

*Reflections on Reading: Michael Rosen

It should be fairly obvious to state that one of the best ways to get children interested in reading and to carry on being interested in reading is to ensure that they are surrounded with books and printed matter that interests them. In fact, it's so obvious, nearly everyone agrees that this is a good idea. The problem arises when we look very closely at whether we adults make sure that it happens, and that it really happens in such a way that children themselves have some choice in the matter.

So, when talking about 'reading for enjoyment' we might ask 'what ways have we invented which make it harder for children to have easy, frequent, ready access to the kinds of printed material that is likely to interest them?' One way, is to ensure that libraries and bookshops are a great distance from many thousands of children. What results from this sad fact is that such children rarely have the experience of being in a physical space in which there is a profusion of books that might interest them. Such a space enables children to browse. In fact, I'm going to put that word 'browse' in scary capitals: BROWSE. I cannot overestimate the value for children to mooch about in the midst of books and printed matter finding material that might interest them. This seemingly trivial, unchallenging activity is in fact charged with the core motivation of reading for pleasure. It has a democratic aspect - 'I am choosing what I want to read'. It has a 'scanning' aspect - learning how to scan across a variety of cues and clues which will inform me what I might find interesting. It has a pick-and-mix aspect - that 'reading' doesn't have to be one single, beginning-to-end activity, but it can be a means of dipping, finding, sticking-with-if-I-want-to, dropping activity. And the end result, is that I, the reader, start to find out what it means for me to have control over what I read.

This last aspect is particularly necessary in the context of children whose only usual access to reading material is via school. School is a place where most reading is prescribed. We are given texts to read, and questions to answer about those texts. This is generally regarded as a good thing. I'm not going to get into the nitty-gritty of whether our ways of doing this are the best. There is a

problem however, whether at key stages in a child's life whether the amount of prescribed reading and question-answering becomes so great that there is hardly any time for free reading. I concede that my argument here is based on my own children who are of school age. By the time they have been at school, done a good amount of physical activity, met their friends, watched their favourite TV programmes or visited their favourite internet sites and done the now huge amounts of homework, I cannot see how either of them can easily get stuck into any kind of long, sustained reading. Again, speaking from personal experience, the one time that reading for pleasure creeps higher up their agenda is on long journeys and on foreign holidays there the TV is in a language they don't understand! Yes, of course, as parents we can impose all sorts of bans and rationing in order to convince our children of the pleasure of reading (and the necessity of it) but I'm the first to admit that such draconian measures always feel as if they run counter to the spirit of reading itself! This is not me throwing in the towel. I'm simply admitting the difficulty in the face of wanting our children to enjoy themselves. That said, I'm a great believer in supporting the activities of our children - as and when they choose what they want to do - with printed material of any kind, even if the activity in question appears at first glance to have little to do with reading - such as football. When we nudge some printed material in front of our youngest and it ties in with his fascination and love of football, I find myself thinking, this will pass on the message that the written word can support and enlarge almost any activity that we take part in.



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Michael Rosen held the post of Children's Laureate from 2007-2009. He is one of the best-known figures in the children's book world, renowned for his work as a poet, performer, broadcaster and scriptwriter. As an author and by selecting other writers' works for anthologies he has been involved with over 140 books.

