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Opening extract from

101 Ways to get your Child to Read

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Patience Thomson

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Foreword

by Michael Morpurgo

It's sometime in 1947. Picture a small boy aged about four, sitting up in bed, short sticky-up hair, striped pyjamas and a very restless mind. He's waiting for something, for his mother to come and read him a story. He's washed his hands and face, and scrubbed behind his ears, and he's brushed his teeth. He's done this because he knows he won't get a story unless he has. She'll check. She comes in and sits down on the bed.

It's a great moment, the best moment. Mum all to myself for a while, and a story. "'Elephant's Child' or 'Jumblies and Jabberwockys'?" she asks me.

"'Elephant's Child'," I tell her, because it's longer. I want her to stay longer. I lie back on my pillow, pull the sheet up to my chin, and watch her. I love to watch her because I know I'll be seeing the story in her face as she tells it. That's because she lives the story, and loves the story as she tells it.

She opens the book. "Here we go," she says. "'In the High and Far-Off Times, the Elephant, O Best Beloved, had no trunk. He had only a blackish, bulgy nose, as big as a boot, that he could wriggle about from side to side; but he couldn't pick up things with it…'"

And off I go with the Elephant's Child, who is full of "satiable curtiosity" (I never quite knew what that meant), down to the "great grey-green, greasy Limpopo river", where his curiosity gets him into all sorts of difficulties with a certain crocodile who is just waiting to grab him by his nose.

I know the story almost word for word, love the sheer fun of it, and the excitement of it. I never want it to end. But of course it does end, in the end! She turns out the light, gives me a kiss and leaves the door ajar as I like it. I am left with just the scent of her face powder, and with Kipling's story of the Elephant Child deep in my head.

I was so lucky. I had a mother who loved to read me stories and poems. And that's the point. She loved doing it. I could tell that by the way she read it. She was enjoying the story as much as I was. The story was the link between us. In that little room there was her, me and the story. They were moments that I kept for always, and maybe she did too. She read beautifully, so that I could hear the music in the words, the rhythms in the sentences.

Then I went off to school, where I discovered all too soon that the words I had loved, and the stories I had loved, were simply used by teachers to test me on my spelling and punctuation and comprehension. This turned me off, and for years my love of stories and poems lay sleeping. Then as a teacher I found myself in

front of 36 year 6 children. I discovered the only way to have them all involved and focused was a good story. I read only the stories I loved, read them with a passion as my mother had. Then one day I dared to make up one of my own. I lived that story as I told it, and they believed it with me. They loved it. They became great readers, and great writers too.

Mr Aesop's tales all had a moral. So why not follow his good example? If as a parent or teacher you read to a child and make it a special moment, if you read because you love it, then the child will catch that love like a falling star, and put it in his pocket for life. He'll store it up in his heart. The star may fade, almost lose its light sometimes, but it will always be there. You will have given that child one of the greatest gifts we can pass on, the joy of reading.

Michael Morpurgo

Michael Morpurgo OBE worked as a teacher before becoming a full-time writer. Michael was Children's Laureate 2003–05, and has won many prizes for his books including the Whitbread Prize, the Smarties Prize and the Children's Book Award. He and his wife run the charity Farms For City Children (FFCC), which brings young children from towns to live and work in the countryside.

Introduction

Why is it important to learn to read?

You probably picked up this book because you know how important reading is these days. If a child never learns to read well, it can affect his or her whole life.

If children are poor readers, they will soon fall behind at school. Homework, tests and exams will be a nightmare. Other children may call them names and say they're stupid.

Some children get used to failing. They may even choose to fail because it's easier that way. They may decide they are stupid, since everyone else thinks so. They stop trying. They feel frustrated and bored. They muck about and get in trouble.

It's hard to get good exam results when reading is a struggle. And when you leave school, what do you do? More than 98 per cent of jobs in Britain today need reading skills.

Reading is part of everyday life. You need to read to get a driving licence, use the internet, shop, book a holiday, fill in forms, take the right medicine, order food in a cafe, catch the bus in the right direction, set up a DVD player and find out what's on TV. If you have problems reading, everything in life is harder.

Helping your child to read well can be the most

important thing you ever do for him or her.

Knowing how to read for yourself is the single most important thing in life, in my opinion. It's like learning to fly on your own and you need never be bored ever again. Every journey is better if you have a paperback in your pocket; each night (and therefore bedtime) becomes madly attractive knowing that your book is waiting for you.

And learning to read is a struggle that will only happen once, like learning to swim or ride a bike. Once reading is mastered, the world opens up like a colossal storehouse of treasures.

Joanna Lumley

Why do some children take longer to learn to read?

Some children learn to read when they are very young with almost no help at all. They just seem to pick it up naturally. Some people can't even remember a time when they didn't know how to read. They are the lucky ones.

Others learn to read at school. They remember later how exciting it was when the words on the page suddenly began to make sense.

But there are some children who have the same help and yet do not seem able to learn to read at all. They are often as clever as the others. They want to learn to read. But for a lot of different reasons it just

doesn't happen.

It is not the teacher's fault. It is not the parents' fault. And most of all, it is not the child's fault.

Maybe these children have problems such as dyslexia. Maybe they have been off sick and have missed a lot of school. Maybe they haven't been well taught.

Some children don't like reading because it's hard work, or they're afraid to try and fail. Maybe their parents and friends don't read. Maybe TV is just more fun!

It can be very hard for a parent to help. Perhaps you aren't a confident reader yourself. Perhaps you want to help, but you don't have time. Perhaps your child seems to hate books, or has given up trying to read, and you don't know what to do.

Getting started is the hardest part, and that's what this book is all about.

In the long history of the human race, reading is new. For thousands of years, we got on very well without reading. It is only now, in modern times, that it has become a vital skill. So it is no surprise that we don't all have the kind of brains that pick up reading easily. It is a very complex process.

In fact, the real surprise is that so many people can.

Boys are more likely to have reading problems, though plenty of girls struggle too.

Why do girls have fewer problems? It may be to do with how we evolved. Women spent more time together looking after the children, so they talked more. Their brains developed to be good with the spoken word. Now, in our modern world, they are wired up better to deal with the written word too.

Now for the good news

You only have to learn to read once. Even if children learn slowly, with the right help they will get there in the end. The important thing is that they are making progress.

That's where parents come in. You are the only people who can give constant support over the years. And there is just such a lot you can do.

You can find out what's stopping your child from reading, and look for ways round it (Chapter 1).

You can learn the way your child's mind works, so that you can find the best way to help (Chapter 2).

You can help your child to get started on his or her letters (Chapter 3).

You can change your child's attitude to reading – and maybe your own too (Chapter 4).

Your child will need support from you, both before starting school and right through his or her school

career. But children's needs change as they get older and you will need to find out what they are. You can also help a great deal by helping your child to organise himself or herself, so that you both have more time and energy for the important things in life (Chapter 5).

You can make sure that your child has the right things to read, like books and magazines that he or she really enjoys (Chapter 6).

You could even brush up on your own reading skills so that you can help your child better (Chapter 7).

You don't need to read the whole book from start to end – it's up to you to decide what you need to know!

On the way you will find 101 tips for you to pick and choose from. They won't all work for everyone – every parent and every child is different! Some of the advice is aimed at children with Specific Learning Difficulties, lots of it is great for all children. And some of it will be perfect for you and your child.

This book will give you the help you need to give your child the best possible start in life. Good luck – and have fun!

Chapter 1

Types of Reading Problem

Reading is a complex skill. So reading problems may have all sorts of different causes. It is important to be aware of things going on in your child's life that may make it harder for him or her to learn.

Life can be tough!

Lots of things could be happening that make it harder for your child to learn well. If any of these are true for your child, he or she may need extra help.

- Has he or she been off sick and missed out on a lot of school?
- Has he or she started at a new school? Many children hate change. They have to make new friends. They have to adapt to a new teacher and a new school's teaching style. This is hard work and can slow their learning down.
- Do you speak English at home? If you don't, your child won't be learning as many new English words as his friends.
- Do you read at home? Children copy their parents. If you never pick up a book, then your child is less likely to read. (See p.49.)
- Do you chat to your children, and listen to

them? Speaking and listening are important skills that we all have to learn. If parents don't talk a lot to their children, they might be slower to pick up language skills. (See chapter 4 for more on this.)

- When is your child's birthday? In England and Wales, if it's in late summer, he or she will always be the youngest in his class because the cut-off point for each school year is August 31st. In Scotland, kids with February birthdays are the youngest. That might mean your child is not as developed as his classmates, finds the same work harder, or gets tired more easily.

- Does your child like the teacher? If not, he or she might not make an effort to do well. If the teacher doesn't understand about reading problems, that can be very difficult.

Children can catch up – but the sooner you spot the problem and do something about it, the better.

Miles away...

One common reason for children to fall behind in their reading is that other things in their life are distracting them.

You need concentration to learn to read. Most children only pay attention for part of the time in lessons. I once asked a class of 11-year-olds to shut their eyes and stop thinking for five minutes. "We can't!" they cried. When the five minutes were up, I asked them how many had a secret world in their

mind that they visited during class time. "How did you know?" they asked.

A lot of children miss out on what is being said in class because they are thinking about other things. In particular it can be very hard for a child who is upset about something. He sits there in the classroom, but does not take in what is going on. His mind is miles away.

So, is your child worrying about something?

- Have there been any dramas in the family? Death or divorce or serious illness will upset children very much.
- Do you or your partner work away a lot? Are you stressed out? Is a brother or sister going through a hard time?
- Is there a new baby coming?
- Do you know or suspect that your child is being bullied?

If your child has any of these problems, you must make sure the school knows. He or she may need extra help and guidance. It will be a bonus to have a teacher who is sympathetic. The last thing you want is for the teacher to be cross with your child for not trying, when he or she is upset already.

A few children have **depression**. They are not just upset with good reason but remain in a constant state of gloom whatever is happening around them. This can even happen to very young children, at primary school. A depressed child will not care about praise or blame, and will simply fail to make progress.

This needs to be sorted out by the experts. Talk to the school or your family doctor.

Physical causes of reading problems

Some children have physical problems that make it difficult for them to read, no matter how hard they try. These children may need to be referred to experts. Here are some of these problems.

Problems with hearing words

Many children who have reading problems at school had hearing problems as infants. They may have had ear infections, like glue ear, and have been partly deaf at times.

If you can't hear properly, it's hard to remember spoken words, and your own speech may be unclear. And when children with hearing problems start learning to read, it's much harder for them to remember how words sound.

This matters because, in reading, one of the skills you need is to recognise words when you sound them

out from the letters on the page – and to recognise them fast. To do this, you have to draw on your "memory bank" of sounds you have already heard. If there are too many gaps in your memory bank, or if you have not got the words quite right, it will be hard to read fluently.

If your child has not stored the sounds of words accurately, he or she may not speak clearly. This can be a sign of problems with hearing. But remember that children start to speak at very different ages, so don't start to worry too early. When they start is not so important. How quickly they make progress is.

If your child had or has hearing problems, or if your child's speech is really hard to understand, you may need help from a **speech and language therapist**. Talk to your doctor.

Problems with seeing words

Some children have problems with seeing the words in front of them clearly. And it's not the same thing as being short-sighted. The letters jump about and change places. These children cannot track a line of print across the page. They lose their place and tire quickly. They may have a "lazy" eye.

Children with these difficulties may not recognise a word when they see it a second or a third time, so you have to tell them over and over again what it is. Don't despair. They will get it in the end. But they will take much longer than their classmates.

Children who tire quickly when they are reading may be sensitive to strong or bright light. Black print on white paper may hurt their eyes. (See p.105 for an idea to help this, and p.106 for information on publishers who print on off-white paper.)

This child may need to see an **orthoptist** for special tests. Ask your family doctor to refer you to one if you think your child has this sort of problem.

SpLD (Specific Learning Difficulties)

Children who have learning difficulties in some areas are often described as having Specific Learning Difficulties or SpLDs. These children have difficulty in one or more areas of learning, but not all aspects of learning are affected. If children are described as having Learning Difficulties, they have problems with all aspects of learning. So the word "specific" is very important!

SpLD is a name that experts give to some types of learning problems. It is called an "umbrella" term because it covers a wide range of difficulties. Of course, no one child has all of them.

It is possible for most children to improve their reading skills, no matter what difficulties they have, but the first step is to understand what those problems are.

The term SpLD includes **dyslexia, dyspraxia** and **ADHD**.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is one of the most common causes of reading difficulties. As many as one child in ten may be affected by dyslexia. Dyslexia may run in families.

The word "dyslexia" is from Greek and means "difficulty with words". But children with dyslexia do not just find it hard to learn to read. They can have one or more of a whole range of problems with writing, spelling, maths, memory and organisation.

I asked a boy of 11 to tell me what it felt like to be dyslexic. He replied, "Dyslexia's like when the wind blows a television aerial round and the screen goes all fuzzy. My brain is the TV."

We know that the reading difficulties caused by dyslexia have something to do with the way dyslexic people's minds work. Brain scans back up the idea that dyslexic people actually think differently. And because their brains are not wired up the same way as other people's, they need to be taught in a different way.

Dyslexia has absolutely nothing to do with being stupid or clever. Some people with dyslexia have great intelligence and talents. If dyslexia is seen as a challenge, not a problem, and if the right teaching methods are used, dyslexic children often do very well in life. Famous dyslexics include Sir Richard Branson, Tom Cruise, Jamie Oliver, Albert Einstein, Walt Disney and Sir Steve Redgrave.

Dyslexic children may need to be referred to a **specialist teacher** or educational psychologist for tests (see Chapter 2). Parents should be able to get a dyslexia assessment for the child through school. The **British Dyslexia Association** can tell you how to ask for this (see p.102). They can also tell you about support in your area. If you cannot have your child assessed through the school, it is possible to have it done privately, but this can be very expensive. You could also ask your doctor.

Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia is a difficulty with planning and co-ordinating movement. A dyspraxic child may have several problems. Terrible handwriting can be one. They may have poor motor skills (movement), can't sit straight, eat very slowly, bump into things and knock things over.

Many of the possible problems do not relate to reading, but there are a few that do:

- Stuttering or unclear speech when reading aloud.
- Losing their place in the text.
- Tiring quickly when reading silently or aloud.
- Finding it hard to remember events that happened in a story in the right order.
- Sitting still to read – they may have to be propped up comfortably.

There are exercises that can improve motor skills and balance. Dyspraxic children can be assessed and helped by an expert **occupational therapist** who has the skills to diagnose and treat this disorder. Contact the **Dyspraxia Foundation** for more advice (see p.104).

ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)

"Why does my child never sit still for two minutes?"

"He roars round the house all day and drives us all mad."

"She distracts everyone else in class."

"He can't concentrate and he doesn't listen."

Your child might have ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). Just like dyslexia and dyspraxia, this is a recognised problem. Discuss it with the school and with your doctor.

ADHD can cause problems with reading. A child with ADHD

- will find it very hard to concentrate
- won't remember the plot
- won't listen to others reading
- won't settle for long.

Medication sometimes helps but must be closely supervised by a doctor. It is important to know that

the child cannot control his or her restless and unruly behaviour and is not just being naughty.

Contact ADDISS for advice (see p.104)

Keeping track of your child's problems and progress

No one is going to expect you to work out the answers to your child's problems for yourself, or even be able to say exactly what they are. There are experts in school who will do this for you. But you can help them by giving them information about your child's reading habits and attitude to books at home. Keep a record of his or her current level of ability and progress with reading. Talk about your child's feelings, too. Is he or she getting depressed about school? This will help you and the experts to identify the pattern of difficulties that is causing the problem.

A **ring binder** is a good way to keep a record, because it can help you keep the pages organised. (If you find writing difficult, get a friend to help, or write very short notes, and don't worry about spelling as long as you can read it! This is just to help you remember.)

- On a regular basis – say, once a month – describe your child's current difficulties with reading and give a few examples of words he or she can and can't read.

- Write down something about your child's attitude to school. Include any worries he or she may

have.

- If you can, photocopy a page of the current reading book from school and underline the words that are too hard for your child to read.

- Is your child's reading improving? Is he reading more words? Can you and your child write down some good new words that he has learnt?

- Write down your concerns and those of your partner and the child's grandparents.

This is a big help in talking to your child's teacher. You will feel more confident if you have notes to show the teacher. You can also make a list of things you want to ask. When the teacher says, "Why are you worried?" you can open the ring binder and explain.

It's sensible to go to any meeting at school with someone who can write notes for you. If you find writing difficult, it can be really hard to listen and write at the same time.

If the school, you and your child are all working as a team, you are going to start to go places. In the next chapters you'll find some tips to get you going. But...

Don't worry too soon!

Try not to panic if your child is learning to read at a different pace from the other children in class. As long as he or she is making progress, that's OK. Children develop at different speeds and young

children all make mistakes with their reading. Sometimes, too, parents or teachers just don't ask the right questions.

The teacher showed six-year-old Charlie a picture of a dinosaur and asked him what sound it began with. He said, "It begins with a b." The teacher reported that he was confusing b and d, and that he should be checked for problems.

His mum asked him why he'd said "dinosaur" began with b. Charlie replied, "It was a brachiosaurus."