



BOOK LEARNING

When her son turns out to be a reluctant reader, **Suzan Jackson** finds that creating a story just for him does the trick.

“I CAN’T DO THIS!”

shouted our son, Jamie, then age 6, as he pushed the book off the table. Watching him struggle with reading, my husband, Ken, and I were frustrated, too. He was a smart kid with a huge vocabulary, so why was he having trouble? Avid readers ourselves, we wanted him to know the joy of reading, but his enthusiasm dwindled as his struggles increased.

“Maybe this book is too hard. Let’s try another one,” I soothed, as I chose a new volume off his shelf.

“Mom, this book is for babies!” he cried as he saw my selection. “I want to read one of my Pokémon books.” We’d had this argument before. A first grader, he had no interest in any of the beginning reader books. Most were written for preschoolers, and Jamie was insulted by the books’ tot-friendly tone.

Instead, he wanted stories about Pokémon, superheroes, and *Star Wars*—cool stuff. Unfortunately, these kinds of books were beyond his abilities. We explained that he needed to start with simple books so he would be able to read the ones he wanted, but that just seemed like wasted effort to him. (Six-year olds aren’t known for their long-range thinking.) What he needed were books that would play to his interests but do it with a few simple words. When I went looking for them in stores and libraries, though, I couldn’t find any. Finally it hit me: if the books Jamie needed didn’t exist, I’d make them myself.

My drawing skills are pretty much limited to stick figures, but there are tons of images available online. I found that with greeting card software, I could make 4-page sections that could be assembled into a book. I made a hand-drawn mock-up, then numbered the pages to figure out how it would go together.

Next came the fun part. I’d never written anything for children, but I knew what I wanted. I wrote about the Pokémon characters Ash and Eevee (easy names to read), and stuck with words that Jamie already knew or could sound out. With just two to four words and one sentence per page, illustrated with pictures from the Internet, the story came together fast.

I printed and stapled the pages together. The 16-page book had only 20 different words but plenty of the action Jamie loved.

I HAD HOPED he’d like the book, but Jamie’s enthusiasm surprised and thrilled me. It was like a dam had broken. Jamie realized that reading could be fun. When he finished my book, he wanted more. He started reading everything—road signs, cereal boxes, even some of the easy reader titles he’d previously scorned.

To keep his motivation up, I created a book focused on our family, another subject close to Jamie’s heart (though perhaps not as close as Pokémon). It paired photographs with simple sentences, such as “This is my Pop Pop. We like to play ball.”

He loved the family book as well. From then on, his confidence bolstered by these successes, there was no stopping him. Jamie’s reading skills quickly progressed; by fourth grade, he was flying through the Harry Potter books. And when Craig, his younger brother, wanted to learn to read, Jamie knew just what to do. He gave Craig the “Ash and Eevee” book as an introduction to the exciting world of letters on the page.

meet the family



The Jackson family of Hockessin, Delaware