

## WHY JOHNNY CAN READ (IF HE WANTS TO)

*By David A. Watson, Ph.D.*

At the stroke of midnight on July 16th, I know exactly where I, and my entire family, will be, and what we'll be doing. We'll be holding our places in line to purchase Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince at the big-box bookstore on Bay Area. I'm well aware that there are many things to do on a Friday night at midnight besides queuing up to purchase a book (sleep, for example). The fact is, it's been on our calendar for months, and my kids (and many others here and elsewhere) wouldn't miss it for the world. For any new release to generate such excitement, and especially a book that actually stimulates pre-adolescents to read, is truly remarkable. Here's why.

Last summer, the National Endowment for the Arts, in collaboration with the United States Census Bureau, released a much-publicized survey of American reading habits. The results were dismaying to bibliophiles everywhere. The report, entitled "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America" and dubbed "Why Johnny Won't Read" by the Washington Post and others, documented a substantial drop in reading by people of all ages, educational attainment, and socioeconomic level. The survey showed that less than half of us (47 %) read "literature" (poetry, plays, and fiction), and in 2002 only 57 % of Americans read any book at all. Put another way, fully 90 million of us read no book of any kind in 2002, with the numbers being worst for adult males, and for young people generally. In a separate study, the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that young people (male or female) read, on average no more than eight minutes per day. Indeed, testing suggests that only about a third of fourth-graders nationwide are proficient readers. Another study indicates that greater than 10 % of entering college freshmen require remedial instruction in reading. Other data show that our kids watch

some three to five hours of television per day, such that by the time they graduate from high school (if they do), they've spent more time in front of the tube than in class (more, in fact, than engaged in any other activity except sleep).

The culprit for the decline, according to some pundits, is that books chosen to be read by our kids in schools are best characterized as “earnest” and “dull.” Others blame it on a move toward literature that addresses the types of problems faced by teens today (e.g. drug abuse, pregnancy, and divorce), and away from adventure stories and biographies. This, argue Mark Bauerlein (Director of Research, National Endowment for the Arts) and Sandra Stotsky (Steering Committee Member, Reading Assessment Framework, National Assessment of Educational Progress), has affected the interest of boys in reading even more than that of girls.

What can we do? Among other ideas for increasing time spent by our children in reading, the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests: setting limits on children's TV time; turning on the television only to watch specific programs; providing other options for kids besides TV; and possibly most importantly, practicing what we preach (i.e. don't be a couch potato, unless that is what you want your child to be also). The RIF (Reading Is Fundamental) organization offers reasons why our children don't read, including: it's boring; there isn't enough time; it's too hard; it isn't important; and it's not fun. RIF says that nagging, bribing, judging, and criticizing are all recipes for failure in getting our kids to read. Instead, they offer 20 ways to encourage reading, at [www.rif.org](http://www.rif.org). A few of these include: finding and making available to kids a variety of interesting reading material; reading aloud to them, either as a family, or as older to younger siblings; and again, turning off the TV and showing your kids by your example that you are a reader.

I remember clearly the last Harry Potter release party two years ago. We took a nap in our hotel room, our entire family, then we went downstairs, out to a bookstore on San Antonio's Riverwalk, and stood in line to claim our copy of Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix. Not satisfied merely to purchase the book, however, my boys insisted we begin reading it. So, over the next two hours we proceeded to knock out the first three chapters. This late-night celebration of the written word made the next day's conference in a darkened (and too-warm) meeting room seem endless, yet it was worth the price to see my children's faces as we began a new adventure in reading. We're now 2,715 pages into the Harry Potter series, and the truth is I'm just as excited to read the next two books aloud to my boys as they were for me to read to them the first five. In fact, my son Jon is fond of saying (only somewhat tongue-in-cheek) that while the Harry Potter movies are okay, the special effects are much better in the books!