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read aloud, read along



Reading Aloud Is A Family Affair

What's the secret to turning kids into readers? Two words: reading aloud!

--By Adrienne Press

When you think of reading aloud, do you picture yourself with your toddler's favorite book at bedtime? Or perhaps a group of young children sitting in a semicircle listening to a storybook read by a teacher? What about fourth graders, eighth graders or twelfth graders? Should parents and teachers read aloud to them, too or do we outgrow this early-childhood ritual? Most of us lose the habit as time goes by, but reading aloud to kids of any age-including us big kids--is one of the best-kept secrets for entertainment that's intimate, educational and inexpensive. Perhaps best of all, reading aloud allows you to spend time together doing something the whole family can participate in.

When it comes to reading, two axioms come to mind: "children learn what they live" and "dumber in the summer." The first one is rather straightforward. If a child grows up in a home where parents read - aloud and silently -- the child will, too. As for losing smarts over the summer, the numbers tell the story. Kids who read at least six books during the summer or travel don't lose any points in their reading test scores the next year; everyone else does, says Jim Trelease, who wrote a

bestseller on the subject called *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. Trelease took his observations from schools where he volunteered, then expanded his inquiry and investigated research published about reading. In the *Handbook*, he has gathered statistics and anecdotes that amply support his thesis that reading - aloud and silently - is among the "magic potions parents feed successful kids."

Trelease on Trelease

"I was a hyperactive child," Trelease says. "My mother would hand me bodily to my father and say, 'Here, take him.'" His father, who didn't have a college diploma but read two newspapers and subscribed to so many magazines his mail carrier complained about the heavy load, realized that reading calmed his son down. "My dad would read the comics to me every night." To understand the comics, you have to understand the social structure of a culture, he says. *Lil Abner* was a study in satire; Dagwood and his wife Blondie or Dagwood and his boss Dithers helped teach about relationships. "It was something I was sharing with my father on his lap on the big upholstered chair every night after dinner," Trelease says. "My father would pick up the *Saturday Evening Post*, we'd look at the cover and he'd ask, 'What's going on here? What is the artist trying to say?'" When Trelease became a father, he read to his children as his father had to him. The tradition of readers raising readers had passed from one generation to another.

Raising Readers

So how do you turn your kids on to reading?

Trelease makes a convincing case for what he calls the reading facts of life: "human beings are pleasure-centered and reading is an accrued skill."

Reading aloud supports both facts by making reading fun. Perhaps most important, parents who read create a role model. It doesn't matter what's being read-newspapers, magazines, novels or comic books-the point is that we imitate our parents' habits -- good and bad -- and reading is one of the best habits a parent can "give" their children.

Like swimming and biking, reading is a skill once learned isn't forgotten. But like those other skills, reading requires practice to develop listening skills, lengthen attention span and build understanding. As Trelease puts it, "the person who doesn't read much struggles when it comes to reading long paragraphs and long chapters. The person who doesn't read much doesn't know much because the largest amount of knowledge is buried in text."

After a government commission evaluated more than 10,000 reading projects, the Department of Education issued a report in 1985 called *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, which described what works, what might work and what doesn't work. Here's the essential nugget of the reports: "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children." If you add to that message's urgency the fact that reading is the basis for all other learning, you'll be ahead of the game.

Closing the Gap

One study of the summer learning gap examined the progress of academically equal first-graders from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds. During the school year, the students kept pace with each other but once the summer vacation started, a "knowledge gap emerged and widened *each* year. The cumulative effect of seven summers of little or no reading shows up in lower eighth grade reading scores, especially for kids from lower-income families.

Reading aloud everyday doesn't require huge chunks of time. Even 15 minutes of read-aloud time will work wonders for preschoolers. What's more important is a regular habit of reading, such as every night after dinner, and choosing books that work for your child's age and read well aloud. As Trelease points out, stories read aloud can be beyond the listener's own reading skills or areas of interest. It's good to stretch your audience's world with stories that will stimulate their imagination. Perhaps the most consideration should be given to

books you, the reader, enjoy because your enthusiasm will come through to your audience. The easiest way to turn a kid off from reading, of course, is the "do as I say, not as I do" approach, whereby mom and dad tell junior he must read but *they* must watch television, Trelease says. (For other helpful Dos and Don'ts, click [here](#).)

Don't worry about reading "classics" or "educational" books. Most educators agree that reading - anything from comic books to the mini biographies in newspapers known as obituaries - is better than not reading. Remember the goal is to create avid readers. Here are some ideas for good [read-aloud books](#).

While Trelease suggests reading to each child individually to tailor the choices to the particular child's age, there *are* times when reading aloud to a group audience works, too. On car trips, for example, you can make it a family affair by listening to stories on tape. You can record stories or chapters from books yourself ahead of time, or borrow unabridged books on tape from the library. As your children grow older, let them read to you, too. And don't forget to share the pleasure of words and ideas found in magazine essays and letters with other "big kids" such as your spouse. For more inspiration, [read on](#)!

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