



Get Brit kids back to reading

Says James Patterson

FOR the first time, according to a leading author, Britain has fallen behind America in terms of children's literacy.

Here one of the States' best-selling novelists, JAMES PATTERSON, talks about what we can all do to ensure we don't fall further down the ranks.

● To read or not to read? That is the question.

The country of William Shakespeare, the Bronte sisters, Charles Dickens and so many more now seems to have fallen out of love with books and, worse, is failing to encourage a whole new generation to read.

For us Americans, the British are our heroes when it comes to literature.

Just look what your writers have done for kids alone.

They have produced Treasure Island, Beatrix Potter, Alice In Wonderland, The Chronicles Of Narnia, the Famous Five, Lord Of The Rings and that bespectacled child wizard Harry Potter.

But here's a weird and shocking thing.

I now believe your literary heavyweight of a nation has fallen behind the United States in children's literacy.

I don't know if it's a cultural thing or a difference within the school systems, but for us in the States there is an emphasis placed on the importance of reading that is missing in the UK.

For goodness sake, we even

have bumper stickers which say: "We Read in this House." It is such a simple thing – but it works and we are proud of it.

Something has obviously gone wrong in the UK and part of the problem must be at home.

Some parents are not offering enough help and encouragement.

The whole notion of "I can't get my kids to read" is just unacceptable.

Can you get them to set the table? Clean their teeth? Get dressed? Of course you can.

So get them to read.

It needs to become ingrained in their daily lives – a habit, something they don't think twice about.

If your child is not at the age where they can read on their own, you must read with them – and even when they are, there is no reason to stop. It is a valuable shared activity.

Pleasure

I would particularly like to appeal to fathers. Research carried out recently by the wonderful charity **Booktrust** showed that just 14 per cent of UK fathers are the main reader to their child.

It also showed that when fathers do read with their child, it is more likely to be with a daughter, reading to them for longer and more often.

This has to change.

Boys need to see their primary male role model making time for reading. It is an impression that will stay with them for life.

Moreover, a father's involvement

in their child's early reading is proven to boost academic success, leading to improved social and emotional wellbeing. There is a misconception among parents that reading begins and ends in the classroom.

This is not true.

The basic skills

start from birth, with parents playing a key role.

Once kids reach school, teachers stick to a curriculum and, in most cases, do not have the capacity to ensure children read for pleasure.

That is not their job, it is yours.

If your child does not acquire the necessary reading skills at an early stage, school will be far from enjoyable for them.

And ultimately, when they go out into the world, they will struggle to succeed.

They're going to be a weight on society.

If you do not offer strong encouragement, you are doing your child a real disservice.

Booktrust's Bookstart scheme delivers free books to 1.5million pre-schoolers all over your green and sceptred isle (where does that come from, kids?), meaning families have an opportunity, at no cost, to read to their babies.

Right from the start, form a habit of a lifetime. Do your duty. Do not fail your children. ●

● **James Patterson's Middle School series of books for kids are published by Young Arrow.**

James is a founding partner of Booktrust's Children's Reading Fund. See booktrust.org.uk.

