

“We are what we read”: respect for self and others

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It is often said, “we are what we eat”, but what we feed our minds is equally as important, and the earlier we start the better. We can remember the books read to us at a very early age, word perfect. But not always can we remember the title of the book we read last month, let alone who wrote it. A child's mind is like a sponge. Those early stories are carried with them for a lifetime. They colour their imagination, their perception of the world, their dreams, their desires and their path in life. Nurturing a love for books and the joy of reading is the making of every child. We live our lives and shape our identities through stories. So what to read that will complement traditional education and empower children from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds to reach their full potential in a diverse and multicultural world?

Given that childhood books ‘stick’, engaging tales or adventures that incorporate sound morals will add significant value to a child. What we are looking for are books that help to develop good, strong characters and a healthy self-esteem, encourage a child to reach his or her full potential and be able to contribute positively to their family, community and the world. Today's world, made ever-smaller by modern technology, communication and travel, is a multicultural melting pot of race, colour and religion. Sound morals transcend all these things. The acceptance of diversity and the learning of life skills have never been more important in a world where moral values have slipped. Pressure from the media, advertising and peers; books and TV programmes with aggressive valueless content; all these pose dilemmas for young people growing up today.

Print books are becoming less popular, and their historical role in stimulating the senses are being supplanted by e-Books, iPhone and iPad apps and computer games. Children are drawn to interactive technology, and parents and teachers alike are battling to balance the stimulation created by video games and hand-held apps with ‘edutainment’ that children are happy to engage with.

Many families now require two incomes to survive. Excessive computer and television viewing is often the norm for very young children, who spend an increasing amount of unsupervised time exposed to excessive amounts of harsh language, sex and violence that are all but ‘legitimised’ by their ready availability. In many developed countries, we are in danger of proliferating a diabetes-prone generation of illiterate couch potatoes, who have abandoned the art of social discourse in favour of texting. Children are exposed to cyber bullying and youth suicide levels are at an all-time high as young people struggle to cope in a confused topsy-turvy world.

This notion is embraced at the heart of the Milly, Molly theme of ‘We may look different but we feel the same’, with the aim to promote the acceptance of diversity. Milly, Molly books, for children between the

ages of four and eight, were among the first books developed to address the challenges of ‘growing up’ in a multicultural world. With broad appeal in over 100 countries, and talking daily to millions of children in 34 different languages, Milly, Molly is a well-recognised global education brand.

The books remind children of the importance of everyday values, such as honesty, responsibility, respect, courtesy, forgiveness and loyalty. These values are implicitly woven into the everyday trials and tribulations of two adventurous multicultural five year olds and their school friends. Milly, Molly also tackles more difficult subjects, such as bullying, anger-management, coping with grief and being wary of strangers. The books have even broached the difficult subject of sexual abuse, and have been adopted by the New Zealand Police Youth Education Services as a resource in their ‘Keeping our Children Safe’ programme in schools.

There are, of course, many other books espousing similar virtues, such as character education, values education, teaching of life skills; call it what you will, they are developing worldwide. There are numerous teaching approaches taken that all have educational merit. Some favour the implicit approach where the story is the conduit for discussion, thought and change, while others favour a more didactic approach. Whatever the method, the challenge is to stimulate the child to take ownership of the concept.

What is needed is a sufficient balance, through parenting, teaching, sport, outdoor activities and ‘edutainment’, to give children proper perspective and the healthy self-esteem necessary to empower them to make the right decisions in life. And here lies the vital importance of instilling the love of reading at an early age. That love will endure for a lifetime. Literary programs need to be at the forefront of technology as well. They must have the versatility to offer wide appeal to children, parents, teachers, schools and libraries. Being the first to introduce interactive apps for iPads and iPhones in multiple languages, Milly, Molly has forged traditional teaching approaches with the latest technology in its quest to nurture the love of reading in multiple formats.

But for all the benefits of modern technology, there is no substitute for reading. To engage with a book and to be inspired by its story is often life changing. As countries such as South Korea race for technology driven education solutions and aim for paperless schools, spare a thought for the importance of books and traditional reading in your own upbringing. For children, the world over, it is comfort food.

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