

The Benefits of Reading Aloud

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There is an easy way to improve your child's chances at school. It will entertain and delight him. It will strengthen the bonds between him and you. And it is virtually free. Sound too good to be true?

Actually, it isn't. The magical method: taking time to read aloud to your child.

In an era of high-stakes testing and education reforms and revolutions, research has repeatedly proved that one simple parenting technique is among the most effective. Children who are read aloud to by parents get a head start in language and literacy skills and go to school better prepared.

"Reading aloud to young children, particularly in an engaging manner, promotes emerging literacy and language development and supports the relationship between child and parent," concludes a review in this month's Archives of Disease in Childhood.

In other words, reading that bedtime story may not only entertain and soothe Johnny, it may also develop his vocabulary, improve his ability to learn to read, and – perhaps most important – foster a lifelong love of books and reading.

Developing that passion for reading is crucial, according to Jim Trelease, author of the bestseller, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. "Every time we read to a child, we're sending a 'pleasure' message to the child's brain," he writes in the Handbook. "You could even call it a commercial, conditioning the child to associate books and print with pleasure."

This reading "commercial" is critical when competition for a child's attention is so fierce. Between television, movies, the Internet, video games and myriad after-school activities, the pleasures of sitting down with a book are often overlooked. In addition, negative experiences with reading – whether frustrations in learning to read or tedious "skill and drill" school assignments – can further turn children off from reading.

That can have long-term consequences. As Trelease succinctly puts it in his Handbook, “Students who read the most, read the best, achieve the most, and stay in school the longest. Conversely, those who don’t read much, cannot get better at it.”

Reading aloud is, according to the landmark 1985 report *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading.”

Despite this advice, however, some educators and many parents don’t read aloud to children from a young age and thus fail to nurture avid and skilled readers. Indeed, this is especially true for children in low-income families. According to the Federal Inter-agency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, only 48% of families below the poverty level read to their preschoolers each day, compared with 64% of families whose incomes were at or above the poverty level. Children from low-income families are also less likely to have exposure to print materials.

Groups such as Reach Out and Read (ROR), however, are working to combat this problem. The Boston-based non-profit extols the virtues of reading aloud to parents when children go to their check-ups at the pediatrician’s or family physician’s office. The group also helps provide reading materials for families of lesser means. And ROR has been remarkably successful: “Studies which examined language in young children found an association between the ROR intervention and statistically significant improvements in preschool language scores, a good predictor of later literacy success,” its website reports.

The good news for families is that this sage piece of parenting wisdom is easy to follow. Reading aloud to your child requires only a book – free, with a library card – and your willingness to spend a little quality time with your child. And while the sacrifices to read aloud are few, the benefits are many: Your child may learn to read better, think better, imagine more richly, and become a passionate and lifelong reader. More than these long-term benefits, however, are some more immediate: The pleasures of spending time with your child and sharing the enjoyment of a good book.