

My Search for the Holy Grail: What Turns Kids On To Reading



In my role as a college instructor in children's literacy, I lecture my students about the importance of building joyful attitudes along with children's developmental skills. I shared with my Children's Lit class my former first graders' enthusiasm as they embarked on the latest installment of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* or proudly reported finishing a *Harry Potter* volume. However, as we delved deeper into the importance of positive attitude and motivation, many of my students reported how difficult this was for them because they didn't particularly enjoy reading.

It occurred to me that although many children begin their literacy journey with excitement and enthusiasm, sometimes they lose their way. Something happens that makes reading no longer joyful and satisfying the way it once was (if it ever was at all).

The challenge

Both my daughters, ages 11 and 14, have always been avid readers. As a voracious reader myself, fathoming a world without reading for pleasure was difficult for me. In fact, I began to feel sad for the many children—and adults—who were missing out on the vicarious experiences and the temporary escape that a good book provides.

I wondered if there was hope for nonreaders. Maybe they *still* just hadn't found the right book or genre that would motivate them? What had *happened* to them somewhere along the way that led to this state of affairs in their adult lives? Would it be possible to trace their lack of

interest or motivation to some earlier literacy trauma? (Disclosure: My undergrad degree is in psychology. I have a tendency to attribute all adult deficiencies to some sort of childhood trauma.) In any case, my curiosity was piqued.

The journey

As a certified reading specialist, I am aware of the research on children's attitudes and motivation in reading. Children who like to read tend to read a lot and, thus, get better at it. Those who don't like to read (often those who struggle with reading) read less often and, as a result, get less practice at it than the motivated readers. But how do you spark that attitude and motivation? That is the \$64,000 question. (Or maybe just the question—I was on a budget.)

I started asking my own girls, "Why do you like to read so much?" and "What do you like to read?" Then I started thinking about kids their age who *don't* like to read and what circumstances led to their feelings. Fortunately for me, my girls have lots of friends, and thus my own personal research study began!

Over time, I interviewed 30 children on the topic of reading attitudes and motivation. Twenty-two were girls and 8 were boys. (That's the breaks when you have only daughters.) The children ranged in age from 9 to 15 (and yes, if you're wondering about ethical research, I *did* have parents sign consent. I wasn't necessarily thinking about publishing a formal research study, but you never know!). What I found out from my "mini study" was quite interesting!

The Holy Grail: The findings

Out of the 30 children interviewed, I was able to classify 16 as motivated readers, 11 as "neutral" (neither particularly enjoying nor reading) and 3 as clearly being "reluctant" readers. Interestingly, many of the motivated readers also tended to be early readers. Did the early reading lead to more motivation and enjoyment? Or was because they enjoyed reading (or being read to) so much that helped them to become early readers? The age-old "chicken or egg" dilemma.

Some of the more popular genre mentioned were fantasy/adventure, fiction/nonfiction books about animals, humor/joke books, and mythology and informational (sports, biographies, magazines) for the

boys. The girls reported most of these, but also included "Coming of Age" type fiction, graphic novels, and fan fiction.

Other factors that had a positive impact on children's attitudes and motivation included:

- ✚ Frequent opportunities to read for pleasure in school (D.E.A.R., etc.)
- ✚ Teacher reading to the class
- ✚ Access to "good books" in the classroom
- ✚ Teachers giving an interest inventory and then matching kids to books
- ✚ Early (preschool) exposure to good books
- ✚ Book clubs (recommendations from friends)
- ✚ Reading a book in anticipation of the movie
- ✚ Books based on TV series
- ✚ Choice (*This is an important one—research indicates that children who have choices for in-school reading generally are motivated to read more and have more positive attitudes toward reading*)
- ✚

In the end, for me, these kids may not have given me The Holy Grail, but they provided a lot of insight into what motivated them to read.

[Ludmila Battista](#) teaches children's literacy and early childhood development courses at Kaplan University. She is also faculty coadvisor for the first online chapter of *Autism Speaks U*. Her background includes elementary education, course development, and curriculum assessment and reading instruction. She is also a certified reading specialist/reading teacher.