A $5 Children's Book vs. a $47,000 Jail Cell -- Choose One

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"Texas uses fourth grade reading scores to project the number of prison cells they're going to need 10 years later."

I first heard that astounding pronouncement in 1995 while co-chairing a White House task force on literacy. And though I later learned that the formula for projecting the number of jail cells was more nuanced, it was not inaccurate. Moreover, Texas wasn't alone in using elementary school reading difficulties as a proxy for serious problems later in life. 60% of America's prison inmates are illiterate; and 85% of all juvenile offenders have reading problems.

Sadly, the percentage of criminals who have reading/illiteracy problems is not surprising. What is shocking however, is how many kids are at risk of illiteracy. Today, fully 67% of American fourth-graders can't read at the fourth-grade proficiency level; and 33% score below the basic competency level. (All these statistics are from the NAEP tests — the standardized tests given to all fourth-graders.)

There is actually a bit of good news in that statistic. When I was a member of Hillary Clinton's Prescription for Reading Partnership task force, the competency failure rate was 40%. So a seven-point shift is significant. Much of that improvement was the result of a mandate in the No Child Left Behind legislation that required schools to use proven, research-based techniques to teach reading. And that led to a large-scale shift away from "whole language" to phonics-based methodologies.

Another significant factor was insight gained from brain research on very young children. One doesn't have to be a rocket scientist – or brain researcher – to understand that babies and toddlers who receive

more verbal, visual, and tactile stimulation from their parents have more brain stimulation than children who don't. That there are long-term, positive impacts on cognitive abilities from this increased early stimulation is no surprise either. Or that lower stimulation levels have a direct impact on what is known as "pre-reading" skills and ultimately success at learning how to read.

But what is surprising is how easily early brain stimulation can be enhanced – particularly among low-income families whose kids arrive at school with the weakest pre-reading skills. And that enhancement comes simply from reading to very young children.

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