THE YOUNG MAN STANDING BEFORE Richard Robinson wasn’t merely unreceptive to the idea of reading, nor was this a student whose problem was a simple lack of motivation. No, this one, a resident of a correctional institution for boys, was way beyond that—he was unwilling, unwavering, dead set against the whole idea.

Forget it, he told his teacher. I’m not going to read. Period.

OK, fine, replied Robinson, who’d been teaching long enough to know there is, as he’s fond of saying, more than one way to skin a cat. Whereupon he sat down, opened a James Bond novel to the first page, read aloud until he got to the suspenseful will-he-die-or-not part of the tale . . . and tossed the book onto the table. See ya later, kid!

“He got all upset when I did that,” recalls a chuckling Robinson, now a professor of curriculum and instruction in MU’s College of Education. “But he borrowed the book, and it worked—eventually he read the thing himself.”

By-the-book pedagogy for reading instruction? Hardly. But as far as he’s concerned, says this literacy education specialist, if it works, you do it. “I had a little boy at that institution tell me he wanted to read the racing form,” he illustrates. “For others, the only reason they were interested in reading was the tabloids by the checkout in the food store. Now, I may not be particularly interested in the National Enquirer myself, but if that’s their motivation, so be it. I say, let’s get them reading a wild UFO story, if that’s what turns them on. We’ll get them into War and Peace later.”

CANT READ, CANT FIT IN
There was a time when not knowing how to read was not a big deal. Relatively speaking, the whole thing is pretty new. More than 90 percent of our time as a species has been without any form of writing, notes Professor John Foley, who has joint appointments in classical studies and English and is the director of MU’s Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, the only research facility in existence devoted to oral traditions and the media derived from them. The Greek alphabet came along somewhere around the seventh or eighth century B.C., he explains, but very few people knew what to do with it. Up through the 12th century, there was absolutely no literacy among the kings of England, and even after that it was very spotty. “They had people to read and write for them, just as they had people to take care of their horses and make meals,” Foley says.

These days, of course, we tend to expect kings and commoners alike to be able to read, though that’s far from the case. According to the National Institute for Literacy in Washington, D.C., more than 20 percent of all adults in this country read at or below the fifth-grade level, which is far below the level needed to earn a living wage. Children with reading difficulties can suffer serious damage to their self-esteem long before they reach employment age.

Studies have found a direct correlation between illiteracy and juvenile delinquency; a downward spiral can begin when a child doesn’t read properly, feels stupid and worthless, and slides into negative, destructive, antisocial behaviors. David DuBois, assistant professor of psychology, explains: “Self-esteem comes from two basic sources: the ability to see yourself as competent and the belief that other peo-
ple perceive you as competent," he explains. "If you can’t read in this society, you lose on both fronts."

FROM MARKS TO MEANING
While most children start reading at about 5 or 6 years of age, Robinson says, "It’s not locked into a particular age or grade level. To say you must be reading by this certain point is like saying, 'Every child in first grade should be this tall.' Children are different."

But when you listen to experts talk about the many things involved in learning to read, that any of us advances to the point where we’re able to puzzle out "TV Guide" listings seems a miracle. "Well, we start very early," Robinson answers. "The current thinking is that kids are learning to be readers almost from the day they’re born."

Emergent literacy, it’s called, referring to the fact that from the moment we emerge wet and wordless from the womb, we are inundated with print. Reading readiness doesn’t happen overnight, goes the theory. With every stop sign, every cereal box, every toy with our own name written on it in Magic Marker, we are one step closer to becoming literate beings. But as proud as mom and dad might be of the precocious toddler who can "read" the McDonald’s sign from half a mile down the interstate, being able to recognize a particular word (or golden arch) is a far cry from reading. Nor is a tot truly reading when she says "eat" in response to mom brandishing the C-A-T flashcard.

"Literacy is a much more complex thing than we used to think it was," notes Foley. "At one time we thought it was a matter of sitting down with someone and getting them to say "oh" when they saw the circle. But reading isn’t just decoding sounds and signs; it’s the ability to decode ideas from signs." But you must speak before you can read.

Babies learn to wrap their minds around language by hearing it spoken, and gradually taking a stab at it themselves. Parents and other caregivers are the most important source of this kind of stimulation, says Linda Espinosa, associate professor of early childhood education. So where does day care fit in here?

"The child-care experience can either enhance a child’s emerging abilities or dampen them," Espinosa says, noting that the critical factor is the degree to which the adults are responsive to the child’s efforts to communicate. But talking isn’t the only thing we work on mastering at that tender age.

On another level, you could say we spend those early years not just learning how to ask for a toy, but also on becoming culturally competent. As Foley explains it, by the time children are nose-to-knees with their first formal teachers, their little heads are virtual warehouses of experiences, images, concepts and stories—a boggling collection of information about what it means to be a person in this time and place. Or, as the professor puts it: "Children have an easier time learning to read when the whole constellation of cultural concepts that our texts talk about is part of their equipment for everyday life."

This is easier to grasp, he says, if you consider what’s involved in learning a foreign language. Even when you’ve advanced enough to decode a sentence word by word and to assign each a dictionary meaning, you’re likely to miss nuances—or even the whole point—if you’re not well-versed in the culture that shapes that language. Take, for example, the time the famous proverb "Out of sight, out of mind" appeared in a Japanese translation as ”Invisible, insane.” Foley provides another illustration: "If you read about Little Red Riding Hood, you know what that’s about. But if I talk about a little girl with a maroon outfit, that doesn’t have the same implications for you, does it? All cultures have shorthand phrases for things—things for which you need to have background if you’re going to read them, which is to say both decode and understand them."

THE MAKING OF A READER
According to Robinson and other experts, the single most important thing parents can do to lay the groundwork for literacy is to read aloud to their children as much as possible. Rest assured there are all sorts of positive things happening while you’re reading that Dr. Seuss book, even the 63rd time through. Book awareness, for instance, is a matter of understanding that the print on the pages has meaning, that there’s a reason for looking at it, that stories have beginnings and middles and endings.

"We all assume everyone knows these basic things," Robinson explains, "but if children haven’t been exposed to books or been read to, they don’t know there’s a reason for doing it.” There’s also the little matter of metacomprehension. "Metacomprehension is an awareness of what you know and what you don’t," continues Robinson. "As an adult, if you don’t know something, you read about it, look at a picture, ask somebody, whatever—you figure out a way to find out. As self-evident as this seems, it’s a fairly
sophisticated notion and for some kids is unfamiliar."

And then there’s our alphabet, adds Foley, which is particularly tricky in that it’s a system both very complicated—you try explaining why “rough” and “ruff” look so different but are pronounced exactly alike—and absolutely arbitrary. “There’s no relationship whatsoever between W-O-R-D and the concept of word,” he explains. “It’s a descriptive convenience, something the culture’s decided on as a way to represent something.” Understanding that spoken language can be broken down into component sounds that in turn can be represented by strings of letters is referred to as phonemic awareness.

Of those children who run into trouble learning to read, some—perhaps 5 percent or so—get hung up not because of poor schooling or low intelligence, but because they are physiologically different.

“These children have trouble with semantic memory, which is the ability to retrieve information that has meaning,” says psychology Professor David Geary, who specializes in cognitive development and has done research on the connections between disabilities in reading and mathematics. “Where most kids will be able to sound out the word ‘book’ if they don’t already know it, these children have trouble coming up with the ‘buh’ sound for B,” he says. This has nothing to do with how smart a kid is, he adds. Several large-scale studies have found this particular problem in children of all intelligence levels. “They have wiring problems, so to speak,” Geary says.

But this quirky wiring phenomenon is relatively rare, stresses Robinson. “I think a lot of kids who’ve been labeled learning-disabled just haven’t been taught very well,” he claims. “For most kids having problems reading, it’s not a gene characteristic or whatever—it’s just that we haven’t got their number.” A new program of MU’s that sends college students to local elementary schools to tutor kids in reading is one more step toward that on a local level. The project, A Way With Words Literacy Program, was inspired by a recent boost in federal work-study grant funds, explains program director Teri Walden, who is head of the Work Study Employment Program in MU’s Career Center. The government encouraged colleges and universities to consider committing at least half the raise to local literacy projects. “Our student tutors won’t be arranged for this boy and a few of his pals to meet with some members of the team for a little man-to-man talk. “I don’t know what the players said to them, but when the kids came out of there, their eyes were like saucers!” Robinson says. “The point is, they obviously got these boys’ attention and made it clear that there are a few more things to life than football. You have to find someone the kid respects, someone he admires, because when he finds out that person is a reader, well, that can make a tremendous difference.”

Which gets back to why parents play such a vital role, why children need to see mom and dad reading on a regular basis as well, he adds. When mom and dad don’t just talk the talk, but walk the walk—or, shall we say, look at the book—kids notice. If all goes well, your child will develop the Flashlight Under the Covers Syndrome. The symptoms include a telltale pool of light glowing through the sheets long after bedtime, glazed eyes in the morning, and your having to point out that sitting at the dinner table with a book propped up in front of one’s face is not considered good manners.

These are all sure signs your kid’s been bitten by the bug, infected with an incurable passion for print. Rejoice in your good fortune, for it means your child is on the way to developing a lifelong habit of reading, that he or she sees reading as a source of great pleasure. But for heaven’s sake, don’t ruin everything by saying any of that out loud, or at least within your book-crazy offspring’s earshot. And make sure you pretend to be at least a little mad about the staying-up-too-late stuff—if you’re a parent, it’s part of the job, it helps maintain your credibility. The beauty of it is, once you get kids reading, you don’t have to convince them it’s an awesome and totally excellent thing to do—they’ll see for themselves soon enough.

SPRING 1998