

Dads and reading

Why dads should read with their children

A guide by Dan Freedman

RENAISSANCE
LEARNING



Dan Freedman writes the *Jamie Johnson* series of novels. He also visits schools around the country.

Born in London in 1977, Dan has been obsessed with

football from a very young age. His passion was a constant through school and university and led him to doing work experience at Arsenal FC, Radio Five LIVE, Carlton TV, Mail on Sunday and Sky Sports.

Dan joined The FA in 2000, becoming editor of their website. As Editor, his job was to bring to life for the public what goes on behind the scenes and to give the players and coaches the platform to talk directly to the fans. He also wrote all the programmes for England matches and The FA Cup Final and toured with the England team during two World Cups and the European Championships.

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“Why should dads read with their children?” - Not a question that I am asked very often. Normally it’s “How do I get my boy to read?”

But when I was invited to talk to a group of dads after hours at a primary school in Harrow about the question above, I accepted straight away because the subject intrigues me.

The school wanted me to win over the more reluctant dads, to get them on-side.

As I watched the group of burly men roll into the room on a cold January night, I was acutely aware that I had to do something in the next hour to justify their decision to give up their free time to discuss this subject.

I decided to start by telling them my story. I never lived with my dad and was a stubborn scoundrel who refused to read any books whatsoever when I was younger. However, I have always gone to football with my dad (I did not state my team so as to stay friends with my new acquaintances) and football has ended up being the consistent theme through my career, first as a journalist covering the England Team and second, as a children’s author.

Does the football reflect or replace my relationship with my dad? Good question, perhaps for another day...But looking at these dads and step-dads in front of me, I was struck by how powerful a group of people they could be...They could be soldiers in a reading army...And where they went, their children would follow.

But first we must win the argument; **why should dads read to their children?**

It's Pivotal to Your Children's Futures

Public health evidence shows that reading just 10 minutes a day improves a child's overall achievement, including the specific areas of education, employment & health over a lifetime...

Now, hang on a minute! Sometimes, statistics and phrases such as this can seem quite dry. My temptation is to switch off almost immediately. But read that sentence above one more time...

It is quite a fact. Education, employment and health must be three of the key drivers of success and happiness in people's lives...and reading for 10 minutes a day can enhance all of these areas?

What father would not want to assist their child's education, employment and health? It's a no-brainer. Perhaps we should put the question another way: Can dads afford *not* to read with their kids?

You are a Role-Model

David Beckham. A school teacher. A pop-star. A wrestler. These are the kind of role-models that boys and girls look up to. But, in truth, kids' biggest role-models of all are their parents.

They will copy what you do and what you don't do. For a child to see their dad reading, even without saying a word, is one of the biggest motivational factors that exist to encourage that child to pick up a book.



David Beckham, footballing ambassador and role-model.

Like it or not, your kids will pick up your habits – that's why we call it their formative years. Why not help them to form a positive habit?

And if you are not a prolific or advanced reader yourself, please don't let that stop you. Your kids will support you, just as you support them. This is a journey for both of you. It can change the dynamic of your relationship.

It's Human Instinct

It's by reading that your children learn words... and how to communicate...and gain a context for the world they live in.

Without going over the top, isn't that part of what being human is about? Isn't it our ability to talk and write and read that makes us different to other animals? That ability to share, learn, entertain, cry and laugh...

And, it's also magical...think back to when you were a child and someone read to you, how your mind danced along to the story.

Going all the way back to when we used to sit around fires, humans have always had the innate desire to hear and tell stories.

A father reading to his child is the most natural thing in the world. Once you start, it will flow.

It's good for YOU

Ok, let's forget the kids for a moment. This is about you too.

"I do enjoy reading a good book – it's so relaxing. But I only have time when we're on holiday. At home, I'm just too busy."

Sound familiar? Yes, me too. Even as an author I'm the same. I don't read as much as I would like to. TV wins. Email wins. Everything else wins.

But hang on! This kid of yours is the perfect opportunity for you to change that. Reading with your child is also reading for you. Find a few slots in the week that you can commit to and get it in the diary – in permanent ink.

Find a book that you both like and a time that suits you both (don't start just as their favourite TV programme is beginning!) and, for those few minutes, let you, your



child and the book be your only focus. Bring that feeling of relaxation into your life at home.

And remember those stats about reading enhancing your education, employment and health? They count for you too.

Your Relationship

Of course, this is the real big win. Yes, reading is good for your kid. Yes, it's good for you too. But, most of all, it's good for you together.

This phrase, 'quality time' makes me feel a bit queasy but, really, the two of you reading together is the perfect example; a defined time with just you and your child. This is where you make memories together.

In thinking about this subject, I have asked dads about how they read with their children and how it has affected to their relationship. Here are some of the answers:

- *"We have a kickaround outside together then read before bedtime. Just before lights out, we discuss the book and the game"*
- *"Sometimes, I'll pick a book that I know is rubbish. We'll start reading it together and then mutually decide we've had enough! It shows that we're in charge and this is fun, not a chore"*

- *"When we read together we stay up past 'bedtime'. It turns the sessions into a real treat for both of us (and we keep it a secret from mum!)"*
- *"I'll read ahead in the book so I know what's happening and then, when we're reading together, I'll stop at a really good bit. 'Noooo!' says my little one. 'Please carry on with the story!!'"*
- *"We enjoy the books together and, in that time, I feel I'm not just a father or a dad but also a mate"*
- *"If something happens and I have to go away for a second, I let my child read on. When I come back in the room, the first question I ask is: 'What have I missed?'"*
- *"The best way I can describe the experience of reading with my kids is to say that we grew together..."*

Emotions

It is a cliché but also a truth (as with most clichés) to say that men find it hard to talk about their feelings. Ideal then, to be able to talk about the feelings and dilemmas of the characters in the story, without having to break cover on your own concerns and vulnerabilities...

In the same way that reading with your child sets the habit that should stay with them for a lifetime, being able to discuss the relationships, choices, regrets and ambitions of the characters in the book will set you in good stead to continue that dialogue as your child gets older.

Hopefully these early experiences will mean they will feel comfortable talking to you about their own worries.



So, What Should You Read With Your Child?

There are no rules here, except that it should be something that the dad wants to read. Don't pretend to enjoy yourself; your kid will smell a rat straight away.

Instead, choose a book that you will genuinely look forward to reading. Perhaps it will be a book that you enjoyed when you were younger or perhaps it'll be a book from the new generation of children's writers. Vampires, football, wizards, spies....they're all there and

though they may be known as children's books, they are very likely to have you hooked in an instant.

But why not start by discussing the options available with your kid/fellow reader. Making a joint choice is an ideal way to start the process. And remember, you are not restricted by mediums either; kindles, iPads, CDs for car journeys can all complement the books and, especially in the case of car journeys, turn dead time into special moments.

“Vampires, football, wizards, spies....they're all there and though they may be known as children's books, they are very likely to have you hooked in an instant.”

So, what do you think? Are you up for it? Lots to chew over and think about, I know. If you'll allow me, I'll close with a comment from one of my readers:

“Me and Dad take turns to read a page each of your books. Dad says this way he reads me a story and hears me read at the same time.”

It made me smile. As an author, to imagine a dad reading my books with his child makes me immensely proud. In my books, the character of the dad is missing. It's an absence which hangs over the main character, Jamie Johnson. But to know that there are dads, very much present, reading the books with their children rounds off the circle perfectly.

And what I really like is this idea of kick-starting the reading habit...dads spending time reading with their kids, putting them on the right path as they grow up.

At some point, of course, as the children get older, it will have to end, which is a shame...but those habits and memories will remain. Imagine a few further years down the line, those children will have kids of their own. And they will think back to reading with their dads and repeat the experience with the new generation.

It's a heart-warming thought and, who knows, maybe they'll even invite granddad along too...

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