

Children at risk

By Rosemary Wells

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The child who sits in a reader's lap is more privileged than child who is given a fancy computer games, state-of the-art sports equipment, designer clothes. This child can be poor. He can live in the meanest streets of a huge city or a house trailer in the far reaches of the rural hills. But if his father sits reads to him quietly half an hour a day, this boy is not at risk. He is blessed and will grow up smart and strong.

A child who listens to a story nightly receives a huge head start in life. This child can own one pair of old shoes and eat free breakfast and lunch at school, but if her mother reads to her, this girl is blessed and will look you in the eye and speak forthrightly and well.

The child who does not have a reader's lap to sit in every night may go to a private school in his father's limousine but he will be emptier for this. No video games, no television hours, no game boys will help him. The child who does not grow up with lots of stories and songs in her parents' voices may be a junior Beauty Queen in the third grade but she will be emptier for this. No amount of trendy clothes, big birthday parties or cell phones will help her.

The child who is read to, regularly and often will develop not only a facility with learning but a healthy imagination. That child is getting a big dose of one on one love. It will show as the child grows up. He or she will likely become a producer in this world.

The child who lives in a home where people have no time, a bookless world, one where the tv and pop music is always on and shopping is the preoccupation of the family, will likely not find it easy to develop much imagination. This can describe millions of American children's lives in both poverty and great wealth.

The mother and father of that little boy or girl have a child at risk. But this is the good news. They can turn this entire pattern around in about a month of intensive regular reading. It takes only a library card and a will to change to do this.

A mother, taking time every day, to read a book aloud to her child, is giving her baby the gift of thought and language. Reading often, starting young, a father gives his child a whole world of his own to dream.

Parents who read to their children are giving of themselves, of their time. By not saying "I'm too tired, I'm too busy, I want to do something else," they are giving love. They are giving their voice, their patience and more important than anything they are giving pure love.

There is much our schools and libraries can do to encourage parents to read aloud to their children. A Read to Your Bunny program can be anything a teacher or librarian wants it to be. One of the schools near my home town tried this. On back to school night in October the teacher asked for a show of hands of families who would be willing to read twenty minutes a day to their youngsters, as regularly as they brushed their teeth. These families kept their promise through thick and thin. Through celebrations and emergencies of all kinds. Through job losses, illness, holidays, vacations, house guests, hurricanes and all else that happened in their lives.. After nine months these parents wrote report letters which the school shared with me.

Those families reported that their relationships with their children had changed. Children listened more to what their parents said and parents listened to their children. The kids demanded fewer trips to the shopping mall and whined less. The played better on their own, their attention spans improved dramatically and they all did better in school. The good news is, this can work in any community in America. All it takes is willing teachers and parents a good library. The kids are easy.