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Reading to Young Children

by Nancy Schulman,

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There are many ways parents can teach and influence their young children, but none is as simple, effective and pleasurable as reading aloud. All you need are wonderful age-appropriate children's books and some undivided time.

Reading aloud brings parents and children close together to share an activity that provides fun and knowledge – along with the gift of a lifelong love of books. Reading with children can begin when your child is an infant. Holding a baby while he listens to the soothing sound of your voice and the rhythmic pattern of language is the first exposure children have to reading. Sturdy board books are great for older babies who love to turn pages over and over and point to pictures and name things they see as they are first learning words. When you get into a routine of reading every day with your child from the very beginning, it becomes part of your daily life and both parents and children can look forward to this time together.

Reading aloud can happen anywhere and anytime. Most children love the calm routine of books at bedtime or snuggling on the sofa or big chair with a parent. But don't limit yourself to only these times. Bring a book with you to the park or in the car. A book can pass time in a restaurant while you wait for your food or encourage a squiggly child to sit for a few more minutes at the table. Books are not the only things you can read to your child. Reading cereal boxes, street signs, magazines or newspapers shows your child that words and information are everywhere; soon she will notice words in print and begin to point them out to you.

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The Benefits to Your Child

Research shows that children who are read to frequently at home are twice as likely to have three or more skills associated with emergent literacy. These literacy skills develop long before a child has learned to read. Further, children who have access to a wide variety of reading materials become more proficient readers.

Reading aloud to children invites curiosity and interest in the world around them and builds vocabulary with words they understand and can use. It also helps develop their attention span and listening skills. They gain knowledge about a wide range of topics that are familiar in their everyday life and are exposed to new ideas and things. They learn that words in print are spoken words written down in a particular order and are read left to right.

Another benefit of reading aloud to children is that it engenders a positive attitude toward reading. When children are read to on a regular basis, they learn to associate reading with warm, pleasurable feelings. And don't forget the impact you have as a role model: when children see their parents reading for enjoyment, they too are likely to view it as an enjoyable pastime.

Choosing Books

How do you know what to read? Choosing books that you both like is helpful. The selection in the children's section in a bookstore or library can seem overwhelming. In selecting books for young children, make sure the illustrations are visually appealing and colorful. Books that have brief, simple stories without too much text on each page are best for young children. The story should be simple enough for your child to retell to you or "read" to himself. As your child grows you can select books that have more complex plots and more words on a page. Young children love books that have rhythm, rhyme or predictable words or phrases they can anticipate and join in on. Choose books that capture the vivid imaginations of preschoolers – stories with animal

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characters and humor are good for this age. Capitalize on their curiosity about the world with books about people, places, things or information that they are particularly interested in. Children enjoy books that reinforce new ideas and concepts that they are learning such as color, shape, letters or numbers. Books on topics like toilet training, a new sibling or starting school are easy for young children to relate to and can help build new skills and abilities. You will probably see books that you remember and loved as a child and these will usually become favorites of your child as well. The fact that a book has received an award such as the Caldecott Medal for illustration or the Newbery Medal for writing is a helpful indicator of high quality children's literature.

Some Classics

There are some authors that are tried and true and are magical for any young child. As you are looking for books for your child, you can't miss with these:

- Frank Asch
- Margaret Wise Brown
- Marc Brown
- John Burningham
- Eric Carle
- Lois Ehlert
- Don Freeman
- Mem Fox
- Mother Goose
- Kevin Henkes
- Lillian or Tana Hobans-Russell
- Ezra Jack Keats
- Ruth Krauss
- Leo Leonna
- Arnold Lobel
- Bill Martin, Jr.
- Dr. Seuss
- William Steig

- Rosemary Wells
- Audrey and Don Wood

As your child gets older and has a greater attention span, some favorite beginning chapter books are:

- My Father's Dragon
- George's Marvelous Medicine
- The Box Car Children
- B is for Betsy
- The Phantom Tollbooth

How to Read Aloud

Once you have selected books to read aloud, there are a number of things that you can do to enhance your enjoyment and your child's. It helps to look a book over before you read and be prepared to read your child's favorite books over and over. Children love repetition and the familiarity that comes with knowing a favorite story.

When you read aloud:

- Look at the cover together and introduce the title, author and illustrator to your child.
- Read slowly. The slower pace helps your child think about the story and form questions.
- Read with expression and use different voices for each character.
- Sit so your child can see the pictures but don't be surprised if your child likes to do something else (like drawing) while listening.
- Allow your child to ask questions or look more closely at the illustrations.
- Encourage your child to participate by turning pages, repeating rhymes or predicting what might happen next.
- Point to the words and follow the text with your finger as you read.
- If your child seems uninterested or distracted, try again later or choose another book.

When parents turn reading aloud time with their children into question and drill sessions or trying to teach them to recognize words, the inherent pleasure of a story or comprehending the meaning of the book gets lost. Visiting the library, getting your child his own library card, buying books as gifts and keeping plenty of reading materials within a child's reach are far more important ways to encourage a potential reader.

Lessons from the Classroom

If you look around an early childhood classroom, you will see the many ways teachers involve young children in reading readiness activities. These are carefully planned experiences that support children's growing language and emergent literacy. Speaking, listening, reading and writing are all inter-related and develop along a continuum of growth.

Teachers will:

- Talk to children using rich and varied vocabulary.
- Daily read aloud fiction, non-fiction and poetry, and discuss books before, during and after reading them.
- Talk about authors and illustrators.
- Have a library area in the classroom stocked with lots of books.
- Post schedules, job charts, calendars, etc. on the walls for children to "read."
- Label places and things around the classroom with words.
- Have activities like rhymes, chants or songs that increase awareness of language sounds.
- Use books as references to answer children's questions.
- Have materials like puzzles, charts, blocks, and magnetic letters to introduce the alphabet.
- Have writing materials (paper, markers, pencils) available for children to write with.
- Put written materials like menus, signs or office pads in the dramatic play areas.
- Use experience charts to write stories that children dictate about class trips or things they have learned.

These are just some of the ways early childhood teachers build the foundations for reading.

Don't Stop Reading!

Finally, when your child does learn to read, don't stop reading aloud. Children may be thrilled to be able to read on their own, but as they mature they will still enjoy listening to stories beyond their reading ability. Elementary age children will love listening to classic adventure stories you read to them. Even when she was a teenager, I read to my daughter and we both loved Jane Austen together.

Make reading a part of your everyday life with your children and you will send the message that reading is valuable. You will create in your family a culture of reading that will stay with them always.

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