don't look now, but they're reading!

by Diana Noonan *

Often kids learn best when they don't know they're learning. The same applies to reading. Introduce your reluctant reader to tempting recipes, interesting brochures and instructional text and before you know it, they'll be reading without realising.

For parents of children who just don't seem attracted to books, encouraging reading can seem like an uphill battle. You take them to the library and they just won't settle; you sit down to read to them and they wriggle and jiggle and head for the nearest box of Lego. If this is your experience, stop! Reading is important but that doesn't mean it begins and ends with a story or chapter book. For some children, their happiest engagement with the written word comes in other ways.

procedural texts (longhand for 'having fun!')

'Procedural text' is a rather formal way of describing 'how-to' writing: the sort of texts we go to when we want to find out how to make something. Recipe books are an example of procedural texts. So are instructions on how to knit, plant a bulb, make a pom-pom, fold a paper plane, make a kite, or ice a cupcake. 'How-to' texts give us easy-to-follow, step by step instructions and, if you choose a 'how-to' that suits your child's interest, level of skill, and reading ability, it can't fail to be a winner. So just where do you find these texts?

Many early literacy books (the sort of books children read when they first start school) are 'how-to's'. The good thing is that you can usually find them in your local library as well as the classroom. School Journals and Junior Journals, which go free into schools, are also often available in the local library and are another source of fun 'make-it' texts (look in the 'activity' sections). In the non-fiction children's section of the library you'll find books on cooking and crafts. If you think a whole book is likely to put your child off engaging with the text, photocopy just one activity and start from there. And never be afraid of writing your own procedural text for a child (what could be better than a simplified version of Gran's recipe for pikelets?).

Whatever activity you choose, talk about the text you'll be working from before you begin (this avoids a child's frustration through making too many mistakes when the action starts). You'll be surprised at just how engaged your young non-reader is as you explore the text together. As you share the text, talk about the meaning of any words or terms that are unfamiliar to your child (such as 'cream together' if you're looking at a recipe or 'crease the fold' if you're working with origami). Finally, give the text the importance it deserves by propping it up on a recipe stand, or pegging it to the kitchen curtains, and get started.

Children can often be so engaged in the 'how-to' activity that they forget to refer to the text itself, so it's your job to draw them back to it with some gentle questioning and direction. For a child who can't wait to pour the milk into the bowl, you may want to remind them to check back in the text to find out if they're doing things in the right order (the beauty of a procedural text is that you, the parent, don't have to be the boss – it's the text that must be obeyed!). Checking back through a text and following steps in the order they are written are reading skills of the highest order, but with an activity, the reading becomes incidental – it just 'happens'!

taking the back seat

Reading for the sake of reading doesn't appeal to all children (or all adults, for that matter). Even reading for pure information can be unappealing for some. But when you link reading for information to something relevant and attractive to a child, everything changes. To create this situation, pop a suggestion (such as "wouldn't it be nice to go to the pool today") into the conversation, then take a back seat while your child does the work. Let them be the one to look up opening times and charges on the pool website (or the brochure you just happen to have at home). Let them check out what facilities the pool has.

With younger children (and a planned trip to somewhere such as an animal-petting park), sit with them in front of the brochure or website and help them match the pictures of the animals to the words for their names. Help the child make a list of the animals they'll soon be seeing and in the order they want to see them. Take this 'shopping list' with you on the trip and refer to it often. Take a pen and tick off the animals one by one as you go through the list. In this way, you're helping your child focus on the text. But keep it light and fun. The key to incidental reading is that it should happen without anyone being aware of it!

ramp it up

Once children are hooked on incidental reading, it's just a hop, skip and a jump to introducing books. After all, if you're hooked on baking or origami, why wouldn't you want a whole book on 'how-to' rather than one page! It's the same with planning outings. Once a child has learned that information takes them places (and lets them do things in an order they dictate), it makes sense that they'll want to seek out new information. Take advantage of this as you ditch the internet for a while and introduce older children to books such as a handbook on 'what to see in the city'. Help the younger child choose a book on animals from the library and then find out how many of these animals you can get to see (if not in the flesh then perhaps in a movie) without leaving town.

Reading is about building an appreciation of, and a thirst for, text. Take it one step at a time until your 'reluctant reader' is chomping at the bit to see more words. Instead of worrying anxiously that your child doesn't want to engage with books, begin enjoying a whole new way of reading together. There are loads of incidental texts out there to suit every interest, and you are the very person to introduce them to the child you know so well.

**Catlins author Diana Noonan is one of New Zealand's best-known writers for children. A former editor of the iconic School Journal, she writes for a wide range of educational resources, and takes a strong interest in the New Zealand Curriculum.*