

What would you have had me do, Mem?

**Jackie
Nieuwenhuizen**



Mem Fox says all kids will learn to read if they are exposed to enough books, words, stories. But here's the thing ... I have two boys, one learned to read, one didn't.

The boys' grandmother happens to be Agnes Nieuwenhuizen, founder of the Centre for Youth Literature. The boys' grandfather happens to be John Nieuwenhuizen, highly regarded translator of books from Dutch into English. The boys' uncle, as it happens, was John Nieuwenhuizen (Jnr), publisher and director for some time of the Sydney Writers' Festival and author. Two of the boys' aunts happen to be editors, their dad works in a library. Me, I am a primary teacher with a specialisation in literacy. They are surrounded by books, by a love of books, by talk about books, by the richest imaginable reading culture. They go to libraries, book events, book shops, books are treats to be savoured and yet ... one learned to read and one, at first, did not.

In the world according to Mem, this should not be possible. We provided the richest possible soil for reading to grow in and yet one learned to read and one, at first, did not. In the world according to Mem, children WILL learn to read as long as the soil is rich. They will not need to be TAUGHT. They will not need to be given, as well as rich soil, rich direct, clear, systematic teaching in the mechanics of reading. The problem is that vast amounts of evidence says otherwise; that my wide experience with children learning to read says otherwise; that mothers of seven-year-old boys frequently tell me otherwise; that my son in front of my eyes was otherwise.

What in the world of Mem should I have done then? Continued to do what was failing to teach him to read? According to Mem he should be reading – all the necessary conditions were met. The problem is, the truth is, HE COULD NOT READ. More fertiliser, more fertiliser, more fertiliser ... NO! A scaffold was required.

By the age of seven, he was frustrated and angry. He just could not make head nor tail of the text on the page in front of him. I decided that the time had come to do something, after getting very little from the school. So I sat down with him for 20 minutes a day, five days a week before school. We opened at lesson one of 'Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons' (a phonics-based, systematic, explicit, direct instruction reading program) and I taught him to read. By about lesson 30 he turned to me one day and said "Mum, it's so cool because now I GET IT, now I know how to do it". (I also continued to immerse him in his rich reading culture of course. We were very clear about what was to do with learning HOW TO read and what was to do with books, culture, etc.) He is now a confident, skilled reader and his spelling ability far outshines that of his whole language-taught brother.

The evidence is extremely clear: at least 30% (National Year of Reading suggests 41%) of children will NOT learn to read adequately unless they are TAUGHT using evidence-based programs.

We see the sad ongoing consequences of this daily, in miserable, angry kids who go on to be miserable, angry teenagers and adults who have been let down by a wilful ignoring of the facts.

Jackie Nieuwenhuizen is a teacher, literacy specialist, Word Wasp and 'That Reading Thing' tutor and DI trainer. www.allreading.com.au