

The Big Battle: Getting your kids to read

I still remember the disastrous Reading class I had to take a few months back. We had selected Roald Dahl's "The BFG", and I was really looking forward to a stimulating hour of laughing at Dahl's wonderfully corny sense of humour. Little did I anticipate how wrong I would turn out to be.

"Human beans from Wellington is tasting strongly of boots," I read out with a grin. My students exchanged puzzled glances. "Why are you laughing, Miss?" one of them asked. I raised an eyebrow "You know, Wellington boots..." A sea of blank faces stared back at me, and with a sinking feeling, I realised that they had absolutely no idea what I was talking about. They simply couldn't connect Wellington with boots, and many of them missed the joke on human 'beans'. I ultimately had to resort to cheap theatrics like changing my voice and acting out the story to get them to enjoy it.

This sad little episode opened my eyes and drove home the fact that the habit of reading is dying a slow death. Faced with a lot of mindless entertainment options, more kids today are turning away from books and reaching for the remote control or joystick instead. The result shows in their performance at school.

Teachers today complain of the deterioration in the standard of writing amongst their students. Ask any one of them, and you're bound to hear them complain that their students don't read enough. The importance of reading a wide range of literature cannot be emphasised enough. As well as increasing general knowledge, it helps the reader strengthen his/her vocabulary, and become more familiar with different styles of writing, that would in turn boost his/her own creativity. This goes for both Bangla and English books, or any language for that matter, and there is a growing concern about the decline of the reading habit.

I'm sure that diagnosis brings to mind a hundred culprits responsible for this situation: cable TV, video games, working mothers (yes, I actually heard this one), Western culture (don't ask), coaching centres taking up too much time, incompetent schooling systems, and finally the attitude of the students themselves. "My child starts crying whenever I ask her to read!" one mother wailed during a PTA meeting I recently attended. I wonder if these parents realise their own hand in this?

It's all very well to point fingers, and yes, factors like TV and other forms of media do play a role in diverting attention away from books. Even then, the reading habit can be saved if parents, teachers, and children work together in cultivating it.

Several schools in the city have been getting together at teachers' workshops to discuss the problem of the declining reading habit. The enormous syllabi that children have to deal with every year is enough to put them off additional reading, and often teachers are hard-pressed to finish the existing syllabus on time, so much so, that they have very little time to schedule separate reading classes. It's a common sight to see children spending the 'library period' finishing homework assignments, or working on class projects instead of reading. Those schools that are able to cordon off some time for reading classes, often face the problem of a lack of resources needed to make reading a

pleasurable experience for the students.

There are schools now that are trying to find creative ways of working around these problems. One teacher talked about how she got the children to create their own books, such as the Fish Book, which is basically a fish-shaped booklet containing pictures and short notes on fishes, which the class worked together to compile. Another one talked about how she played a game of 'rigmorole' with the children, whereby she provided them with a story opening, and each child in turn, added to the plot. She typed up the finished product, and let the children work on the illustrations and cover. The resulting booklet was then read in class, and the students were asked to prepare book reports on them. These are just a few examples on how schools can encourage children to read, and how they can make reading a pleasurable experience for them.

Okay, so we have all these dedicated teachers working on getting your child to read. How do you, as a parent contribute to their efforts? Sadly enough, many parents don't regard the job of cultivating a reading habit as their responsibility, and alarmingly, many parents who do, often do more harm than good. One teacher incredulously recalls one parent who came and told



her that he had made sure his child had read all the books on the suggested reading list several times over, and after the child had mastered the books, he had her read it backwards! Then there are those well-meaning, but over-eager parents who virtually force-feed the books to their children, regardless of whether the children are able to digest the reading material or not. In most such cases, they end up undoing all the hard work put in by the teachers. Here are a few suggestions as to how you can get your child to pick up the habit:

Choose books that the child can easily read and understand. Put yourself in the child's place for one minute. Would you enjoy reading something that you didn't understand? If the text were difficult to read, would you want to continue? One must keep in mind that as a child is learning to read, most of the text is uncharted territory, and s/he must be allowed to become familiar with it in her own sweet time. Choose books with colourful illustrations, and topics that are appealing to your child. Once the child has picked up the habit of reading, s/he will automatically broaden the range of topics.

Don't discourage comic books. There is a popular misconception about comic books being rife with slang and other

negative elements. The opposite is true for most comic books, actually. Comics communicate to the child through colourful images, humour, and often carry positive messages. More importantly, they're fun to read, and a good way to get your child hooked on the habit.

Teach by example. "I told my child to read, but she only wants to watch TV." How many times have you heard this complaint? Children learn by example. If you want your child to learn how to enjoy reading, you have to show him/her that it's fun, by reading in front of him/her. Most importantly, set an example by doing a lot of reading yourself. If your child sees you enjoying the act of reading, s/he will pick up the habit faster.

Create the right atmosphere. Turn off the TV. Don't expect your child to want to read if you're going to be watching television while s/he's doing it. Schedule a particular time during the day, when you and your child can read together, even if it's only half an hour. During that time, put the telephone calls on hold, switch off the television, and remove anything from the area that might distract you and your child. Read together, and try to make it a fun experience.

Read the stories out to him/her. Discuss the plot and the characters, as you would anything else with your own peers. No matter how busy you are, trying making some time to read with your child. Let him/her feel that this is important to you.

Books make great gifts. Let's face it. Video games and Barbie dolls are pretty and fun, but with all their assorted accessories, they leave little to the imagination, and stunt your child's mental growth. On birthdays and other special occasions, try gifting them with books. Choose books about things they like, like the Harry Potter series, the Bromeliad Trilogy (Terry Pratchett), and this year's biggest hit: Poké mon. Get them colouring and activity books. Treat the books like a fabulous treat, and soon your child won't be able to have enough of them.

These are just a few ways you can get your child to read. The earlier you start, the easier it will be for them to pick up the habit, so that by the time they reach their teens, life will be a lot easier for everyone, as they gear up for their major exams. Finally, when they come home with super grades, and maybe an academic award or two, you'll know that all your efforts have been well worth it. Do you really need another reason?

By Sabrina F Ahmad

HOROSCOPE

ARIES (Mar. 21-April 19)

You will find good buys and you will lift your spirits. You need to be careful not to make promises that you can't fulfill. This will be a great night to invite friend over to visit. Listen to the advice given by others. Your lucky day this week will be Monday.

TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20)

Relax and enjoy what you've accomplished when you're finished. Plan your day carefully. Focus on forming business partnerships. New emotional connections can be made through business contacts. Your lucky day this week will be Friday.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

Go with the flow and don't be concerned about your own job. Outbursts of passion may cause arguments with your mate. Opportunities for new friendships are apparent. Make arrangements to meet new friends. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

Talk to those in a position of power about your intentions. Think twice before you say something you might regret later. Don't turn down offers that include sports activities or children. Take advantage of your attributes and lure the mate of your choice. Your lucky day this week will be Saturday.

LEO (July 23-Aug 22)

Travel for business will be advantageous. Real estate investments will payoff. You'll have amazing ideas, but superiors may try to block your attempts at implementing them. Try not to allow others to burden you with additional responsibilities. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

You can meet new and exciting friends who will provide mental stimulation. Compromise if you wish to have any fun at all. Don't overspend or give too freely to others. You may be able to get some good advice about your personal problems. Your lucky day this week will be Friday.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

Make arrangements to spend quality time together. Do what you can to help them but don't neglect your own family. You need to keep everyone on your domestic scene too busy to complain. Hidden matters are likely to surface. Your lucky day this week will be Monday.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24-Nov. 21)

Communication will be your strong point and you should be able to persuade others to see things your way. Don't go hog wild when it comes to entertainment or you could find yourself short of funds at the end of the month. Try not to be too lavish with your lover. Be cautious who you deal with financially. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)

Don't let your emotions interfere with your professional integrity. This week is great for a trip. Don't be too quick to judge. Take time to do something nice for yourself. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 20)

Your mate may want to pick a fight but if you're persistent with your affections their anger should dissipate. Focus, and concentrate on yourself and your future. Lack of cash might be partly to blame for the problems at home. Use your genuine warmth and compassion to win hearts. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 21-Feb. 19)

You will benefit through hidden assets and property investments. You can't do everything on your own. Don't expect romantic encounters to be lasting. Your high energy should be spent pleasing your mate. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.

PISCES (Feb. 20-March 20)

Older family members may try to put unreasonable demands on you. Don't let others saddle you with guilt that isn't warranted. Find out all the facts before you jump to conclusions. You can put in some overtime and make extra cash. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.