

Roots of reading planted here

It's one of the best gifts to give to your child

PICTURE this scene: a man is talking to his friend about the Richard Branson autobiography he is reading; nearby, the man's 10-year-old son puts aside his soccer comic to ask a clarifying question about his father's conversation, and both adults willingly draw the boy into their discussion. In another room the mother has put aside her newspaper to read a rhyming poem to her eight-month-old daughter, who lies sleepily in a cot.

Picture another scene in another suburban house down the road: adults talk in one room while in another children compete to be heard by each other — here, children observe but participate little in adult conversation. There are few books in this house — besides the Bible, school books and someone's management guide.

In each of these homes a family is carrying out a cultural ritual passed on through generations of families. Where the children of these two homes meet in school. Probably, teachers in this school expect their pupils to ask the teachers questions, even challenge them, sometimes to work quietly on their own, or draw from their knowledge of the world to make posters and give speeches.

Which children are better prepared for academic



Judith Ancer

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success?

As these kids move through school and life, where books and newspapers are threatened by technology, they discover, ironically, that their world is increasingly saturated by literacy: MXit, texting, Twitter, Facebook, the internet and Wikipedia. More and more, the information they read is unfiltered by experts and adults.

Which children from which homes are better prepared to make sense of this new world, distinguish fact from fiction, re-organise the stream of data into patterns and ideas, and take effective action?

At the heart of the first

home is the belief that infants understand language even before they learn to speak. Because they see that their children respond differently to different sounds and to different people, these parents assume that babies understand more than they communicate. Therefore they create a language-rich environment — their children grow up hearing rhymes and stories before they can read, and are asked for their opinion before they can speak.

These parents are guides, leading their children on the road to literacy.

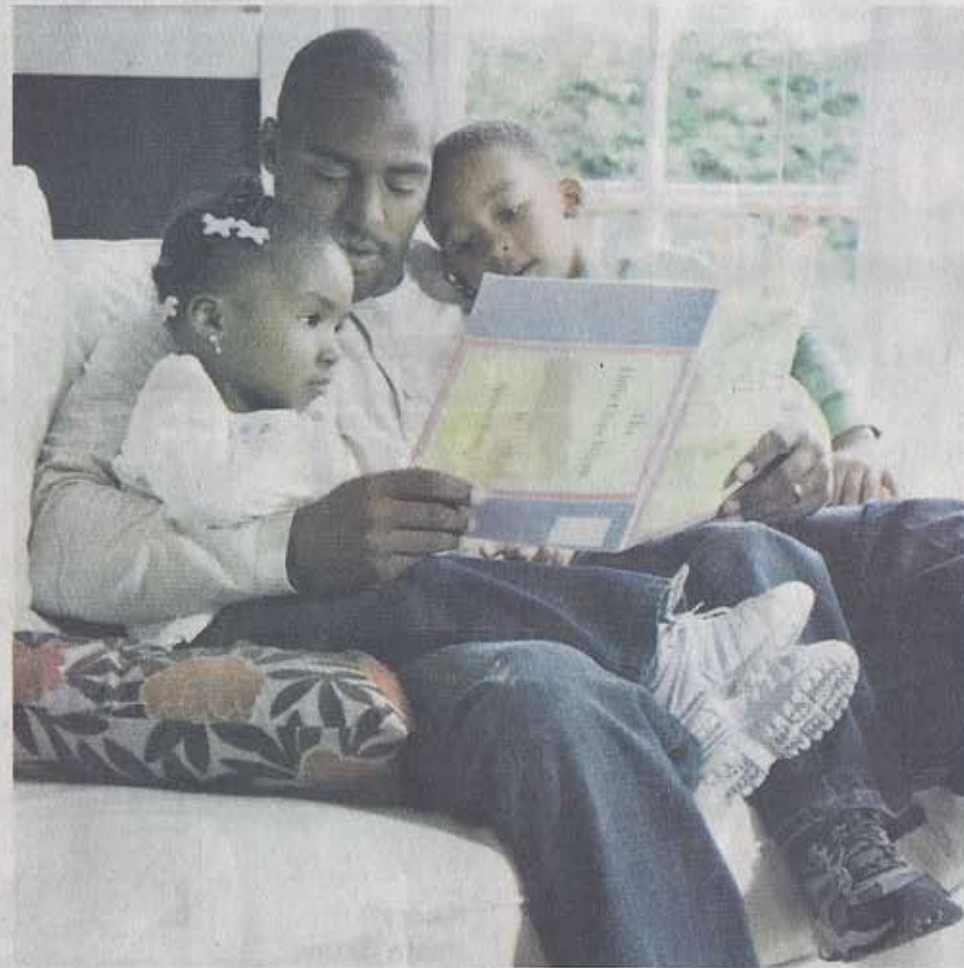
The infant brain is abuzz with activity, neurons firing: for a baby every day is like watching an exciting movie. Previously, there was an assumption that infants were much less aware than adults. In fact, babies are hyperaware and influenced by their early experiences, including being spoken and read to.

Therefore, I would suggest that you do your child a great service by raising them in a language-rich environment.

● Start, as always, with yourself. If you don't read, it's likely they won't;

● Value and display variety: around the house should be scattered books, magazines, newspapers, Kindles, personal computers and anything else;

● Use literacy to interact.



STORY TIME: Children learn on Dad's lap to love books

Picture: GALLO/GETTY IMAGES

Meet at the dinner table to talk. Talk to your sulky teenager about what you are reading and ask their opinion — revealing your pleasure helps to sell the enjoyment of reading and

asking questions animates the brain. With an infant, point out pictures, say sounds and words, repeat the sound your child makes in response;

● Extend your own

vocabulary and consciously use interesting words in conversation. One day your child will say, "I think I'm a humanist, Mom," or "My teacher is not impartial," and you will feel a little

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egotistic pride as you hear your own rhythms of speech echoing back to you;

● In a technologically-rich world, make an occasional move towards other media — have days when TVs are switched off and everyone reads the newspaper;

● Encourage your children to write; and

● Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, create a bit of magic. We know that reading extends vocabulary, perhaps arouses empathy, improves communication, extends knowledge and improves school marks. But this is not why kids will start reading. They will start because it's a magical escape, a journey of adventure.

Ancer is a Johannesburg-based psychologist