



Modeling a love for reading is the most engaging way to ensure our young people are on the pathway to learning and all the opportunities it offers.

FROM READERS TO CHANGEMAKERS

Rana Dajani
We Love Reading

All over the world, great strides have been made in conquering illiteracy. Yet, many adults and children do not spend sufficient time reading to benefit from the well-documented rewards of reading for pleasure. In many countries, literacy achievements have not inherently solved the problems of low reading comprehension and limited engagement with literature.

Reading for pleasure is lacking in today's society, for multifactorial and complex reasons. Children's experiences at school are too often characterized by stressful and narrow high-stakes testing and rote memorization, which can result in burn-out for students and even an aversion to reading, study, and literature. When young people

become accustomed to thinking that their views and opinions about reading do not matter, it comes as no surprise that they do not view it as a worthwhile use of their time. Alternative means of entertainment, like social media, television, and video games, become the default avenues for enjoyment.

The process of building a culture of reading for pleasure among children has three main steps:

1. Children must learn to read. This objective is termed literacy, and it is the most commonly understood and celebrated of the three steps.



2. Children must learn to love to read. This objective is the most overlooked part of the process, and the main focus of my work.
3. Children must be provided with interesting and stimulating reading material.

The dominant trend in global reading initiatives is to dedicate the large bulk of their resources to steps one and three. But passing over the critical second step puts the entire journey in peril. If children do not love reading, making books more widely available to them—although absolutely necessary—will not be sufficient to encourage them to read.

A Love of Reading Is Essential

In most cases, governments and program designers do not pay attention to this issue, due to a lack of awareness and knowledge about how essential the love of reading is to human development. The We Love Reading model strives to close that gap by promoting and harboring a love of reading that goes beyond the sphere of formal education and enters the everyday psychology and experience of children.

As the British National Literacy Trust argued in 2006, “Just because someone is able to read, does not mean he or she will choose to do so.”¹ In 2015, researchers at the Reading Agency wrote correctly that “children and young people must achieve enjoyment and gratification as outcomes from their reading experiences in order to pursue autonomous reading.”² Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, makes a similar point, arguing that reading aloud is the most important measure we can take to instill the lifelong motivation to read in every new generation.

“Much of the work in school involves the decoding of mechanics of reading. You might also call it the ‘how-to’ aspect of reading. The other half of reading is the ‘want-to,’ the motivational end. Without the ‘want-to’ all the ‘how-to’ drill work is not going to create lifetime readers.”³

We Love Reading concentrates not only on the ability to read, but also on the intrinsic value of reading for pleasure. Moreover, the method is simple, cost-efficient, and driven by the impacted



communities themselves. The approach centers on building capacity, not on the provision of materials. The fundamental goal is to foster a deep love of reading through the practice of reading aloud to children. In a post-pandemic world with an unpredictable future for education, the best approach we can take is to guarantee that children have an intrinsic motivation to learn and have the critical thinking skills necessary to do so. This can be accomplished through fostering a love of reading early in life.

Rewards of Reading Aloud

Children in the developing world have fewer opportunities and spaces in which to interact with books and literature. Creating new environments where reading aloud and reading for pleasure are introduced into children's lives is an essential service in this context. We focus on reading in person, not using a digital device, because as humans we are social organisms and we need the social interaction for healthy minds and bodies. By making reading an enjoyable experience rather than a chore associated with schoolwork, we are supporting children's development into lifelong readers. And if we are successful, these children will grow up and pass on the love of reading to the next generation.

Part of our theory of change is that each discrete act of learning gives rise to a chain reaction that positively affects countless others. We Love Reading has a far-reaching vision. We believe that in order to initiate real change, we must begin at the grassroots level through one-on-one interactions and focus on experience and building human potential. No significant change can be achieved without an extensive process underlying it. But once the kind of change we are seeking is realized, the rewards will be exponentially greater than we could have hoped for at the outset.

Empirical studies have shown that by reading aloud to children beginning in their earliest years, when the child's brain is developing and connections between neurons are being made,



we can create an association between feelings of security, love, and happiness and the practice of reading. I believe this connection can be nourished as early as in utero and persists into adulthood.

The following are just some of the many benefits to be derived from reading to children:

- It builds confidence, helping struggling readers find their voice and experience success and progress.
- It creates a sense of community. Silent reading is a solitary act, while reading aloud generates a shared experience.
- It connects the spoken and written word. Reading material out loud that a child has written shows the interconnections between writing, reading, and speaking.
- It stimulates many senses simultaneously, which helps children to memorize and recognize words more effectively.
- It encourages the reader to speak clearly and expressively, which deepens comprehension for both the reader and listener.
- It builds pathways in the child's brain that facilitate imaginative and creative thinking, form unique memories, boost self-esteem, nourish interpersonal relationships, and increase attention span.

When we acknowledge these immensely valuable outcomes, working to introduce a culture of reading aloud to our communities seems imperative. The real challenge, of course, lies in implementing these ideas in a sustainable and meaningful way.

The We Love Reading Model

Fundamentally, the ideal path to building a popular culture of reading passes through the home. If we could reach every parent in the world and convince them to read aloud to their children from birth, we would accomplish more than any community program ever could. Yet this is not practically feasible. We Love Reading has done the next best thing by organizing community-run

read aloud sessions at the neighborhood level. Of course, parents play a special role in We Love Reading, both as an essential part of our international community of ambassadors, and as the constituency with the most to gain from transforming their children's lives through reading for pleasure.

In 2006, after studying the latest research on the benefits of reading aloud, I designed a model initiative that offers a grassroots-led approach to fostering the love of reading. Crucially, the model I proposed does not exclusively focus on children, but rather views local women, and adults more generally, as essential to building a culture of reading in their own communities. I sought to engage parents and ordinary people as champions of reading in their neighborhoods, who would teach children to experience the joys of reading aloud. The initiative was born from a feeling of responsibility fundamental in my religion and culture: "Everyone is a guardian" (Prophet Mohd).

We Love Reading trains local women, men, and youth how to read aloud to children and to establish We Love Reading Libraries where they live and work. The program is based on shared universal human values while celebrating diversity by focusing locally. The volunteers who take our training are called "ambassadors." A We Love Reading Library is not necessarily a physical space. Rather, it's a social space where ambassadors regularly read aloud to local children.

Books that are read aloud in the program are attractive, politically and religiously neutral in content, and written in the child's native tongue. These books are then incorporated into a library controlled by a local ambassador.

In addition to promoting the experience of reading, the program empowers ordinary people to become leaders in their communities and build a sense of ownership over their work. In Jordan, where We Love Reading was first launched, the program helped normalize the presence of women as leaders in public space—a vital task not just in the Middle East but across the world.

Implementation and Impact

The We Love Reading model can be replicated anywhere: it uses existing common spaces, like a local house of worship or community center; it requires no extensive or bulky library, only a smaller core of books for the ambassador to hand out to children directly; and it relies on

ambassadors who do not need any advanced degree or extensive training, just basic reading ability and communication skills.

When ambassadors are trained, they are asked to "pay it forward" by sharing what they've learned with other local residents and thereby create a domino effect. The fact that ambassadors come from the impacted communities themselves helps to resolve the typical tensions between local life and externally run social programs. The program is built on trust that every ambassador knows what is best for their community. As We Love Reading Libraries grow, their organizers—often working and disadvantaged women and men—assert themselves as vital public leaders and agents of change. In many cases, residents begin to invest in their own libraries and assume full ownership of and responsibility for their operations.

We Love Reading has been impactful on a scale that I could not have imagined when we began our work, because it is a simple, effective initiative that depends on the ingenuity of those who run and benefit from it on the ground. We have reached hundreds of thousands of children in 65 countries around the world, growing through a global network of ambassadors.

For We Love Reading, the practice of reading aloud is a means, but our ultimate end is to help children learn how to think and act for themselves. The program is highly contextual and responsive: each library is adaptive and determined by particular traditions and cultures while still maintaining the program's essential structure. This contextual flexibility allows local ambassadors to control their own work and removes national and regional obstacles to the movement.

Part of the power of a movement centered on reading is the raw magnetism of the books themselves. In the words of novelist John Green, "Sometimes, you read a book and it fills you with this weird evangelical zeal, and you become convinced that the shattered world will never be put back together unless and until all living humans read the book."⁴ My own wish is that every child finds the excitement and pure joy of losing oneself in a book. I want everyone to be able to experience the horizons that open up through literature, and for our youth in particular to be empowered and inspired through reading.

We Love Reading is about the hope we find when we discover new worlds and possibilities



through reading. What new worlds are waiting to be discovered? What stories are waiting to be read that will make a difference in a child's heart, help build their bonds with their community, or cause a change in their thinking? These are the questions that motivate We Love Reading.

The Process

Building the program in a community involves eight main steps:

1. Recruit ambassadors from the area who are responsible, passionate, and dedicated, and enable them to set up and manage a library.
2. Train these ambassadors how to read aloud effectively and how to organize a local library. We have an online training course in 10 languages. <https://weloveread.org/>
3. Ambassadors reach out to community members and win as much support for the idea as possible.
4. Ambassadors then find a central location that is safe and easily accessible by the community where they host their read-aloud sessions—a place of worship, a community center, their own home, or even under a tree.
5. Ambassadors secure books for the library through donations from individuals or organizations—as many books as can be easily stored and assembled for each session.
6. Ambassadors hold a read-aloud session every weekend.
7. Ambassadors lend books to children to take home and read on their own.
8. The program organizes all the ambassadors in the area and develops a network to communicate, strategize, share ideas, and build support. This helps ensure the sustainability of the project.

These simple steps form the foundation of our program, upon which thousands of We Love Reading Libraries have grown and become autonomous centers of community life. Through patient and deliberate organizing, ambassadors can make these steps happen in many different countries and social contexts.

Stories From We Love Reading in Action

- In Aqaba, an ancient Jordanian port city by the Red Sea, I met a woman who asked if We Love Reading could build a library for community

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use. I explained to her that we didn't build libraries, but she could volunteer with our organization to do so herself. She took the initiative, completed our training, and began holding reading circles in a local mosque. Before long, her library had outgrown the space. A neighborhood contractor offered his services to build a stand-alone library, and dozens of residents came together to purchase supplies for the project. What began with one local woman quickly turned into a community initiative. Today, the library stands as a testament to their collective effort.

- Another woman, Najwa from northern Jordan, was excited about our program but admitted that she did not know how to read herself. We wanted to support her vision, but she needed to be able to read to begin the training. Several months later, we were stunned to learn that Najwa had, at the age of 70, felt so motivated that she had enrolled in a literacy course and learned how to read. She returned to us, completed the We Love Reading training, and began her own library. Her story is one of the most

inspiring examples of self-transformation that we've witnessed during our work. One of We Love Reading's most significant accomplishments is to create a space for elderly citizens to assert themselves as continuing, active agents in their communities.

- Another We Love Reading ambassador in Jordan has cerebral palsy. His mother and uncle brought him to our training to see if the program was right for him. He quickly embraced the idea of establishing a library in his community and became an ambassador, even training his siblings and other relatives as ambassadors as well.
- Some of our most successful libraries have been established in refugee camps, and are led by refugees themselves. We've learned the importance of treating refugees as active agents of change and decision-makers in their own lives. In addition to the obvious needs associated with physical survival, refugees, like all human beings, also have spiritual and intellectual needs that must be met. One of the first refugees we met at Zaatar



refugee camp in Jordan was Asma Arrashed, originally from Daraa, Syria. After learning about the program, she quickly began organizing her own We Love Reading library with local children. At first, she found it difficult to find a group of children who would come to read-aloud sessions consistently. Once she began to read them stories, however, she described finding “happiness in their eyes.” Asma built a vibrant and enduring library that allowed her to express her passion for reading and writing. A documentary created around Asma’s story, called “The Neighborhood Storyteller,” has won multiple film awards (www.theneighborhoodstoryteller.com).

Research and Recognition

We Love Reading is built on scientific research and has been rigorously evaluated by researchers at leading institutions of higher education, including Brown University, Harvard University, Yale University, New York University, the University of Chicago, Queen Mary University of London, and New York University Abu Dhabi. We partner extensively with universities and academic researchers to test our model, share our findings, and fine-tune our approach. The research has shown improvement of executive functions among children as a result of reading aloud and improved emotional perception as well as increased practices and attitudes toward reading and willingness to go to school.



An independent evaluation of our work, conducted by a USAID-funded company in Amman, reported that 95% of the volunteers found the program had cultivated a love of reading among children. This was evident through child engagement, attendance at reading sessions, invitations to friends to join sessions, requests for multiple books, and investment in buying books. All parents found that the program had positively impacted their children. Moreover, 75% of volunteers found that they witnessed positive change in children's behavior and attitudes after attending the sessions, with most stating that children became less aggressive, more disciplined, and less shy and fearful. Volunteers also highlighted benefits for themselves, including increased self-confidence, strengthened character, positive thinking toward reading, enhanced ability to deal with children, and greater knowledge about how to provide children with psychosocial support.

The program has received numerous awards and recognitions, including: Schwab Award for Social Entrepreneurship (2022), Ashoka Fellowship (2019), the UN Science, Technology and Innovation Forum Award (2019), World Literacy Council Award (2018), Jacobs Foundation Social Entrepreneurship Award (2018), UNESCO Literacy Prize (2017), UNHCR Innovative Education for Refugees Award (2017), STARS Foundation Impact Award (recognizing organizations that achieve excellence in the provision of services for children, encouraging the replication of effective approaches and practices) (2015), and IDEO.org Award for Best Refugee Education Program (2015).

Read to Evolve!

At We Love Reading, we do things because we want to, not because we have to. We do things because we have a passion for them and we feel a sense of agency in and ownership over our project. This is why We Love Reading creates lasting changemakers everywhere it goes. We Love Reading is changing mindsets through reading to create changemakers. We scale mindsets. What every ambassador does, they do because they

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want to contribute to the betterment of their community and themselves, not because it is a duty or chore. It is their agency, their goal, and the journey they want to take. We Love Reading is not and has never been about grades and scores; it is not a competition. It is about changing a mindset, about creating an environment that fosters a passion for reading, a passion for social entrepreneurship, and—ultimately—a passion for human freedom.

I leave my readers with some brief words I offered to my audience at the 2017 UNESCO Literacy Award ceremony, which capture the spirit of what I've attempted to accomplish through this work:

Read! The first word revealed to humanity in the Quran is “Read!” Why? Because reading is the most important action we can take as human beings, and the most important help, advice, and guide we can give to others. Reading provides fuel for the mind to contemplate, produce knowledge, build on the work of others, and expand our horizons. Reading is the centerpiece of that continuous cycle by which we build on the knowledge of our predecessors so that others can build on ours in their own time. Reading is the chain of continuity between generations of human beings without which we cannot grow or evolve. Read!

Notes:

¹ Clark, C., & Rumbold, K. (2006). *Reading for pleasure: A research overview*. National Literacy Trust. p. 7.

² The Reading Agency. (2015). *Literature review: The impact of reading for pleasure and empowerment*. BOP Consulting. p. 15.

³ Trelease, J. (2019). *The read-aloud handbook*. Penguin.

⁴ Green, J. (2012). *The fault in our stars*. Dutton Books. p. 33.

About the Author

Rana Dajani is a professor of molecular biology and a social innovator who wants to catalyze systems change in order to address the root causes of the challenges being targeted by the SDGs. She believes the way to do so is for every human to have a mindset of “I can” and to take responsibility to solve locally.