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Recipes for Reading Success

Parenting People

By Alison O'Leary Murray

There is no universally accepted method for getting kids to read. Some educators embrace whole language while others tout phonics; some take pains to process every word while others say it's OK to skip the ones a child can't read.

In that way, reading with kids is like cooking for them: parents have to experiment and sample until something mutually acceptable is produced.

That's the idea behind the *Words That Cook!* show that Laurie Joy Haas and Monty Haas brought to the airwaves of cable and public television three years ago as a follow-up to their book, *Read It Aloud! A Parent's Guide to Sharing Books With Young Children* (Reading Railroad, 2000). Aimed at parents, kids and educators, the half-cartoon show, featuring real-life co-hosts Monty Haas and Martine Bernard, offers fun and easy ways to improve literacy. And it's anything but boring.



Martine Bernard and Monty Haas, co-hosts of *Words That Cook!* do a lot more than read on this television show about literacy.

Successful But Unsatisfied

By most indications, the show has been successful. It started on Natick's cable television station and is now seen in more than 20 states across the country. Last year, *Words That Cook!* collected a major prize – the International Reading Association's 2005 Broadcast Media Award for Television. The show's producers have just announced a partnership with the Massachusetts Retired and Senior Volunteer Program to train reading tutors. They've also launched a distance-learning course on literacy tutoring, offered through Fitchburg State College.

And yet, Monty Haas is not satisfied.

"No matter how many statistics show that reading and interacting with children and books produces successful kids, it's still something that's not on many parents' radar screens," he says. "Quite honestly, reading is the magic bullet for helping this country's children educationally. Any normal, run-of-the-mill child struggling with schoolwork can trace his problems back to not finding the connection, the love of reading."

Gathering Ingredients

That's why Haas and Bernard travel to visit with librarians, teachers and special schools to learn their techniques for getting all kids – toddlers, sports fanatics, reluctant readers and others – to not just pick up a book, but to make reading, wordplay and language a daily family activity.

That kind of integration is what they found when filming two segments of *Words That Cook!* at Lincoln's Carroll School, a private institution for kids with language-based learning disorders like dyslexia. Donna

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– Monty Haas, *Words That Cook!*

Sullivan, director of curriculum and instruction for the school, says language learning is integrated into everything kids do there.

"We take a multisensory approach and include language in all areas of the curriculum, including wood shop and art," she says.

Sharing Solutions

Tips from the Carroll School and other experts Haas and Bernard have met on the show can be found on the Web site, www.wordsthatcook.org, including:

- Use brainteasers to focus children's attention;
- Empower children with choices;
- Use tongue twisters to support articulation; and
- Try all sorts of dramatic play at home.

The site also includes a plethora of resources for parents and teachers, including a list of recommended reading, arranged by age, by Miriam Marecek, Ph.D., who has worked as a literacy coach with the Harvard Graduate School of Education and on the board of the pediatric literacy program Reach Out and Read.

Laurie Joy Haas, executive producer of the show, says that reading is such a simple solution that it's often overlooked.

"All of the experts with all of the training and background all arrive at the simplistic conclusion that is within reach of every parent," she says of reading together. "Reading is not punishment, it's not force-feeding kids. It's just a matter of creating an atmosphere of joy."

To drive the point home, she and Monty created a list, "101 Ways to Get and Keep Kids Reading." The ideas on that list are as simple as "read to your hamster." It will be available for purchase from their Web site soon.

"It doesn't take an advanced degree to find creative, innovative ways to interact with kids and reading," she says. "Parents just need to trust their instincts and go with it." ♦

Alison O'Leary Murray is editor of *The Boston Parents' Paper*.

Want to Know More?

Visit *Words That Cook!*'s Web site at www.wordsthatcook.org for reading lists, tips and techniques for getting kids to love reading.