

Is Society Demanding Children to Read Too Early?

By Clara Yoder

Once upon a time, in a long forgotten world, PlayStations, X-Boxes and Game Boys had yet to be invented. For their absence, internet and television weren't there to stave off boredom. Yes, in that long forgotten world where today's children would be taxed for entertainment, there was imagination—daring adventures, and magical worlds where heroes and villains fought, and princesses awaited rescue. Not so long ago children read for amusement and pleasure. Now children are assailed from multiple sides with competing forms of entertainment. It is no wonder books and reading for pleasure are being forgotten.

In social circles, one of the many questions parents of young children face is whether their child has learned the alphabet and is learning to read. Parents are pressured to read to their children from the time they are born. Through this early exposure, their child is expected to successfully learn the rudimentary reading skills necessary to succeed in kindergarten, first grade and beyond.

This article requests the reader to consider whether society in general is placing too many demands on children by requiring them to lay aside playtime to instead, pursue the art of reading. As the article is read, please keep these questions in mind.

- Is society demanding too much from children?
- What if the reason children are losing interest in reading is because of the incessant pressure they feel to perform?
- If children were allowed to develop interest in reading at their own pace, would this reduce the number of visitations to psychologists, reading specialists, and other forms of after-school programs?
- Is it natural for children to sit still and learn to read in pre-school?
- Characteristically, boys are naturally assertive and rambunctious as children; could they be experiencing negative effects from the simple rule of sitting still long enough to learn to read?
- How do parents feel when their child is observed or labeled due to their inability to read or perform on task? How does this make the child feel?
- Could the current education requirements for children result in potentially bright individuals becoming disillusioned to the wonders of reading with the possible side-effect of limiting their future career options?

Curiously, several [Nobel Prize](#) winners have voiced their intense displeasure with the education they respectively received. Among these noted individuals was Albert Einstein, who did not speak until the age of four or start reading until the age of seven. Einstein stated that, "It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wreck and ruin without fail." Einstein was referring to the education children were receiving in his time. Einstein observed that most of his schooling problems arose from an unwillingness to perform for teachers or be coerced to learn. Einstein won the 1921 Nobel Prize in physics. Several other individuals who received Nobel Prizes in literature include Rabindranath Tagore who believed education was "a mere method of discipline which refuses to take into account the individual. It is a manufactory specially designed for grinding out uniform results. It follows an imaginary straight line of the average in digging its channel of education." This begs the question of whether state education requirements are truly taking individual children's interests into account. Winston Churchill disliked being away from home—for schooling—so much that it drove him to read for pleasure. He stated that, "My teachers saw me at once backward and precocious, reading books beyond my years and yet at the bottom of the

Form.” Churchill responded to his teachers belief that he was inept by stating that, “Where my reason, imagination or interest were not engaged, I would not or I could not learn.” This reasoning coming from Nobel Prize winners and greatly respected individuals makes one wonder if children who are observed in classrooms as rowdy, inattentive, or struggling are simply not interested in the subject matter and therefore refuse to learn it.

According to a former Griffith University lecturer Mr. John Reddington, “there is no specific age by which a child should be able to read.” (5) [Dr. Katz](#), a professor of education at the University of Illinois contends that, “Children should be introduced to the alphabet at the age of five-and-a-half, in an ideal world.” The evidence we have so far,” Dr Katz said, “is that if you start formal teaching of reading very early the children do well in tests but when you follow them up to the age of 11 or 12 they don’t do better than those who have had a more informal approach.”

In other [countries](#) such as Sweden, Germany, and Finland, children can be as old as eight before formal reading instructions begin. Their belief is that children should be sociable and play without the additional anxiety to become literate hovering above their heads. Literacy can come too early for some children and may result in the disillusionment that reading holds no pleasure. To combat this undesirable end product, Mr. Reddington believes that children develop natural interests in reading between 7 and 12 years of age and that once this occurs their love for books becomes insatiable. (5) In essence, the American Government should follow in Finland’s footsteps and focus more on social development and playtime with young children and less on formal education—reading and writing—since this approach appears to work very well for [Finland](#) whose literacy rate is extremely high.

“Indeed there are many negative problems associated with poor reading skills some include, difficulty with completing assignments, self-esteem issues, illness brought on by stress, frustration and poor grades among others. (8) Evidence suggests that formal instruction at too young of an age could be more damaging to boys due to their natural active and assertive nature according to Dr. Katz. Other studies suggest that the risk of developing dyslexia is increased in boys because eye formation may not be fully developed. On the upside, students who read for pleasure have descent writing skills and vocabulary due to the exposure they attain from reading. (8) This does not indicate that only children who begin reading young will develop these skills. Recall that Albert Einstein began reading at age seven and was unaffected by this late start.

A solution to this problem is to stop assuming that a “one-size-fits-all” approach to reading is going to help children learn to read. Teachers even feel that there are many different methods to learning to read. (10) There are an infinite number of ways that reading can be taught to students and teachers are not happy with teaching students phonics alone. Teachers feel that students are not reading as well as they can and in essence, they are sending students to higher grade-levels unprepared.

A 2006 study showed that “reading for pleasure outweighed every social advantage, including parent’s income, in the future success of the child.”

[China’s](#) great intellectual Confucius said, “Have an insatiable desire to learn.” It has been proven that reading can be learned—at late ages too—but it remains to be seen whether those individuals who learned will actually enjoy it. You can teach someone something you enjoy, but that individual has to discover whether *they* enjoy it or not.

In the words of Francis Bacon, “Reading maketh a full man.”