaching herself, when she was about twelve. I bought her a different math book, because of course she learns differently. I got her a book that the public schools were using. It

had more pictures and images. When she was fifteen, she went to a private school, where she was a straight A student, taking algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and calculus from highly educated teachers. Both of my girls went on to do very well at Ohio State University and Wake Forest University, but they took as little math as possible in college.

My son's math education was a little different because he did not do any math until he was fifteen. That's when he decided to take an algebra class with other homeschoolers. In that class, he learned basic math WHILE he was learning algebra. It was kind of like on-the-job training. He now has a Master's degree, by the way, in International Business. He loved studying economics and plans to get another graduate degree in Finance.

I used to do volunteer teaching for immigrants and former convicts who were studying to get their G.E.D. At that time, I learned how quickly people could learn high school math, or at least the math required for the G.E.D. If you are worried about your children because they haven't started math yet, please realize they have time. If you have a child who is meant to be mathematician, he or she will probably be interested in math earlier than my kids were.

Okay so now, I want to tell you about my son's journey to reading, in case you have a child who has better things to do than learn to read right now. I am SO thankful that my son did not read until he was eleven. He was doing things that are much more valuable than reading during his early years. He was creating all the time.

I am convinced that there is a correlation between early reading and lack of creativity. I came to this conclusion from watching my kids and several other children. I don't know which comes first. I am sure that the less creative kids get more attracted to books, so they are more motivated to learn to read early. But I also believe that they end up reading so much that their minds have less time for imaginative activities.

Anyway, if you have a child who is not yet reading, savor this time. Once they start reading they lose some of their gift of creativity... their connection with inner guidance is weakened. Not that they can't get that back, but they'll have to work at that and they might not do so for another 50 or 60 years. So cherish this time.

When my son was young, he was drawing, building things with his Legos and using his imagination all day long. And he was listening to really beautiful literature, not the kind they were promoting in schools and the library, but books with rich vocabulary and complex sentences with subtle meanings. We borrowed books on tape from some company that would send us the cassette tapes. We would return them by mailing them back. He would be in his room sometimes for several hours, listening to books on tape while building with his Legos. He also spent a great deal of time outside. And he had a good friend he would play with for long hours.

Often I skip an important part of this story. But with great shame and remorse, I'll tell you it now. I did what I will encourage you not to do. I buckled under the pressure of my kids' grandparents who were afraid my son would never learn to read and, at some point during the years when

other kids his age were reading, I tried to teach him to read. I am sorry about that now. I think the damage done was a little more than I can explain. But think of it this way: if you could teach yourself something, wouldn't you rather learn by yourself? No one taught you to walk or talk. Reading can be learned the same way.

I used to say that you cannot keep your child from learning to read, if you read. Now days, less people are actually reading, but almost everyone reads enough for their children to pick up the habit.

Fortunately, my son did not learn to read when I was teaching him. I didn't know at the time that he had dyslexia and dysgraphia. We didn't learn that until he was seventeen. I'm glad we didn't know. I think it's unhealthy to label children. But since I was getting nowhere trying to teach him, I just gave up, and he went back to using his imagination all day long.

Sometime during my son's eleventh year, we bought our first computer, and pretty soon after that, he wanted to build a website. So the very first book he ever read, and the book that he used to teach himself to read, was on HTML. It was a very thick book, and he took it into his room, closed the door, and somehow taught himself to read it. Basically he was learning a different language (HTML) while he was learning to read. Then he built a website which was quite advanced; it did some of the things I didn't see until years later on professional websites. And when he was thirteen, he built himself a computer out of scratch (not from a kit).

I kind of tested him (without him knowing it) when he was thirteen and found out that he was reading at "college level"... I know, shoot me! You should never test your child. But he didn't know he was being tested, and (because I did test him) now you know how quickly children can advance their reading ability when they are older. Keep in mind, that he had been listening to books on tape that were way above his "grade level". So he was used to listening to a rich, mature vocabulary.

I hope my son's story helps you relax if you were worrying about your child or children learning to read. Some people say, "But, your son seems really smart". Well, he wasn't "dumbed down" by school or television; that's for sure. Let me ask you this: doesn't your child or children seem really smart too? And don't they seem really resourceful? If they get the idea that reading will help them learn some things they want to learn, don't you think they'll learn to read? Remember you did not have to teach them to walk or talk. They can also learn reading without being taughtunless they are watching television or playing video games often. In that case, they may not have the incentive to learn to read. Someday, in the not too distant future, no one will need to read. That may be the case when your children are grown.

I mentioned that all three of my children taught themselves to read. I actually taught myself to read too. I am sure this was very common historically. One of my daughters was reading chapter books by the time she was five years old, and my other daughter taught herself to read when she was almost nine. The one who learned to read later, just graduated (in four years with students her age) from a university ranked 27th by U.S. News Best Colleges. I think it's better when they

learn later, but you can't stop them from teaching themselves to read when they are ready, just as you can't stop your child from learning to walk and talk. It's just going to happen. And you wouldn't want to deprive your children the opportunity to teach themselves.

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