

WebParentTip: LET'S LENGTHEN ATTENTION SPANS

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"Our appetites are gargantuan, our attention spans anorectic." is an accurate description of the number of words we are confronted with each day. Tracy Schiff's column in the New York Times (Tuesday, 2-13-07) points out that never have so many words been written or read in a day. A new blog is created every second and 27 novels are published every day in the US alone.

But we mostly deal with bits and bytes of information rather than continuous narrative. When we "read" something online we are searching, not following the mind of an author through a creative work of fiction or an intellectual argument.

I watched my grandchildren last week who "borrowed" my computer to log on to child-appropriate sites. Even those that were educational had information broken up into short bursts of words or were separated from other information by graphics, most of which wagged or jiggled in some way. Headache-producing. At least the very occasional blog I open stands still!

It occurs to me that we owe J.J. Rawlings, creator of Harry Potter, a vote of thanks for realizing that kids need narrative as well as bits and bytes. Long books CAN engage a child. My daughter read all the published Harry Potter books to the twins even though they could read themselves as reading aloud made it a shared family event.

Reading on a computer is NOT reading a book. Read to your children. Go beyond picture books when they are old enough and shift to reading the classics or the contemporary series like Artemis Fowl. Read a chapter at a time so your children will learn the art of remembering a plot line and imagining a character.

This will help their attention spans grow long enough to read whole books on their own. The last thing you want your child to have is an anorectic attention span.