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Peter Gray Ph.D.
Freedom to Learn

Children Teach Themselves to Read

The unschoolers' account of how children learn to read

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The general assumption in our culture is that children must be taught to read. Vast amounts

of research go into trying to figure out the scientifically best way to do this. In the [education](#) stacks of any major university library you can find rows and rows of books and many journals devoted solely to the topic of how to teach reading. In education circles heated debates--dubbed "the reading wars"--have raged for decades between those who believe that most emphasis should be placed on teaching phonics and those who take what is called a "whole language" approach to reading instruction. Many controlled experiments have been conducted comparing one instruction method to another, with kindergartners and first graders as the guinea pigs. The phonics people say that their method has "won" in those experiments, and the whole language people say that the experiments were rigged.

The evidence from the standard schools is that reading does not come easily to kids. Huge amounts of time and effort go into teaching reading, from preschool on through most of the elementary school years. In addition, educators encourage [parents](#) of young children to teach reading at home in order to prepare the children for reading instruction in school or to supplement that instruction. Large industries have developed around the creation and [marketing](#) of instructional materials for this purpose. There is no end to interactive computer programs, videos, and specially sequenced books designed--"scientifically," according to their proponents--to teach phonics and provide a growing base of sight words for beginning readers.

I recently read an article by two [cognitive](#) scientists claiming that the next development in reading instruction is going to be individualized instruction.[1] According to the authors, modern [brain](#) imaging methods will be used to figure out the unique learning style of each child, and digital text-delivery programs will be used to teach reading to each child according to his or her unique needs and way of learning. The authors and their colleagues are, indeed, working on developing such systems. To me, this seems silly. The unique needs of each child, as they affect learning to read, are not just functions of differences in brain hardware, but vary from day to day and moment to moment based on the child's specific experiences, wishes, and whims, which the child himself or herself controls. I'll begin to believe these researchers' claims when I see evidence that brain imaging can be used to predict, in advance, the contents of daydreams.

In marked contrast to all this frenzy about teaching reading stands the view of people involved in the "unschooling" movement and the Sudbury "non-school" school movement, who claim that reading need not be taught at all! As long as kids grow up in a literate society, surrounded by people who read, they will learn to read. They may ask some questions along the way and get a few pointers from others who already know how to read, but they will take the initiative in all of this and orchestrate the entire process themselves. This is individualized learning, but it does not require brain imaging or cognitive scientists, and it requires little effort on the part of anyone other than the child who is learning. Each child knows exactly what his or her own learning style is, knows exactly what he or she is ready for, and will learn to read in his or her own unique way, at his or her unique schedule.

and had received no systematic reading instruction, and they interviewed the students, their parents, and school staff to try to figure out when, why, and how each of them learned to read. What they found defied every attempt at generalization. Students began their first real reading at a remarkably wide range of ages--from as young as age 4 to as old as age 14. Some students learned very quickly, going from apparently complete non-reading to fluent reading in a matter of weeks; others learned much more slowly. A few learned in a conscious manner, systematically working on phonics and asking for help along the way. Others just "picked it up." They realized, one day, that they could read, but they had no idea how they had learned to do so. There was no systematic relationship between the age at which students had first learned to read and their involvement with reading at the time of the interview. Some of the most voracious readers had learned early and others had learned late.

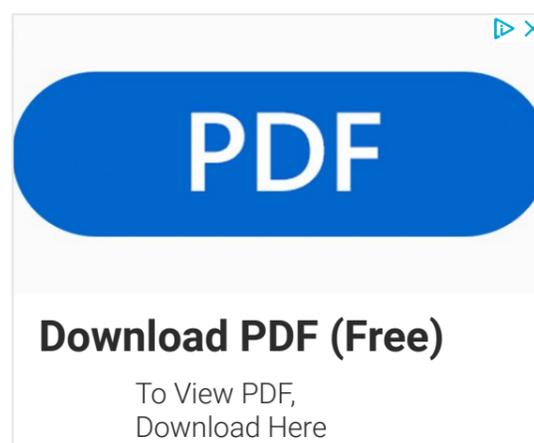
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My son, who is a staff member at Sudbury Valley, tells me that that study is now out of date. His impression is that most Sudbury Valley students today are learning to read earlier, and with even less conscious effort than before, because they are immersed in a culture in which people are communicating regularly with the written word--in computer games, email, [Facebook](#), cell-phone texting, and the like. The written word is not essentially different to them than the spoken word, so the biological machinery that all humans have for picking up spoken language is more or less automatically employed in their learning to read and write (or type). I'd love to study this in some way, but so far haven't figured out how to do it without being intrusive.

Several weeks ago (see post of [January 6, 2010](#)), I invited readers of this blog who are involved in unschooling or Sudbury model schooling to write to me with stories about learning to read without formal instruction. Eighteen people--most of whom identified themselves as parents of unschoolers--kindly shared their stories with me. Each story is unique. Just as my students found in their study at Sudbury Valley, there seems to be no pattern to how unschooled children today are learning to read.

By listing and organizing the main points made by each story, I did, however, extract what seem to me to be **seven principles** that may cast some general understanding on the process of learning to read without schooling. I have chosen to organize the remainder of this essay around these principles and to exemplify each with quotations from stories that were sent to me. Some of the people who sent stories asked that I use only their first names and not their children's names, so I will use that convention throughout.

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For children in standard schools, it is very important to learn to read on schedule, by the timetable dictated by the school. If you fall behind you will be unable to keep up with the rest of the curriculum and may be labeled as a "failure," or as someone who should repeat a grade, or as a person with some sort of mental handicap. In standard schools learning to read is the key to all of the rest of learning. First you "learn to read" and then you "read to learn." Without knowing how to read you can't learn much of the rest of the curriculum, because so much of it is presented through the written word. There is even evidence that failure to learn to read on schedule predicts subsequent naughtiness in standard schools. One longitudinal study, conducted in Finland, found that poor reading in preschool and kindergarten predicted poor reading later on in elementary school and also predicted subsequent "externalizing problem behavior," which basically means acting out.[3]

But the story is entirely different for unschooled children. They may learn to read at any time, with no apparent negative consequences. The stories sent to me by readers of this blog include 21 separate cases of children learning to read in which the age of first real reading (reading and understanding of novel passages of text) was mentioned. Of these, two learned at age 4, seven learned at age 5 or 6, six learned at age 7 or 8, five learned at age 9 or 10, and one learned at age 11.

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Even within the same family, different children learned to read at quite different ages. Diane wrote that her first daughter learned to read at age 5 and her second daughter learned at age 9; Lisa W. wrote that one son learned at age 4 and another at age 7; and Beatrice wrote that one daughter learned before age 5 and the other at age 8.

None of these children has difficulty reading today. Beatrice reports that the daughter who didn't read until age 8 is now 14 years old and "reads hundreds of books a year," "has written a novel," and "has won numerous poetry awards." Apparently, late reading is not inconsistent with subsequent extraordinary literary ability! This daughter did, however, show other signs of literary precocity well before she learned to read. According to Beatrice, she could recite from memory all of the poems in the *Complete Mother Goose* book by the time she was 15 months old. [Note: See Beatrice Ekwa Ekoko's excellent blog at <http://radiofreeschool.blogspot.com/>.]

The message repeated most often in these stories of learning to read is that, because the children were not forced or coaxed into reading against their wills, they have positive attitudes about reading and about learning in general. This is perhaps most clearly stated by Jenny, who wrote, regarding her daughter (now 15) who didn't read well until age 11: "One of the best things that came out of allowing her to read at her own pace and on her own initiative was that she owned the experience, and through owning that experience she came to realize that if she could do that, she could learn anything. We have never pressured her to learn anything at all, ever, and because of that, her ability to learn has remained intact. She is bright and inquisitive and interested in the world around her."

2. Motivated children can go from apparent non-reading to fluent reading very quickly.

In some cases unschooled children progress from non-reading to reading in what seems to observers to be a flash. For example, Lisa W. wrote: "Our second child, who is a visual thinker, didn't learn to read until he was 7. For years, he could either figure out what he needed to know from pictorial cues, or if stuck, would get his older

Diane wrote, "My first daughter could not read when she turned 5 in March but by the end of that year she could read fluently, out loud, without pause or hesitation." And Kate wrote that her son, at age 9, "taught himself to read" in a period of just one month. In that time span he deliberately worked at reading, on his own, and progressed from being a hesitant, poor reader to highly fluent reading, well beyond what a standard school would have regarded as his "grade level."

Such step-like progressions in overt reading ability may occur at least partly because earlier, more covert stages of learning are not noticed by observers and may not even be noticed by the learners. Karen attributes the rapid onset of reading that she observed in her son to a sudden gain in confidence. She wrote: "Over this past summer, son A [now age 7] went from hiding his ability [to read at all] to reading chapter books. In a summer! Now, six months later, he feels confident enough in his reading ability that I regularly get up in the morning to find him reading aloud to his sister. He even offers to read to his father and me. This was unheard of a year ago when he hid his ability level from us in his embarrassment and lack of confidence. I'm so glad we didn't push him!"

3. Attempts to push reading can backfire.

Three of the people who sent me stories wrote that they at some point attempted to teach reading to their non-reading child and that the attempt seemed to have negative consequences. Here is what they said.

Holli wrote that when her son was "about 3 1/2" she began trying to teach him reading. "I think the Bob books are stupidly repetitive and inane, but I found ones that were at least moderately engaging and had him start practicing them. ... He really was not ready yet, I think, for actual reading, and whether he was or not, he resented being made to do something that wasn't his idea, so he resisted. ... Pretty quickly I realized that in spite of the progress he was making in reading skill, I was doing more harm than good to my son, because I was making him hate reading. I immediately ceased formal instruction in reading, and just went back to reading to him whenever he wanted me to." Holli went on to note that, roughly two years later, her son "entirely surreptitiously" began to look at books on his own and eventually to read, apparently hiding his interest and practice so as not to feel pressured.

Beatrice wrote, of her daughter who learned to read at age 8: "I too am guilty of trying to 'make her' read, when she turned 6, worried that the kids at school would be learning this skill and not wanting her to be left behind. After a couple of weeks of insisting she read and keep a journal with me spelling everything and she copying it all out, she told me flatly to 'leave me alone,' that she would have no part in my scheme and would learn to read when she was 'good and ready.'"

And Kate, a homeschooling mom in the UK, wrote, concerning her attempts to teach reading to her son: "By age 9 he was resistant to any English and reading became a regular battle. He resisted it and found it boring and he was distracted, so finally I got over my own schooly head and tried a new policy of letting go. I said that I would never make him read again or even suggest it.... Over the next month he quietly went to his room ... and taught himself to read.... I had spent four years teaching him the basics [when he wasn't interested], but am now sure that he could have learnt that in a few weeks."

4. Children learn to read when reading becomes, to them, a means to some valued end or ends.

There's an old joke, which I recall first hearing several decades ago, about a child who reached age 5 without ever speaking a word. Then one day, at lunch, he said, "This soup is cold." His mom, practically falling over, said, "My son, you can talk! Why haven't you ever said anything before?" "Well," said the boy, "up until now the soup has always been warm."

This story is completely apocryphal as applied to learning to talk, which is why we understand it to be a joke. Children learn to talk whether or not they really have to talk in order to get their needs met; they are genetically programmed for it. But the story, somewhat modified, could apply quite reasonably to learning to read. Children

Amanda wrote, concerning her daughter who attends a Sudbury model school: "She had consistently told people that she didn't know how to read until she made brownies this past November [at age 7]. She asked her father and myself to make her favorite brownies for her, but neither of us was willing to make them. A little while later she ran into the room and asked me if I would turn on the oven for her and find her a 9x11 pan (she said, "9 ex 11" instead of "9 by 11"). I got her a pan and turned on the oven. Later she ran in and asked me to put the brownies in the oven. Then she said, 'Ma, I think I can read now.' She brought me a few books that she then read out loud to me until she jumped up and said, 'those brownies smell done. Will you take them out now?' ... Now she tells people that she knows how to read and that she taught herself how."

Idzie, a 19-year-old unschooled but beautifully educated blogger, sent me a link to an essay, on her [blog](#), about her own [memories](#) of learning to read. She wrote, in part: "When I was something like age 8 or 9, my mother was reading the first Harry Potter book aloud to my sister and me. But, well, she had things to do other than read, and if she read too long, her voice would get hoarse. So, being quite frustrated at how slow a process this was, and really wanting to know what happened next, I picked it up and began to read."

Marie, an unschooling mom, wrote about her son, now age 7: "[He] found the incentive to become a better reader through acting at a local theater. He has always been passionate about putting together 'shows,' but now he is old enough to have real acting experience. He sees that reading is an integral part of this activity that he loves and it has given him a strong reason to grow and develop as a reader. He recently had a part in A Midsummer Night's Dream and had to read and memorize Shakespeare. It took no instruction on the part of a 'teacher' whatsoever."

Jenny wrote that her daughter, who didn't begin to read books until age 11, was able to satisfy her love of stories by being read to, watching movies, and checking out CDs and books on tape, from the library. She finally began reading because there was no other way for her to satisfy her interest in video games, such as ToonTown, and manga books, which require reading that nobody would do for her.

5. Reading, like many other skills, is learned socially through shared participation.

Observations at Sudbury Valley School, and at other Sudbury model schools, suggest that many children there learn to read through age-mixed play. Non-readers and readers play games together, including computer games, with written words. To keep the game going, the readers read the words and the non-readers pick them up.

Vincent Lopez, a staff member at the [Diablo Valley School](#), a Sudbury model school, sent me this sweet example of age-mixed learning: "In the art room they are making signs to imitate a TV show that had just started. It is in my opinion, a dumb, low-ethics, media-driven, free for all dating show; I've let this be known before. In their own way they are processing the future to come. ... but I digress. The jewel of this snippet is that the 5-year-old is attempting to read the sign with the help of his multi-aged peers. ...Students learn because they want to get the jokes, be more advanced like the peers around them."

Nearly all of the stories from home unschoolers include examples of shared participation in reading. One of my favorites is that presented by Diane, who noted that her daughter, who learned to read at age 5, became interested in reading because of the family's regular Bible reading time. Before she could read she insisted on having her turn at Bible reading, "and she would just make up words as her turn!"

Others wrote about shared family games involving words, or about shared television viewing in which the onscreen guide and captions would be read for the benefit of nonreaders. Over time, the nonreaders needed ever less help; they began recognizing and reading more and more words themselves. The most often mentioned examples of shared participation are those of parents, or sometimes siblings, reading stories to nonreaders, often as part of the bedtime ritual. Nonreaders look on, at the words as well as the pictures, and sometimes read some of the words; or they memorize books that have been read to them repeatedly, and then later they pretend to read the books while actually attending to some of the words. Pretend reading gradually becomes real reading.

hold in the case of reading.

6. Some children become interested in writing before reading, and they learn to read as they learn to write.

At least seven of the people who sent me stories said that their child was interested in writing, or typing, either before or simultaneously with their initial interest in reading. Here are four examples:

Marie wrote, of her son, now age 7: "He is an artist and spends hours drawing things, especially stories and inventions. So naturally he wished to make his pictures "talk" with captions, titles, instructions, and quotations. ... There was a lot of 'MOM? How do you spell *Superdog wants to go home?*' I would spell out the sentence and five minutes later, 'MOM? How do you spell *Superdog sees his house?*'" This boy learned to read, at least partly, by reading the sentences that he, himself, had written.

Beatrice told a similar story about her youngest daughter, who learned to read before age 5. "She learned to read from her desire to express herself through the written word. Starting from the time she could hold a pencil, be it writing a poem, a song, designing an ad, she needed me to tell her the spelling: 'How do you spell *beaver*, how do you spell *suggest?*'"

Lisa R. wrote of her son, who is presently in the midst of learning to read: "His reading skill relates to his writing efforts. ... He has written short notes and story titles using his own phonetic spelling. Sometimes he asks how to spell words for a note or a book. Through repetition, he now remembers some of these words."

Lisa W. wrote: "Our oldest child learned to read when he was 4 years old as a by-product of trying to find free online games on the computer. He would open the browser and ask me to spell *free*, then *online*, then *games*. All of a sudden he was reading."

7. There is no predictable "course" through which children learn to read.

Lest you leave this essay with the belief that I and the people who have contributed these stories have taught you something useful about how to "teach" or "help" your child to read, I assure you we have not. Every child is unique. Your child must tell you how you can help, or not help. I have no idea about that, nor does any so-called reading expert. My only advice is, don't push it; listen to your child; respond appropriately to your child's questions, but don't go overboard by telling your child more than he or she wants to know. If you do go overboard, your child will learn to stop asking you questions.

Quite a few of the people who wrote to me expressed surprise at the sequence that their child went through in learning to read. Some learned to read quite exotic words, which never appear in the primers, well before they learned simpler words. Some, as I said, learned to write before they could read. Some seemed to be learning at a rapid rate and then they just stopped for a couple of years before progressing further. We adults can enjoy watching all of this as long as we remember that it isn't our responsibility to change it. We're just observers and sometimes tools that our children use for their own chosen ends.

I am very grateful to the people who took time to write their stories so thoughtfully and send them to me. I hope that many of you who have just read this essay will add to these stories with stories of your own, in the comments section below. It's high time that we created a real account of the many ways that unschooled children learn to read, an account to contrast with all those rows of books on teaching reading that exist in the education section of every university library.

Finally, I can't resist ending with a little story about my son's learning to read. He was a very early reader, and one of the first indications of his reading ability occurred when he was about three and a half and we were looking at a Civil War monument in a town square somewhere in New England. He looked at the words, and then he said to me, "Why would men fight and die to save an onion?"

Notes

[1] D. Rose & B. Dalton (2009), Learning to read in the digital age. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 3, 74-83.

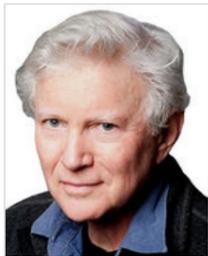
[2] R. M. Savio (1989), Self-initiative in the learning process; and A. DelGaudio (1989), SVS Reading Study. Unpublished senior honors theses.

[3] A. Halonen et al., (2006). The role of learning to read in the development of problem behaviour: A cross-lagged longitudinal study. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76, 517-534.

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Peter Gray, Ph.D., is a research professor at Boston College and author of the newly published book *Free to Learn* (Basic Books) and *Psychology*.

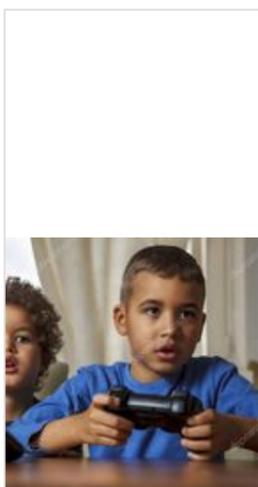
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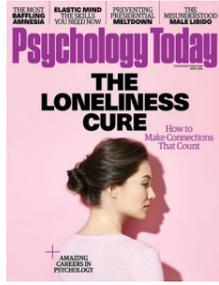
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