

Chris Evans: parents must read to their children

As the Hay Festival begins, the Radio 2 presenter argues that sharing the magic of books is as enriching for parents as it is for children By Chris Evans, May 2014



In my job on Radio 2, every day I wish I knew more words. I wish I knew how better to weave together magical phrases to help the audience's morning skip along in the right direction. But I don't, because I am too late to the words party. Still, I try, God I try, and I will keep on trying because I love words and the magic they can create.

Wit is a word often uttered in my business: "He's such a great wit, she's so quick." What this actually means is, simply, that he or she has a way with words, a grand command of their mother tongue. These enviable eggheads possess a huge vocabulary that's available to them almost before they know what they want to say, a mine of words that is so frustratingly (for the rest of us) comprehensive that no crunching of gears can be heard as they open their mouths to woo us with their mellifluous wisdom. Everything they need is there on standby, rows and rows of obedient analogies, similes and synonyms waiting to be called into action in the blink of an eye.

I didn't read as a kid because I was never taught about the wonder of books. That's why I used to listen to the radio so much, and how I became fascinated with what people had to say. I still marvel at those brilliantly articulate sports commentators who talk in the same way that a runner runs: fearless, pounding on regardless, confident without even having to think about what they're going to say next. This is why I devour programmes such as Any Questions on Radio 4. I often pretend to be on the panel and wonder how the guests answer such relatively simple questions with such (usually) considered, informed trains of thought that flow and confront and entertain all at the same time. The answers are like mini-essays, full of spontaneity, daring, energy and personality. I've long realised, alas, that I'll never be able to emulate such talent because I haven't put in the hours. Just as I'll never be able to go to the Tate Modern, look at a painting, go home, pick a brush up and expect to become the next Hockney or Monet.

Perhaps, however, things might be different for my two sons. My wife, Natasha, made me start reading to our little boy Noah when he was about a year old. It wasn't something I really wanted to do, especially as Noah could barely grunt when Natasha made the suggestion, let alone speak. But I did it anyway, frankly because I suspected I'd get a good few days of the silent treatment if I didn't. But from that very first moment I snuggled down with Noah on our bed, it was obvious that my wife was right. Something happened that I hadn't witnessed before: his normally wandering attention had been arrested and he instantly focused on the pages. This was the beginning.

The first word he joined in with was "home" from Oliver Jeffers's stunning short story The Way Back Home. Others followed. "Up" I remember vividly, and "moooon". Gradually our reading became routine: teatime, bath, milk, then story time. As our pile of children's books grew bigger, Noah's eyes grew wider and he became ever more attentive.

Four years on, nothing has changed except that Noah now has two stories each night. He reads the first and Tash or I read him the second, while the other parent continues the adventure all over again in the room next door with Eli, Noah's little brother.

When I was asked to write this piece I hunkered down with Noah and explained to him what I was about to do.

“Oh,” he said, “why?”

“Because not all children get to have story time before they go to sleep.”

“Why not?”

“Because, like Daddy used to think, some parents don't think it's important.”

He didn't understand this. I then suggested we look at some of the books I used to read to him when he was still a baby.

“Ooh, that's a good idea, Daddy, let's do that.”

As I proceeded to pluck them from his funky book case one by one, his brow began to furrow as he recognised the covers and then the most gorgeous smile took over his face. These were his books, his property, his peace – each was full of a different set of friends and the worlds they inhabit.

We lay on his bed in the exact same position we always have, me to his right, his head on my chest, my right hand holding the book up above while my left arm struggles to turn each page from around my son's shoulders. I asked him to describe each book in a word. Here's what happened.

“What about The Tiger Who Came to Tea?” “Good.”

“Sharing a Shell? “Really good.”

“Aliens Love Underpants?” “Funny – really funny.”

“The Smartest Giant in Town?”

“Quite fun.”

“The Emperor's New Clothes?”

“Brilliant.”

“The Rocket Racing Car?”

“Awesome.”

A Squash and a Squeeze?

“Rhyming! I love rhyming.”

And then, finally, we came to The Way Back Home, back to where it all began. Immediately I found myself choking up.

“Brilliant, Dad, brilliant. That's my favourite book ever.”

“Shall I read it to you one more time,” I suggested, “just for fun?”

“No Dad, no! I’ll read it to you.”

And so he did:

“Once – there – was – a boy – and – one – day – as he – was – put – ting – his – things – back – in – his – cup ... cup ... cup – board ...”

I melted into a sobbing wreck and had to stifle my tears so he wouldn’t notice – just as I am now, writing this. But there was no need to hide because Noah was already in another world, the world of words: gone, transported to a place only he knows – his interpretation of whatever it is those words were giving him. His voice was the narrator, his mind was the producer, his eyes were the cameraman; he was the costume designer, the lighting technician and all the actors rolled into one.

So please, parents – read to your children. Ideally at night, just before they drift off into the glorious, deep sleep of the innocent. Cuddle up and breathe together by the comforting glow of the bedside light in the darkness of winter, or while trying to hide your eyes from the blinding light of a late spring or early autumn setting sun. It will help them understand how an “ee” at the end of a word turns a hard “aa” into an “ay”, or how a “t” and “h” mysteriously morph into a “th”, sounding completely different.

If nothing else, you should do it because eventually they will read to you, not only because they’re told to or it’s their reading book from school, but because they want to. And you will not believe how extraordinarily beautiful and life-affirming that feels.