

READING AND CHILDREN

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Surely everyone is familiar with the Harry Potter books or the Lord of the Rings trilogy. Harry's throbbing scar reminds him that the evil Voldemort is lurking and Frodo's ring whispers a wish to return to its tyrannical master. I believe we all have stories that whisper to us. Our stories define who we are and influence what we do. When I was in high school, people in my hometown used to call the school office if they needed a babysitter. The names and phone numbers of these families would be placed on a list and students could sign up for the jobs. At 14, this was a great way to make a little money. One of the babysitting assignments was a real eye opener. Dishes were piled high in a sink, the floor was filthy, the kitchen table looked like it hadn't been wiped down in weeks and the kids -- there were seven of them under nine years old.

The orders were simple. They were going out for a night on the town. Throw the kids in the room with the two mattresses on the floor and if they gave me any trouble, smack'em. When the door closed, I still remember standing there for what seemed like minutes -- and was probably only 10 seconds -- staring at the children and they were staring at me. Being as task oriented then as I am today, I was already making mental notes on the steps required to achieve my goal -- wash dishes, clean table, clean kids, (clean bathroom first), find some food to give them a snack and get them to fall asleep on two mattresses in one room.

The thing I remember most about that night was the moment I got all of those kids into the bedroom and asked what story they'd like me to read to them. They just looked at me. Finally the little girl, probably five years old said, "We don't have any books to read," and they didn't, not one children's book, actually not one book of any kind. So I told them about ten stories and they finally agreed to go to sleep. About a half an hour later, I was sitting carefully in the middle of the sofa, I didn't want to touch anything if I could help it, the little girl came out, stood in front of me, took the fingers of her two hands and pinched my leg while saying, "I want you to come back here and tell us stories again." She said nothing else, turned around and went back to bed. I swear I can still feel that pinch today when I think about reading and kids. Anyway, I made it a point to find that name on the list and signed up to babysit for them. I brought a book and hid it under a mattress. The oldest boy told me nobody would ever find it there. Each time I returned, I'd read to them for a long time before they'd go to sleep.

Then, someone else took that babysitting assignment one day. The following day I was called down to the office by an angry school secretary. She asked me why I hadn't reported the condition of THAT family. After all, we didn't want that kind of family on our list. I never saw those kids again. I remember feeling angry. I can still feel a throb in my leg where that little girl pinched me whenever I think about kids who miss the simplest things in life.

That is why I continue to advocate for library programs -- in every school in this country. Libraries DO make a difference in the lives of children and families. President Obama, I know that you can help to make this happen.