

2024

Reflections on Reading

The U.S. Naval War College

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Recommended Citation

Naval War College, The U.S. (2024) "Reflections on Reading," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 77: No. 2, Article 20.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol77/iss2/20>

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REFLECTIONS ON READING

IGNITING A SPARK IN THE MIND OF A CHILD

Professor John E. Jackson of the Naval War College is the Program Manager for the Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program.

The Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program is designed to encourage sailors to read books of value as a component of their individual professional development. This is the sixty-second “Reflection” published in the *Review*, and for a change the focus is not on what sailors should read, but rather how they can contribute to the intellectual growth of their small children. A common theme of these Reflections has been that reading books of merit opens an individual’s eyes to the surrounding world. Developing a habit of reading is valuable on so many levels, and there is no greater gift that parents can give children than to read to them at an early age and give them the tools to become readers themselves.

According to the nonprofit Child Mind Institute:

From birth, babies are hardwired to develop language skills, and consistent exposure to a wide variety of language patterns is what helps them do exactly that. “Just exposure to words is the single most important thing that you can do to help build the language pathways in your child’s brain,” says Laura Phillips, PsyD, the senior director of the Learning and Development Center at the Child Mind Institute. “Reading and exposure to words helps kids maximize their language and cognitive capacity.” Even the tactile experience of holding or touching a book supports babies’ cognitive development.

By reading to your child starting at a young age, even before they’re able to communicate verbally, you help lay the neurological groundwork for effective language use and literacy. That’s partly because books expose children to vocabulary and grammar that they wouldn’t normally hear. “When kids are with caregivers or parents, they’re exposed to the same language, the same vocabulary words, the same patterns of speaking, which is wonderful,” says Dr. Phillips. “But books allow them to hear new vocabulary and new ways of putting words together, which expands their ability to make sense of and use language.”

Research has found that young children whose parents read to them daily have been exposed to at least 290,000 more words by the time they enter kindergarten than kids who aren't read to regularly. And depending on how much daily reading time kids get, that number can go up to over a million words. All that exposure likely makes it easier for kids to expand their vocabularies and understand the variety of texts they'll need to read as they get older, both inside school and out.

The value of childhood reading is recognized widely, and there are a number of options for parents to obtain printed and digital books to share with their children; a simple Internet search on the keywords "free books for kids" will identify numerous sources. One remarkable program, for example, is managed by a world-famous country music singer and mails more than *two million* high-quality, age-appropriate books each month to enrolled children from birth to age five. Children enrolled from birth can receive sixty free books by the time they graduate from the reading program. Since it began, this program has provided nearly two hundred million free printed books in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Republic of Ireland. The impact of such programs has been widely researched, and the results suggest positive increases in key early childhood literacy metrics. Some hard-copy-focused book delivery programs determine eligibility based on the postal code in which the family resides. Parents will find that most programs that utilize digital media are unconstrained by a family's geographical location.

Sailors can also take advantage of the many resources available from the Department of Defense Morale, Welfare and Recreation Libraries (DoDMWRLibraries.org) and the Navy General Library Program (NGLP@navy.mil). These programs enable registered users to download e-books and audiobooks for readers of all ages. The "Children's Corners" on both sites are particularly good sources for age-specific materials.

The bottom line is that tens of thousands of Navy families are eligible to enroll their infants and young children in these remarkable and easily accessible programs. On a personal note, my new grandson received his first hard-copy book from one of the largest programs within six weeks of his birth. We encourage all sailors, of all ranks and in all locations, to investigate to see whether their children are eligible to walk the road of discovery with either hard-copy or digital books!

One of the greatest gifts adults can give—to their offspring and to their society—is to read to children.

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