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Gift a reading life to a child this festive season

This Children's Day, let's make a pledge to get children started on a diet of books, as early as possible



Detail from a page of "The Hungry Little Sky Monster" by Rohini Nilekani, illustrated by Megha Punater.

By Rohini Nilekani

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What is a good time to introduce a child to books? Different parents may have different answers. I found the right age to be six months. For both my children, I had cloth, plastic or board books about animals or very simple stories with repetitive words. I would show them the books, and slowly read them out. At that stage they were mostly interested in consuming the books rather literally, trying to taste them with their mouths. By eight months though, they would be eager for the books, actually picking up the ones they liked. By three years, my daughter was reading simple books to my infant son, who would gurgle happily as though he understood it all. It was their first bonding experience.

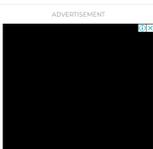
We had the same experience with my grandson. By six months, he was being read to at sleep time, a pile of books kept ready next to the bed. His favourites were the four board books published by Tulika Books, including *Dosa Amma Dosa*. He wouldn't wait even for a few seconds between books and would begin a muck cry as the last page of a book was read, as if to say, "Hurry up, I want the next one."

These are common experiences in many households around the world. Yet far too many families simply do not have access to good books for their children.



There are many reasons for this. Parents may not be readers themselves, for example. This would influence whether or not their children have books. Yet many parents who are not avid readers still want their children to read. They understand the importance of having good stories that unleash a child's imagination, improve her vocabulary and of course, also keep her out of one's hair for a bit!

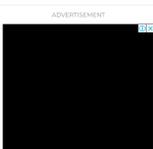
Yet books can be expensive, or impossible to find, or simply not be in the right language. Or they can be alienating, with stories and characters that are too unfamiliar, or culturally unapproachable.



Luckily, the past two decades have been extremely good for children's publishing in India. While the National Book Trust and the Children's Book Trust have been publishing good, affordable books for decades, many publishers have recently come into play, offering attractive books in several languages for India's 300 million children.

Pratham Books has been part of this journey. I co-founded Pratham Books in 2004 with the mission "A Book in Every Child's Hand". It was a non-profit born from the Pratham network which had helped thousands of children to become fluent readers. But there simply were not enough books in enough languages that were accessible and affordable, for them to practise their new skill. So we decided to become publishers ourselves. We saw it as a societal mission, involving *samaaj*, *bazaar* and *sarkaar*, to influence the world of children's publishing, and to democratise the joy of reading.

Fortunately, we succeeded in quickly becoming India's largest children's publisher, innovating a new model to publish books simultaneously in up to 12 languages. We inched closer to our goals in 2008, when we put up our books online, under an open source creative commons licence. Suddenly, lots of books in many languages became available to parents, children and teachers, completely free. Today, the leadership team has taken this idea even further via our open source digital repository, *StoryWeaver*, with incredibly diverse books in dozens of languages, all free for children anytime, anywhere in the world.



The Hungry Little Sky Monster, published by Juggernaut Books.

What a marvellous opportunity this is for parents and teachers to introduce children to all kinds of books, without worrying about cost. Thanks to many new publishers as well as non-profits such as Room to Read and the International Children's Digital Library, Indian parents now have many reading experiences to choose from. They are empowered to give their children perhaps the best gift of all—a reading life.



There is much evidence to bulwark this statement. Research has linked all manner of benefits in life to reading.

A 2018 Ohio State University study looked at the relationship between children's vocabulary and reading in children younger than five years. The study found that children who are never read to, hear about 5,000 words, whereas those whose parents read them one book a day hear about 300,000 words before entering kindergarten.

Similarly, research has shown that parent-child book reading (PCBR) is effective at improving young children's language, literacy, brain and cognitive development. Reading to children during early childhood is also a strong predictor of children's brain development and performance in school.



There is one more study I can personally vouch for. Caitlin Canfield of Boston University reports that shared book reading at six months is associated with increases in observed and reported parental warmth and decreases in parenting stress at 18 months. These findings suggest that early parent-child book reading can have positive collateral impacts on the parent-child relationship over time. I could go on citing research. But the important takeaway is that there is no better time for parents to encourage reading in very young children.

Please buy books if you can. Download free books if you can't. Leave books lying around the house; get siblings to read to younger kids; ask children about the stories they read. Get as many kinds of books as you possibly can—books of different cultures, in different languages, with a range of illustration styles. In the festive season, let children feast on books.

Rohini Nilekani is a writer and philanthropist. Her new book, *The Hungry Little Sky Monster*, is out now from Juggernaut Books.



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