



Creating A Love Of Reading

John Daniel O'Leary

CREATING A LOVE OF READING

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Introduction

Whenever I am asked for a definition of literacy, this beautiful passage by Métis author Maria Campbell comes to mind.



*In my language, which is CREE,
the mind is called MOM TUNE AY
CHI KUN. MOM TUNE AY CHI KUN
is the sacred place inside each one of us
where no one else can go.
It is in this place that each one of us
can dream, imagine, fantasize, create
and, yes, even talk
to the grandfathers and grandmothers.*

*The thoughts and images that come
from this place are called
MOM TUNE AY CHI KUNA
which means wisdom
and they can be given to others
in stories, songs, dances and art
(Maria Campbell, ACHIMOONA).*





Reading, writing and literacy mean far more than understanding words on paper. Literacy has a lot to do with enriching and discovering more about yourself, your personal dreams, ambitions and hopes -- coming to understand that "sacred place inside." Literacy also enables us to share this "sacred place" with others, either with an intimate friend or with the world, through "stories, songs, dances and art." When you are reading or being read a favourite book, poem or story, the writer is sharing with you something of that "sacred place inside."

There is a lot of talk about literacy these days, and much of it is about the meaning of the word. Is there widely accepted definition of literacy? When I answer that question, I begin by quoting the passage by Maria Campbell. Then, I remark that in my years as a teacher, educator and literacy organizer, I have never heard someone say: "I am illiterate." Instead, I hear things like:

"I want my Grade 10."

"I want to get a driver's licence."

"I want to go to college."

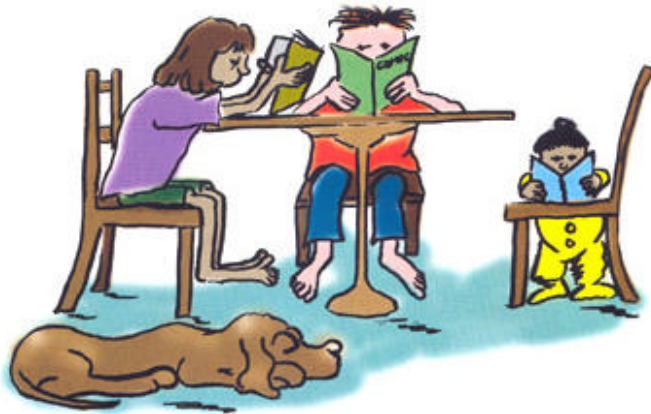
"I want to read with my children."



People come to a literacy program because they have a personal or professional goal, and they understand that learning to read will enable them to achieve it. As educators, our role is to help the student reach that goal. So, the meaning of literacy has a lot to do with achievement -- students achieving their personal or professional goals, however modest or grand they may be.

Today in Canada, there are more literacy programs in place, or being planned, than ever before. This is not surprising given our country's long and distinguished tradition in non-formal, adult education and literacy programs. The Antigonish Movement, the Cooperative Movement, the Women's Institute, the Farm Forum, YMCA and YWCA programs, the Worker's Educational Association, and Frontier College are some of the organizations that have led the way in creating and implementing learning and literacy programs over several decades.





Canadians know a lot about teaching people to read and write. As we further expand and develop our adult literacy programs, we can learn from this rich tradition of popular education -- what I like to call church-basement and kitchen-table learning.

Yet, this tradition poses some fundamental questions. While we have a long history of teaching adults to read and write, we now need to do it on a scale never attempted before. We need to teach people by the thousands, rather than by the hundreds or the dozens. How can we do this? And, more importantly, what are we doing to break the cycle of low literacy levels? What can we do now to prevent low literacy levels in the future?

At Frontier College, we are faced with the same questions. As of 1999, we have been teaching adults for 100 years. Are we content to continue for another 100? Or another 100 after that?

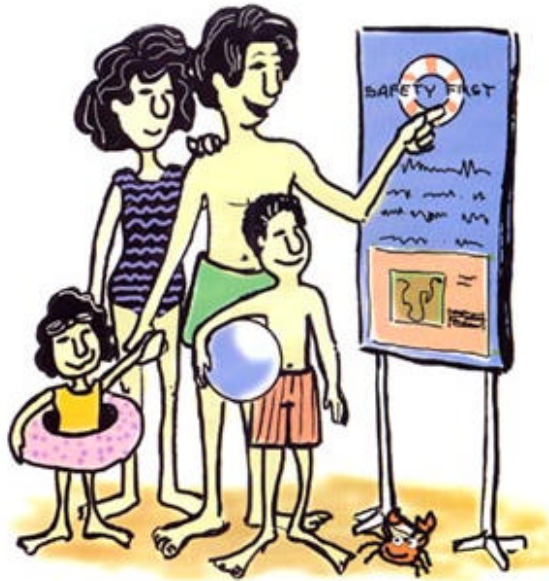
A truly integrated approach to literacy can't just teach adults to read. It must be devoted to equally to raising children to be enthusiastic, regular readers. Literacy must be a life-long love and a life-long commitment. To reach that end, our community-reading programs must work to mobilize all our resources today to ensure a more literate Canada tomorrow.



What place does learning have in the community?

Literacy and learning are not just school issues. They are cultural issues as well. Unfortunately, in Canada, we do not value literacy and learning the same way we value sports and entertainment, for instance.

If the classroom is the only place a child reads, writes and has ongoing exposure to books and stories, then that child is at risk of growing up a reluctant reader or, worse, a non-reader. To develop good reading habits that will last a lifetime, a child must be surrounded by books, stories and reading, not only in the classroom, but in the home, the community and beyond.



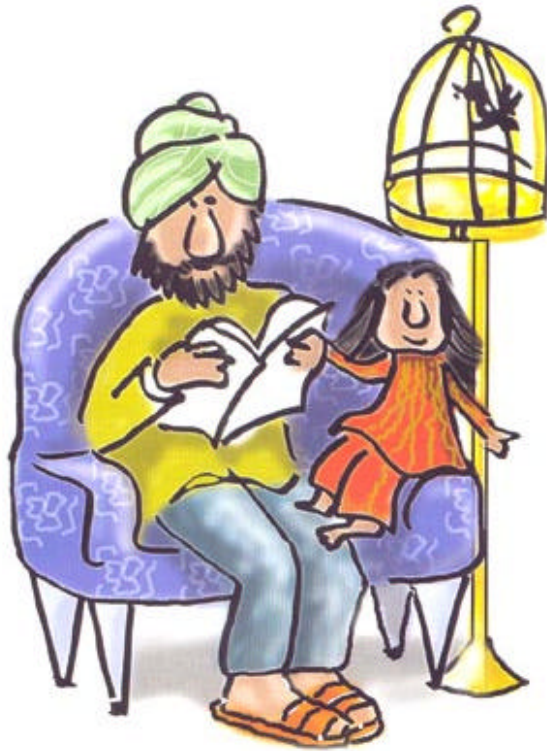
Books and stories do not belong only in our schools and libraries. They have an equal place in our parks, kitchens, playgrounds, buses, malls, markets, ice rinks, swimming pools, and town halls. Community-reading programs get books and stories to these places.

What about children and reading?

How to teach children to read has been a topic of debate for decades and continues to be today. At educational conferences across the country, academics, advocates and experts of one school of thought do battle with those from another. And, it appears that all sides have the data, statistics and research to support their views.

This debate will not be examined here. This booklet is not about how to teach reading -- that remains the principal responsibility of teachers and schools. Rather, this booklet is about encouraging, inspiring and supporting reading.





One thing that almost all educators and reading experts agree on:

Children who read, and are read with, outside the classroom do better than those who do not.

While academics and educators persist in their debate over "this" method versus "that" method of teaching reading, let's think of ways to instill reading in the home and the community, so that our children become good readers and remain so for a lifetime.

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Can parents be teachers too?

Many parents believe they have no place in teaching reading and that one has to be a professional to do it. The truth is, parents are constantly teaching. By the time a child enters school for the first time, he or she has learned to walk, play a number of games, speak, use the toilet, ride a bike, eat at the table, celebrate holidays ... the list is almost endless. With most of these things, it is the parent or another adult within the child's family who has been the teacher. And, of course, children are constantly learning from each other.





Reading can be included in the list above. It has to be. Research indicates that the most important influence of a child's academic success is the model parents set. The first six years of a child's life are a time of intense learning -- reading has to be a part of this process. It can't be left to the school alone. A child entering school who can't read at all, who has no favourite books or stories, and who may not know the alphabet, is starting with an enormous disadvantage.

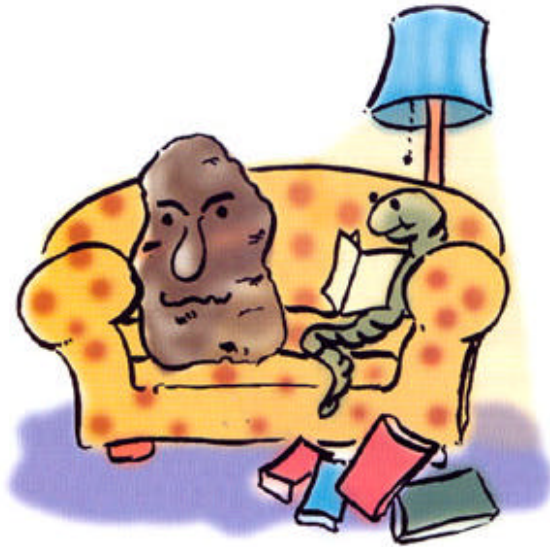
Developing good, early reading habits depends on the time and intimate one-to-one attention that a parent can usually provide. A teacher, with 30 or more students in the classroom, can't possibly provide the same degree of attention.

Couch potato or bookworm — Which one are you?

Do you read? Do your children see you reading, not just with them but as something you do and value?

If you read newspapers, magazines and books regularly, your children will learn that reading is a valued activity. Children are natural mimics. They will notice what you do about reading, not just what you say about it.

It's simply not enough to tell children to read while you plop down on the couch for another marathon evening with the TV or VCR. Books and reading must have a valued place in your own life for your children to learn good reading habits.





How can I include reading in our lives?

Make books and reading aloud to, and with, children a routine part of life in your home. Be sure to take books along on all family outings -- in the stroller, the car, the bus (one of my favourite places) or at the supermarket. Have your child softly read aloud as you shop.

Also, include books and reading in important family occasions. Halloween, for instance, offers an opportunity to discover scary stories suited to a child's age. As well as offering candy at your door, consider reading aloud a scary poem, riddle or passage. Keep it short -- 30 seconds is ideal.

Think of other occasions, events and holidays ... then, include books, stories and reading when celebrating them. Remember, the time spent on reading need not be long. Just be sure to include reading in every celebrated occasion. Make it a routine, a custom, a presence in your home. By doing so, you will be helping your child to develop a love of reading. What's more ... it's a lot of fun!

When should I start reading with my child?

On the way home from the hospital! When you read aloud to a baby, he or she is growing used to the rhythmic sound of your voice and associating it with a peaceful and secure time. In other words, your baby is learning to associate words, language and reading with pleasure.



What should I read to my child?

When your child is an infant, what you read is not so important -- it's the act of reading that matters. Of course, oral stories, songs, rhymes, lullabies and chants are all part of the early reading process. The child will grow used to them, will develop favourites and will start repeating them.

When the child's sight and hearing have developed (at about 10 months), using actual books becomes more important. Picture books with simple, bold illustrations and bright, solid colours are most effective at this stage. Use the book to point out familiar objects and repeat simple words (such as mommy or daddy). And use it as an object of play. Leave one or two books in the playpen or crib.

Use your own stories

Do you know family stories? Children are fascinated by their heritage and roots. Get as much information about your family as you can and share it by telling stories in your home. Uncles, aunts, grandmothers and grandfathers all have stories. Who are they? Where did they come from? What did they do?

Bring these stories alive for your children. For instance, many literacy organizations have published collections of oral histories collected by adult literacy learners. These anthologies are designed to capture and preserve family and community stories as a means of teaching literacy. They are one way to learn about your own local history.





Should I get others involved?

Encourage everyone in your family to make books and reading a priority. As parents, you play a major role, but you should not be the only models -- get the entire clan involved, including friends.

Tell a family a story before, during and after dinner. Write a "book" together about your family. Everyone can do research and write about an interesting relative. As with all learning, this exercise is unlimited. Learning about distant relatives will provoke questions: Where did great grandma come from? How did she get here? Why did they leave the farm and move to Sackville? Follow up on these questions; seek out books, articles and letters that tell your family history and bring it to life as much as possible for your children.

Your children will delight in your family's tradition of stories and reading. It is an intimate and memorable experience for everyone. Your family reading circles will be remembered for a lifetime. And your children will share this gift with their children, and so on.

Can children read together?

When your child starts kindergarten, he or she may get a book buddy or book pal — an older child, in Grade 6 or 7, who will read with your child, over and over, several times a week.

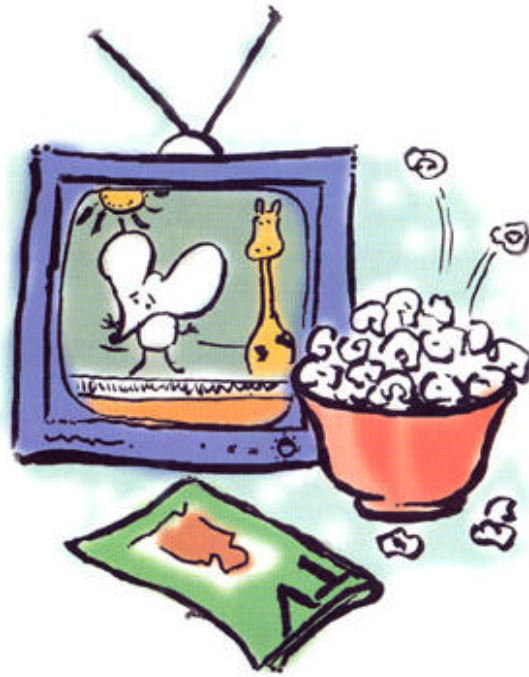
You can do this in your home, beginning in the preschool years. Older brothers and sisters, relatives, babysitters, friends and neighbours can all be book buddies or book pals with your child. Encourage and support this kind of reading. Your child will enjoy it and will be comfortable with it by the time he or she reaches school.



When do I stop reading with my child?

Never. Make your house a reading home when your child is born and maintain it forever. Start early and never stop.

Children, "tweens" (11-14 years old), teens, young adults and adults enjoy reading and being read to if they are confident and comfortable with it. These experiences are drawn from the earliest childhood years when you the "parent teacher," were doing the teaching.



What about reading in the community?

The community plays a large role in promoting the value of reading. Is that role recognized in your community? Think about your building, neighbourhood, village, town or city. What does your child see adults doing, talking about, spending money on or getting excited about? Make a list. Then ask yourself where books and reading figure on that list. Are they there at all?

In the introduction of this booklet, I mentioned that Canadian culture doesn't value reading the way it values sports and entertainment. For most Canadian children, reading stops at 3:30 p.m. on weekdays. They don't pick up a book at all on weekends, holidays and during the summer. These children grow up as reluctant or non-readers. They have not been taught or shown to value reading; they have not learned to think it important or fun. This is not the fault of schools or libraries -- books are highly valued in those places. Instead, they have been taught it by their community.

Clearly, we have to invite the community to teach something different, to teach that reading is important and fun.

Reading circles

Frontier College organized its first reading circle in 1984, in downtown Toronto. We called it a book show.

Today, there are more than 1,000 active reading circles in every province and territory across Canada. We are proud of this growth but our dream is to one day count reading circles by the tens of thousand! You can help make this happen.

A reading circle is a place in the community, outside of schools, where children gather on a regular basis to read and share stories. That's it. It sounds simple and it is. But it's also an extremely powerful tool to support learning and literacy for the future. If we can make books, reading and stories a routine, everyday activity for our children (the way TV is now), then we will begin to solve the literacy problem.



You can start your own community reading circle. Here's how:

1. Find a place in your community where young children (4-12 years old) gather outside of school -- for instance, a community centre, a Boys and Girls Club or a park. If necessary, obtain approval from local authorities to have your reading circle there.
2. Pick a time. Early evening or weekend mornings are best. You will need 90 minutes or so.
3. Find some friends who will volunteer their help. Extra assistance is vital for a reading circle.
4. Tell your local librarian what you are doing. Get help in choosing a wide variety of books for the children.
5. Ask your librarian or a grade-school teacher for tips about reading aloud.
6. Promote the reading circle by word-of-mouth, posters, etc. Tell your school about it and ask the staff to tell children.
7. Kick off the reading with a special event. Invite a well-known person to come and read aloud to the children. Try a local radio or TV personality, the captain of your junior hockey team, the mayor, a school-crossing guard or a firefighter.
8. You are on your way! The children will come with their parents to hear your guest reader. Afterwards, invite the children to choose a book from the selection you have brought. They can read alone, in pairs, in groups, or with you, their parents, or your volunteers.
9. Tell the children to come back next week at the same time for more stories, reading and fun.
10. Hold your reading circle on a regular basis.



Across the country, in countless communities, volunteers spend time organizing sports programs for children. This is worthwhile, but why can't we do the same with reading?

You don't need to be a professional athlete to get involved in community sports. And you don't need to be a professional teacher to get involved in community reading. You simply need to care about our children and their future. Your local reading experts will give you the training and support you need.

Reading experts in your community include elementary-school teachers, especially from kindergarten to Grade 4, children's librarians at your public library, and owners and staff of book stores. These people know a lot about books and reading. Tell them what you're doing and why. They will usually be delighted and pleased to help because you're helping them do their job.

Groups like Frontier College can help, too. Read on to find out how.

What else can I do?

A reading circle is only the beginning. You can do more.

Celebrity reading

Who are the people in your community your children know and look up to? Find out, and invite them to visit your reading circle to share a story with the children. Your celebrity does not have to be an actual "celebrity." Of course, if Wayne Gretzky can drop by, invite him. But local heroes will do just fine ... and the children already know most of them. It could be a local radio or TV host, a writer from your newspaper, the school principal, a firefighter, police officer, crossing guard, parent, elder ... the list is almost endless.

Or, you could invite visitors from outside your community (such as athletes or politicians) to visit and to tell your children a story from their own community. This is a wonderful way to welcome a stranger. Over time, perhaps, this could become a custom in every Canadian community, province and territory. Travellers would be sure to pack a storybook to read aloud with new friends when visiting a different part of our country!

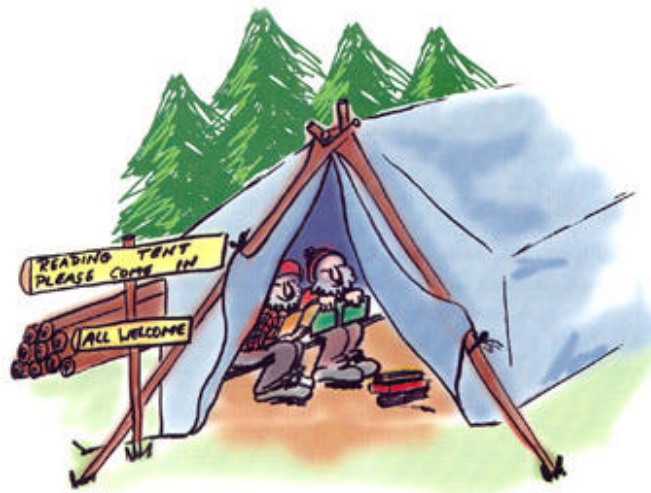
Special events

What are the most exciting activities in your community? Parades, Canada Day, multicultural events, religious occasions and festivals are all opportunities to feature books, stories and reading along with music, food and fireworks.

Find out what activities are going on in your community each month. Consult newspapers and contact community leaders and organizers. Introduce yourself and ask them if reading books and stories can be included in the planned event. Volunteer to set up a reading corner or a reading tent. Based on our experience at Frontier College, the answer will be yes.

Reading tents

An effective way to bring reading to the community is to set up a traditional, Frontier College-style reading tent. The founder of Frontier College, Rev. Alfred Fitzpatrick (from Pictou, Nova Scotia), set up the first reading tent in 1899, in an isolated logging camp. He put up the tent in the middle of the camp, and stocked it with books and magazines. Then, he hung up a banner which read: "Reading Tent -- All Welcome." At the end of the working day, loggers went to the tent to study, to learn a new language and to share stories.





We resurrected Rev. Fitzpatrick's idea, setting up the first modern reading tents in each provincial and territorial capital on Canada Day, 1989. Since then, people have set up reading tents (still bearing the sign, Reading Tent — All Welcome) in malls, parks, city halls, hockey rinks ... just about everywhere. It's simple and fun to do, and it's giving our children an important message -- that books belong everywhere, not just in schools and libraries.

Make the reading tent distinctly yours. Stock it with books and stories suited to the occasion. Have children and volunteers invite passers-by to join in. Invite your celebrity readers to drop by:

Let's continue this uniquely Canadian custom begun by Rev. Fitzpatrick, when he wrote:

Whenever and wherever people congregate, then and there shall be the time, place and means of their education.

Teen Reading Teams

At Frontier College, when we talk about taking books and reading "to the streets," we mean it literally! Here's how it works.

We have developed a Street Reading project by grouping student volunteers into teams, called Teen Reading Teams.

A small group of students meet in a public place, such as a mall or farmer's market. Each of the students (Street Readers) has a shoulder bag full of children's books from the library and wears a bright T-shirt or badge identifying him or her as a volunteer Street Reader.

Working in groups of two or three, the Street Readers look for families who seem bored (for example, sitting in malls) and approach them. They identify themselves and offer to share a story. While one Street Reader reads aloud with the children, the other talks to the parents about the importance of reading with their children every day. And they remind them that books and stories belong everywhere.

This program has been successful in locations of all kind -- malls, markets, parks, playgrounds and busses. It works and it's fun!

Occasionally, we encounter a family not willing to participate. That's fine -- the Street Readers just move on. We are conscious of safety issues too. Each team is accompanied by an adult, each Street Reader is clearly identified and we never approach unaccompanied children.

Street Reading can work for you, too. Get a Teen Reading Team started in your community.

What can we do about the electronic culture?

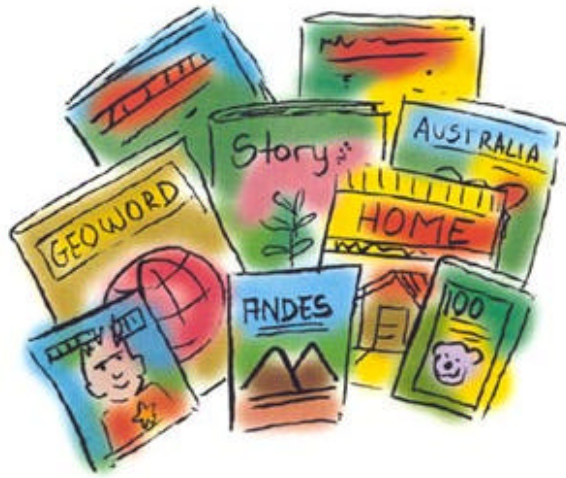
Young people today are growing up and living in an oral culture. What they know comes largely from radio, TV, movies, music, videos and conversation. This fact must be considered when we talk about reading and literacy.

We can't ignore the electronic culture, so let's use it to promote and support reading and literacy. Here are a few ideas:

Reading and TV

TV Guide is the best-selling magazine in Canada. Use it, along with your local newspaper guide, to read about TV shows and to discuss viewing with your child. Why not write letters to your children's favourite TV personalities? If possible, invite these TV stars to become celebrity readers in your community.

Your local library will have books on almost everything you see on TV. Take time to note what show or person interests your child and, together, visit the library to pursue that interest through reading.



In one reading circle, older children write letters to TV advertisers whose commercials portray women or children in a negative way or whose products are not friendly to the environment.

Keep in mind that TV can drive reading too. When *Anne of Green Gables* was shown on CBC, book stores couldn't keep the book on the shelves. Sales soared as families tuned in, then turned on to the classic novel. Watch for TV adaptations of your favourite book.

Remember that it's wise to limit the amount of time your child watches TV. Set an example. It's hypocritical to order your children to the library as you sit down for a few hours in front of the "tube."

Reading and Hollywood

As with TV, watch for obvious movie tie-ins. Most family films come from books that are available at the library and, often, there are special paperback editions of feature movies.

The movie theatre is also a terrific place for a reading circle. With a theatre's approval, set up a reading circle in the lobby -- a thick blanket, some pillows and a heap of books are all you need. Have the children read aloud in the line up and invite others to the reading circle while mom or dad gets the popcorn. Continue after the show, encouraging families to read up on the character, adventure or country they have just seen in the movie.

Rock 'n' roll 'n' reading

Children who say they hate books and reading will often be able to recite, by heart, lyrics and stories from their favourite bands and singers.

Rock music is full of references to legends, historical personalities, current issues and novels. Read the lyrics of your child's favourite singer and, together, explore the images and allusions. Get library books about rock stars, their home cities, etc. Write fan letters and join fan clubs. Read music magazines.

Rap music provides a great opportunity to read and to recite language that is intricate, compact and full of meaning and allusion. But rap music instead of a book? No, not instead of, but if your child overcomes an aversion to reading through rock lyrics, then he or she might get to the book.

Reading the news and politics

Can democracy survive in a culture that doesn't value books or reading? If all we know about a policy or politician comes from a TV news story, can our political debates be fully informed?

That's why it's important to use this limited coverage as a launch pad for thought and discussion. Use news stories, political issues and personalities to provoke conversations with your children. Use books and articles to follow up on questions raised by the political commercial or 30-second news story.



Consider inviting your elected representatives to read a story with your reading circle, at your reading tent event, or with your Street Readers. Who better than an elected official to demonstrate the importance of reading, and the link between democracy and literacy?

Your city hall, community hall or provincial/territorial legislature are also great places to set up a reading tent. Recruit some volunteers to read aloud from local histories and biographies. Help people to learn about the lives of local heroes who have statues and memorials around town.

How will reading help our country?

We know a lot about stories today. We hear and learn them from TV, movies and videos. From Vancouver to Quebec City and Fredericton, from Shsashet and Yellowknife, we tune into the electronic culture and absorb its stories for hours, every day.

But do we know our own stories? Our family, community or national story? These stories all exist and they are wonderfully rich. But most of them lie on shelves, silent and unread, unknown to us as we rush through our busy lives. If we take these stories down from the shelf, turn off the TV for a few minutes and read about ourselves -- our history and heroes, our failures and achievements -- we will come to understand each other better.

Let us come together in our communities and share these stories with our children. If we do, persistently and daily (the way we do with TV), we will be encouraging a love for reading, and developing respect for one another.

Seek out a group in your community you don't know, and invite them to your reading circle to share their stories with the children. In return, give them one of your stories for their children. Invite them to join the reading circle and to participate at your Canada Day reading tent.

Canada's Aboriginal people have a rich storytelling tradition. From them, we can learn much about the value of stories in preserving and nourishing language, culture and community. Meet the Aboriginal people who live in your community and invite them to bring their stories to your neighbourhood, reading circle or special reading event.

These are just some of the ways that books, reading and stories can help Canadians come together in their communities.

Reading, stories and literacy will not guarantee justice, peace, an end to racism or a specific direction for our country. But they will enhance mutual understanding and bring us together for moments of education and enjoyment. They will help us listen well and express ourselves clearly. And, through that kind of communication, we can help to overcome isolation and unawareness, and nurture togetherness, respect and understanding — now and in the future

