

WinkWorld November 2006

4 Benchmarks to Literacy Development: Wyatt Finally Reads (a lot)

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11.11.2006

Wyatt's life has been a *book flood*, in that his mother read to him for hours daily since he was born. Despite this rich literacy foundation, he remained a reluctant reader until age 8. He is now 10-years-old and loves to read. How did this happen?

As we reflect back, four pivotal literacy benchmarks are visible: First, *pokémon* paid a visit; second, *Captain Underpants* came calling; third, a scripted program threatened to undo his reading and destroy his self-confidence, until his mother pulled him out of school in the spring of his 2nd grade year. The fourth benchmark came two months later, when Wyatt began to read independently, *Harry Potter*.

In spite of massive reading aloud to Wyatt at home, which he loved, he did not decode in Kindergarten; he did not decode in first grade; and he did not second grade. In what follows, his mother tells the story of how and why a once resistant reader dramatically morphed into an avid reader.

Benchmark #1: pokémon Pedagogy

"Hell has officially frozen over," I muttered to myself later that month, as I stood in line about to purchase my first pack of pokémon cards for Wyatt. pokémon intuitively appalls me. Wyatt's peers have been collecting the cards for years, but I refused to buy any for Wyatt.

"Mom, you and all the girls' moms are the only ones who don't allow pokémon," Wyatt told me earnestly one day. I remained unmoved.

Then one day one of Wyatt's friends came over to play. He brought his binder full of pokémon cards to show Wyatt. I remember thinking, "Oh, no. How quickly can I get them away from those cards and onto the trampoline?"

Wyatt spent the next two hours reading those cards. He and his friend sat on the living room floor going over every letter and word in detail. As I dried dishes in the next room, I became aware of Wyatt's efforts to read all of those cards. Wyatt usually shies away from any attempt at individual reading. Now he sat pouring over letters and words trying to make meaning. "He's reading!," I thought to myself.

The next day I purchased pokémon cards and a collecting card binder. Wyatt has been reading those cards daily ever since. His literacy has grown considerably (Wink, J., 2005, p. 8).

Benchmark #2: Captain Underpants

I had continued to read with Wyatt and his brother and sister. Our stories grew more and more complex, and Wyatt used extremely mature oral language. He loved the action stories, with hints of the supernatural; for example, I have read the J.R.R. Tolkien series and the

Redwall series, the entire *Harry Potter*, series, umpteen Norse, Celtic, and Southwestern myths and legends to all three kids.

Still, Wyatt's teachers told me they would have *to intervene* to help him begin to read. I agonized and reflected: Could it be that these stories were too intimidating for Wyatt to try to read by himself? Were the books simply too big, the print too dense, the visual clues too infrequent? Reluctantly, I switched from reading the *Harry Potter* series to the *Captain Underpants* series. Within days Wyatt was decoding paragraph-by-paragraph and page-by-page. (Wink, J., 2005, p. 9).

Benchmark #3: Pulling Wyatt Out of a Scripted School Reading Program

"Mom, I'm so stupid. I'm just so stupid. I don't understand any of this stuff," Wyatt threw his head down on his folded arms at the kitchen table and cried.

"What are you working on there, Wyatt?" I asked. I sat down beside him to look at the worksheets of homework spread out in front of him. Black and white dittos filled with line after line of words broken down into incomprehensible parts. Slashes, dots, and hyphens turned words into a trail of shrapnel.

"Wyatt, I don't understand how to do any of this, either, honey. Not a thing. You're NOT stupid. This reading homework is stupid." The next day I pulled him out of school to homeschool him for the remainder of the year.

Benchmark #4: Harry Potter

Two months later, I walked through Wyatt's room and discovered him lying on his bed reading aloud to himself, and suddenly realized that he was reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. I feigned casual *nonchalance* and kept walking until I was out of his room and on the other side of the doors—where I immediately and silently started jumping up and down and pumping, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" into the air with my fist. Remember, this is the kid who couldn't read two months ago.

As I walked up the stairs, different scenes from the past flashed through my mind. I thought of the countless times I had encouraged Wyatt to read, and my words were met with stony silent tears. I thought of the previous couple of years when Wyatt refused to try to read. I remembered the many times, when I had asked him to read, and the entire atmosphere changed from a sense of togetherness, happiness, and enthusiasm to one of sadness and the inevitable feelings of failure for both of us. Tears, always there were agonized tears involved whenever Wyatt was asked to read.

Those memories floated back to me again that night when Wyatt and I cuddled in bed together, him now reading aloud to me *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. "Oh, don't worry Mom, I'll just read this. You don't have to read anything tonight. Here we go." He read to me, page after page, complete with inflection and enthusiasm. He drank in the storyline, adventure, humor, and mystery.

Now, he's reading about Harry Potter flying about on his broom, high above the Quidditch field, in search of the golden snitch. And along with Harry, Wyatt too, has learned to fly (Retrieved October 31, 2006, from *WinkWorld*. Jan. 2004.)

Postscript. Wyatt is now in the 5th grade and his teacher told me yesterday that he reads at

the high school proficiency level. "*He loves to read,*" she said.

References

American Library Association, Banned Books. Retrieved November 11, 2006 from, <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bbwlinks/topten2000to2005.htm>. We note that *Happy Potter* is #1 as the most frequently challenged book and *Captain Underpants* is #9.

Wink, J. (2005). *Critical pedagogy: Notes from the Real World*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

For use of this story, we appreciate the following citation: Retrieved, November 11, 2006, from <http://www.joanwink.com/news.php>, WinkWorld, November 2006, or <http://www.joanwink.com/newsletter/archive.php>.