

She next looked for a way to fill the free time created by the TV vacuum: She said, "You boys are going to the library and check out *two* books. At the end of each week you'll write me a report on what you've read." (Only years later did the boys discover she couldn't read well enough to understand any of the reports.)

**O**f course they didn't like it but they didn't dare refuse. And in reading two books a week, then talking about them to his mother, Bennie raised his reading scores. And because the entire curriculum is tied to reading, the rest of the report card began to improve. Each semester, each year, the scores rose. And by the time he was a senior in high school he was third in his class, scoring in the 90th percentile of the nation.



Dr. Ben Carson

With colleges like West Point, Yale, and Stanford waving scholarships in his face but only ten dollars in his pocket for application fees, Bennie let his choice fall to whichever school won the College Bowl television quiz that year (Yale). He majored in psychology, then went on to the medical schools (University of Michigan and Johns Hopkins). Today, at age fifty-eight, **Dr. Ben Carson** is one of the world's premier pediatric brain surgeons. When Johns Hopkins named him head of pediatric neurosurgery he was, at age 33, the youngest in the nation.

Asked to explain how you get from a fatherless inner-city home and a mother with a third-grade education, from being the worst student in your fifth-grade class to being a world-famous brain surgeon with a brother

who is an engineer, Ben Carson points to two factors: his mother's religion (Seventh-Day Adventist) and the pivotal moment when she limited their TV-viewing and ordered them to start reading. (For the "complete" story, read *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story* by Ben Carson [HarperCollins/Zondervan].)

Several things are worth noting in the Carson family's story: 1. Mrs. Carson didn't trash the set—she *controlled* it; and 2. With high expectations of her children, she demanded appropriate behavior from them. In controlling the dosage of TV, Mrs. Carson averted disaster. Dosage determines the impact of anything—from hurricanes and aspirin to reading and television.

For more on Dr. Carson, see The Academy of Achievement (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/car1bio-1>.)

**W**hat the Pitts and Carson families did wasn't expensive, so income level need not be a blockade. It may not be easy, but it's not impossible. For example, the most comprehensive study of American school children (22,000 students) showed that while poverty children made up 52 percent of the bottom quarter when they entered kindergarten, six percent scored in the highest quartile—right up there with the richest children in America. These families, along with the Pittses and Carsons, demonstrate there is no limit to children's achievements when parents do the right things.



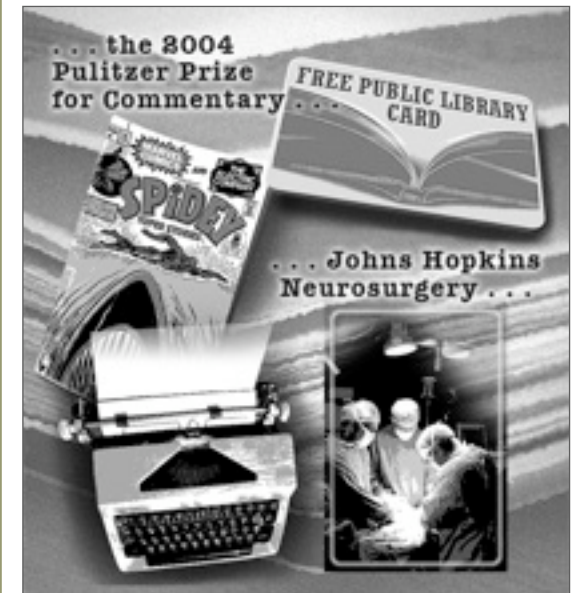
For more details on these subjects, see Jim Trelease's Web site [www.trelease-on-reading.com](http://www.trelease-on-reading.com).  
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# TWO FAMILIES EVERY PARENT SHOULD MEET

One home produced a Pulitzer Prize-winner, the other a world-famous brain surgeon.  
*And they did it in poverty.*

BY JIM TRELEASE

Author of the New York Times Bestseller  
*The Read-Aloud Handbook*



**L**et me introduce you to two families who come from the humblest of circumstances: American poverty. Two families that produced extraordinary children without the aid of expensive tutors but with the aid of gutsy parenting.

We begin with **Leonard Pitts Jr.**, who once described his mother this way: "She was not a learned woman, never finished high school. But then, it's hard to be learned when you grow up black in Depression-era Mississippi. Still, not being learned is not the same as not being smart." His mother "was a voracious consumer of books and newspapers, a woman filled with a thirst to know." With that in mind, picture this 46-year-old son sitting down at his computer in 2004, typing the following words:

My first reader was a welfare mother with a heart condition. She lived in a housing project near downtown Los Angeles.

This is circa 1962 or '63 and technically, she wasn't my reader back then but my listener. I would follow her around as she ironed clothes or prepared a meal, reading aloud from my latest epic, which, like all my epics, was about a boy who was secretly a superhero, with super strength and the ability to fly.

Surely there came a point when the poor woman secretly regretted having taught the bespectacled child his ABCs, but she never let on. Just nodded and exclaimed in all the right places and when the story was done, sent me off to clean up my room or wash my hands for dinner.



Leonard Pitts Jr.

*Miami Herald* column for that day.

Mrs. Pitts couldn't afford expensive tutoring classes. Instead, she tutored him herself—by listening, enthusing, and reading. She couldn't afford high-priced "eye-contact" tutors but she skimped to buy him a toy typewriter when he was eight, and a used one when he was 14. Loose change? Just enough so her son could buy the latest "Spider-Man" and "Fantastic Four" comic books. What Mrs. Pitts was doing is one of the great trade secrets in American education. It's called parenting. Of all the teaching methods, it's the one that works best.

(For more information on Leonard Pitts Jr. and samples of his newspaper work: [http://www.leonardpittsjr.com/recent\\_columns.html](http://www.leonardpittsjr.com/recent_columns.html).)



**T**he second story begins with a woman named **Sonya Carson**, trying to raise two sons in inner-city Detroit as a single parent. One of twenty-four children, Mrs. Carson had only a third-grade education. A hard-working, driven woman, she worked as a domestic and child care-giver for wealthy families—sometimes working two or three jobs at a time to support her sons. Sometimes she

Pitts was writing a thank-you note to his mother. Even though she had died 16 years earlier, he wanted her to know how grateful he was. After all, you don't win the **Pulitzer Prize for Commentary** just any day of the week. (Pulitzers are the highest award in journalism.) His thank-you note became his syndicated

worked so hard she had to "get away to her relatives for a rest." Only years later did her sons discover that she was checking herself into an institution for professional help for depression.

Her sons, on the other hand, were not working themselves into any kind of frenzy. Both were on a slow boat to nowhere in the classroom. Bennie, the younger one, was the worst student in his fifth-grade class. As if raising two sons in one of the most dangerous cities in America were not enough, Mrs. Carson now faced the challenge of the boys' grades. She met it head-on. "Bennie—you're smarter than this report card," she declared, pointing to his math score. "First thing, you're going to learn your times tables—every one of them!"

"I only went through the third grade and I know them all the way through my twelves," his mother answered. "And furthermore, you are not to go outside tomorrow until you learn them."

Bennie learned his times tables—and his math scores began to climb. His mother's next goal was to get the rest of his grades up. Her intuition pointed to the television that never seemed to be off when the boys were home. "From now on, you can only watch three television programs a week!" A week! (What Sonya Carson lacked in book sense she made up for with common sense that would be vindicated nearly thirty years later when major research studies showed a powerful connection between "over-viewing" and "underachievement.")

What Sonya Carson lacked in book sense she made up for with common sense.