

The Habit of Reading Among Children

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Books are one of the best tools for training and upbringing. A good book always has a salutary effect on the mind of a reader. It will elevate spirit and thoughts, and it will augment the reader's store of knowledge. Books help in correcting moral ineptitude. Particularly in these days of mechanical existence, when people have hardly any time to attend meetings and symposia, the best source of acquiring religious and general knowledge are books that can be

browsed through whenever a person finds some time to spare.

It is possible that the reading of books may have a deeper impact on the minds of readers than other sources of acquiring knowledge. Sometimes, reading brings about a revolutionary change in the outlook of a person. The habit of reading is the best pastime, one of the reasons being

that it can keep a person busy when there is nothing else to do.

People who are in the habit of reading not only make the best use of their spare time, but they will also keep their minds away from the worries that might chase them if they were to sit brooding, doing nothing. To a reader, a good book is better than visiting the best of gardens

and scenic places.

Commander of the Faithful, Imam Ali (peace be upon him), says: "A person who keeps himself occupied with books will never lose his peace of mind." (Ghurar al-Hikam)

He has also said: "Obtaining fresh knowledge removes the tiredness and cloudiness of your hearts; because the hearts, like the bodies, too experience exhaustion." (Usul al-Kafi)

The gauge for the progress of any nation is related to the quality and number of books consumed, and to the number of persons habituated of reading them. The formal education of a person is no criterion of judging a person's knowledge. A truly learned person is one who is engaged in meaningful reading and research.

Unfortunately, there are many people with school diplomas and university degrees, but there are very few learned scholars and researchers among them. Most children complete their formal education, keep aside their books and get busy with other activities of life. Their growth of knowledge then becomes stagnant. Their criterion of acquiring education for finding a job

has been achieved – they feel that there is no further use for gaining any more knowledge.

In fact, formal education is usually for achieving excellence in a chosen field of knowledge, but learning education in general should not stop. Education is a continuous process and goes on till the last breath of a person. The religion of Islam too has exhorted its followers to pursue

the path of learning from the cradle to the grave.

The Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him and his progeny) has said: "Searching for knowledge is the duty of every Muslim. Allah likes the seekers of knowledge." (Usul al-Kafi)

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (peace be upon him) says: "Even if my companions are motivated to acquire knowledge at the threat of a whipping, I would approve of it." (Usul al-Kafi)

The Prophet has also told us: "Barring two types of persons, there is no reward for anyone else: first, the erudite scholar, and then he who is busy acquiring knowledge." (Usul al-Kafi)

Imam Sadiq said: "People are of three types: the erudite scholar, the seeker of knowledge – and the others are mere a heap of garbage." (Usul al-Kafi)

Prophet Luqman (peace be upon him) advised his son: "Spare some time in the day and night for reading and acquiring knowledge. If you stop reading, your knowledge will dissipate." (Bihar al-Anwar)

Imam Sadiq also said: "Searching for knowledge in all conditions is absolutely necessary." (Bihar al-Anwar)

Similarly, the Prophet has said: "Searching for knowledge is the duty of every Muslim man and every Muslim woman." (Bihar al-Anwar)

Imam Sadiq exhorted: "If the people knew the uses of knowledge, they would have tried to acquire it even at the cost of their very lives. For this purpose, they would have undertaken hazardous sea voyages." (Bihar al-Anwar)

The Prophet has said: "If I spent one day without adding to the store of my knowledge, I would consider that day unlucky for me." (Majma al-Zawaid)

It is the duty of the parents to send their children to schools for acquiring knowledge of reading and writing. Islam has very clear directions in this regard for the followers of the faith. Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq said: "A child plays for seven years, studies for seven years, and for another seven years learns about what is permissible (Halal) and impermissible (Haram)." (Mustadrak al-Wasa'il)

The Prophet explained: "A son has three rights over his father: the father must select a good name for him, the father should teach him to read and write, and when he grows up, get him a spouse." He has told us: "When a child is taken to the school, and the teacher instructs him to say Bismillah (In the name of Allah), Allah will spare the child's parents from the fire of the Hell!" The Prophet also said: "Pity on the children of the Last Epoch for what their forebears have brought to them. Although the parents would themselves be Muslims, they would not acquaint the children with the religious duties." (Mustadrak al-Wasa'il)

The other responsibility of the parents is that they bring up their children in such a way that

they cultivate habits of reading good books and of becoming seekers of knowledge. The atmosphere in their homes should be one of education and learning. They must motivate the children by their words and actions to develop the habit of reading. Before the child goes for formal education to school, he/she should be introduced to books. In the beginning, parents should read aloud small and interesting stories and fables to make the child interested in books.

Give the children books with lots of colored pictures and illustrations. Everyday, parents or older siblings should read even part of a book to the younger ones to sustain their interest in the contents. The details of the illustrations should be explained to the children. Then the child should be asked to recount the story and explain the meaning of the illustrations.

In this informal education, the parents should not make haste in teaching and should not give books that are beyond the child's comprehension. They must first spark an interest in the child for listening to stories, and then bring out the process of reading from the books. Continue this process until the children learn to read and write on their own. Then leave the work of actually reading the books to the child. Sometimes ask the child's opinion about a new book, or discuss the contents of it with the child. Here are some reminders for parents:

1. Children like fables and understand their contents well. Therefore, it is useful if the material provided to them on any subject is in the form of stories.
2. Every child will have an individual personality, so the capability and tastes too will differ from person to person. There will be changes in the tastes of a person with advancements in years – therefore, the parents must first try to figure out the taste and capability of their child and then bring suitable books. Difficult and boring books must not be thrust upon the child, as this might have a negative impact on the child's reading habits.
3. Since the child is in the process of developing a personality, and the books can have a deep impact on this process, care must be exercised to see that books with appropriate contents are chosen. Parents should first read the books themselves, and then decide about their suitability for the child's reading. The child should not read any undesirable matter that might have a negative impact on such an impressionable mind – after getting into the habit of reading such literature, it would be difficult to wean the child out of it.
4. Children show more interest in reading about crime and adventure. These books may have detrimental effects on the psyche of a child. Similarly, books that give vent to the sexual instincts in children should be kept out of their reach. One person writes in his memoirs thus: "My Granny used to love me very much. I used to sleep with her at nights. I always used to ask her to tell me bed-time stories. To make me go to sleep, she used to tell me one story every

night.

In her repertoire there were stories about the Jinn Baba and other tales of horror. These stories have left their mark on my psyche. I used to sleep in a feeling of horror after hearing the stories. I started seeing horrible, bad dreams. Over time, I turned into a timid and cowardly person. I was always afraid to be alone. I became excitable and restless. This condition persists with me. How I wish parents and elders wouldn't relate horror stories to their impressionable children. I have decided that I will not tell such stories to my own children. I

generally tell them stories from the Holy Qur'an, and other stories with good morals."

5. The habit of reading is not just a pastime. The main purpose of reading is to acquire knowledge and understand the contents of the books, deriving advantage from them. It is not very important how many books the child reads, but the important thing is how the books have been read. Is the child just making a cursory rapid reading? Has he/she read a book with absorbed interest and understood its contents? The parents should give full attention to these aspects. Occasionally, after asking the child to give the gist of a book that he/she read, the parents should derive a conclusion of whether or not the child has understood the contents correctly. If the understanding is skewed, they should correct the child.

6. Children generally like books with imaginary stories. Some intellectuals encourage reading of such books. They feel that such books will promote the imaginative faculties of the child. But the author feels that the reading of imaginary and fictitious stories can promote the habit of lying. The reader's mind will become the storehouse of false thoughts, and when upon growing up, the child might resort to falsities to fulfill his/her needs and wishes.

7. It is true that a child prefers to read stories than other reading matter. But care must be taken that a carefully selected mix of books on various subjects is given and not just storybooks. The child must steadily develop interests in reading and understanding the intricate subject matter of serious literature.

8. It is not true that children are fond of only fictitious stories. They will definitely show a keen interest in reading the stories of great personalities, their lives and achievements. They can aim .to model their own lives on the lives of the great personages they read about