



home run research

Should We Just Tell Them to Read? The Role of Direct Encouragement in Promoting Recreational Reading

Fay Shin
fshin@csulb.edu

“Home Run Research” offers short columns that present new, original research in a digestible, easy-to-understand way, research that has implications for librarians and others interested in literacy development.

The question of how to encourage students to read more is still under investigation. We know that simply supplying access to books has a positive effect on students’ reading habits, but is not always sufficient.¹

In addition, there is evidence that read alouds encourage reading, and that teachers modeling reading encourages reading.² What about simply telling students to read? Does direct encouragement work? I present here dramatic evidence that, in one case, it did work, but urge caution about its use.

Tanisha: A Reluctant Reader

Tanisha is a native speaker of English, a sixth grader who read at the fourth-grade level at the time of this study. She was one of two hundred students participating in a special summer program I organized that allowed children to read for pleasure for two hours per day. Children could read whatever they selected, and accountability was minimal: Students only had to fill out a simple form for each book they read with the name and title of the book.

Children in this program had previously had little access to books, but during the summer had access to a large quantity of paperback books, including the Goosebumps, Sweet Valley Kids, and Animorphs series, as well as such magazines as *WWF (World Wrestling Federation)*, *Teen*, *Seventeen*, and *Sports Illustrated for Kids*—about twenty-five items per child.

I became interested in Tanisha’s progress because of a particular incident that happened during the conferencing time. One Friday when Tanisha was in the library, I pulled her folder and conference log and asked her to read to me. She read one page from the Goosebumps book she was reading. She read it without difficulty and with a high level of accuracy. I asked her a few questions, and it was obvious that she had understood what she had read. When she finished reading the next page, I asked her what she was going to read over the weekend. She said she would read chapters 2, 3, and 4. I proceeded to tell her that she was a good reader and that she could read much more. I told her I wanted her to finish the book she was reading, and I gave her another Goosebumps book for her to read by Monday.

She was shocked! Her face just lit up and she exclaimed, “Are you crazy? I can’t finish this book and read a whole other book!” I smiled and asked her to calm down. I reiterated that she just read a page to me and was an excellent reader. Then I simply said, “Tanisha, I just want you to read as much as you can. If you can’t finish the book, that is okay. You have proven to me that you are a good reader, and I know that you can read these two books. Regardless, you read as much as you can.”

I left it at that, and she walked away mumbling. Monday morning, I was in the library and Tanisha walked in at 7:45 with a huge smile on her face. She handed me the two Goosebumps books and said, “Guess what? I finished both books!”

I was thrilled for her and I could tell she was very proud of herself. I complimented her and praised her accomplishment. Then, I smiled back at her and said, “Okay Tanisha, here is another book for you to start and finish

Fay Shin teaches in the College of Education/Department of Teacher Education at California State University, Long Beach.

This column is edited by Stephen Krashen <krashen@usc.edu>, an Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

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by tomorrow.” She looked at me and rolled her eyes and said, “Oh brother!”

A Book a Day

Then she took the book and walked back to her class. I knew I had her hooked. For the next few weeks, she actually read a book a day. After a couple of weeks of *Goosebumps*, I encouraged her to read other books. She went to the next level of *Goosebumps* (the Fear Street series). Before branching out to other authors, however, she was focused on only reading *Goosebumps* books. After about one week of trying to convince her to try Judy Blume books, she finally gave in and was pleasantly surprised. I realized it was not easy to convince her to try other books, but she did it only because I asked her as a special request (and I didn't give up). Gradually, she started to read books that I had recommended (*Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* and *SuperFudge* by Judy Blume, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor).³

Tanesha became one of the top readers of the two hundred students in the summer session, and read more than forty books. On the last day of summer school, her teacher told me that Tanesha went up to her and actually said she was going to sue the school and teachers. The teacher was very surprised and asked her why. Tanesha answered, “Because my eyes hurt. I have never, ever read so much in my whole entire life!” She was, of course, joking, but also half-serious. She really felt she had done nothing but read, read, read all summer. Overall, she was pleased with herself, and she was very surprised that reading could actually be fun. She said she planned to do a lot more reading during the rest of the summer and during school the following year.

When Encouragement Works

Tanesha's case demonstrates that direct encouragement, even fairly forceful encouragement, can work. Will it work in all cases? From Tanesha's case, we can provisionally conclude that several conditions need to be met for encouragement to work:

1. There needs to be access to plenty of books. This is not a trivial condition: Research shows that children of poverty have very little access to books at home, at school, and in their communities.⁴
2. The reading that is suggested must be extremely compelling. One way to help guarantee that this will happen is to allow choice.
3. The student is capable of doing the reading, but lacks confidence.

These conditions were apparently met in studies in which direct encouragement worked; more reading resulted when teachers and parents encouraged children to read.⁵ Encouragement didn't work in one study, however, when parents encouraged children to read the newspaper.⁶ Apparently, newspaper reading was not interesting or was too difficult for these children; conditions 2 and 3 were not met.

A reluctant reader quoted in the *Washington Post* recently said, “I have always hated it when people would tell me to read.”⁷ The case of Tanesha helps us understand why direct encouragement works in some cases and not in others. ●

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