

WHY READING TO CHILDREN IS IMPORTANT



BY SUSAN L. HALL AND LOUISA C. MOATS

The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children. This is especially so during the preschool years.¹

from Becoming a Nation of Readers

THIS CONCLUSION, from an influential report entitled, *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*, resulted from a study sponsored by the National Institute of Education. The purpose of this review was to summarize the findings from research about reading and to make recommendations for instruction. This report, which was published in 1984, is still recognized as a landmark summary of research in reading and is frequently quoted in educators' books.

The fact that the Commission on Reading proclaimed the importance of reading to children may not surprise many parents; most parents have been told in many ways to read to their children. As a first-time parent, however, I became aware that although I had been repeatedly advised to read to my child, no one had ever explained *why* it was important.*

When my first child was born, I was working full-time and feeling very overextended. I read many popular parenting books and worried about what my child

ate, how to childproof the house, how to evaluate child-care options, and so forth. After a few months of feeling overwhelmed with how much there was to learn and do as a new parent, I decided to choose a couple of things that were important to me and do those really well. I chose two areas to concentrate on in my parenting, knowing I could not be an expert on every aspect of child rearing. Driven by interest, I made a commitment to do a particularly diligent job

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This article is an excerpt from the authors' book, Straight Talk About Reading: How Parents Can Make a Difference During the Early Years. Copyright © 1999. Used with permission of NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, Inc. Available in paperback for \$12.95. (ISBN #0-8092-2857-2)

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*Whenever you see a personal segment that uses "I," it is a story told by Susan Hall. We wrote these stories in her personal voice because we knew that other parents would readily identify with her puzzlement and her worry when her own son developed reading difficulties.

with building self-esteem and getting my child ready to read. My goal was to raise a child who loved to read and who had strong self-esteem. Little did I know at the time how connected these two goals are.

My choice of parenting goals may be of interest because one is a gift my parents gave to me and the other is a gift I discovered myself. My parents were amazingly intuitive about how to parent in order to raise a child with strong self-esteem. However, my parents didn't read to me as a child, and our home contained very few books. If they had been advised that reading aloud was critical for success in school, I have no doubt that my parents would have read to me and my siblings in spite of the fact that neither parent read for pleasure. In the 1950s, the importance of reading aloud to children wasn't widely known or communicated to parents. Because reading was not emphasized or modeled at home, I did not discover reading for pleasure until my late teen years. I missed the pleasure of many classic children's stories in my own childhood; therefore, the prospect of sharing them with my own children was doubly inviting. I'd get what I'd missed; they'd get acquainted with the wonderful world of books.

Having decided that I wanted my children to be readers, I began paying close attention to anything written about how children learn to read. In my journey through all the parenting books, I was on the lookout for anything about reading. The recommendation that parents should read to their children came through loud and clear, so I began to purchase children's books and read aloud to my children. However, being an overly analytical person, I began to wonder about *why* I should read to my child and *what proof* there is that it really makes a difference. Although regularly reading aloud to our children was a habit my husband and I embraced, I was nagged with these questions and struck by the fact that I had never seen an explanation of how this activity benefits children's subsequent reading ability.

It was during my first course in a master's program in education called "Survey of Reading Methods and Materials" that the answers emerged. One summer as I sat on my deck reading the textbook for this course, it all began to make sense. The information about what reading aloud to a child accomplishes was there in the textbooks for educators. But why wasn't this information in parenting books? That was probably the moment of conception for this book.

Six Reasons Why Reading Aloud Helps

How Does Reading Stories Aloud Benefit My Child?

There are some well-researched benefits to a child whose parents read aloud to him.

BENEFITS FROM READING ALOUD

The child

- develops background knowledge about a variety of topics
 - builds his vocabulary
 - becomes familiar with rich language patterns
 - develops familiarity with story structure
 - acquires familiarity with the reading process
 - identifies reading as a pleasurable activity
-

Each of these benefits is explored in this article, along with evidence that reading aloud to our children will encourage them to be readers.

Benefit: Builds Background Knowledge

Probably the most critical benefit of all those hours of reading stories to our children is that the child gains knowledge of things, people, and places that he is less likely to acquire from any other source. Every story a parent reads to a child gives information about an envi-



ILLUSTRATED BY SONJA LAMIT

ronment and images of things that happen in that environment. It is almost as if we are creating a huge inventory of mental images of life's experiences and doing so much more rapidly than the child could experience firsthand, even in families that emphasize travel and conversation. Later, when the child reads a sentence or passage about a topic he is at least somewhat familiar with, it is so much easier for him to determine unknown words and comprehend what he is reading. Having background, or prior knowledge, about the topic when reading a new book is a critical component of later comprehension after the child has learned to read the words.

After reading about background knowledge in my education textbook, I began examining children's stories to see what kind of information is contained in them. Let's take a popular children's story and assess it from the perspective of what it provides the child. My oldest child loved *Curious George* stories written by H. A. Rey. Because I have fond memories of how much we enjoyed reading these stories, I've chosen one for an analysis of the background information provided in it.

Overview of the Story— *Curious George Gets a Medal*

In this classic children's book, a monkey named George is the center of the story. He is very curious and causes some difficulty each time he pursues his curiosity by exploring something. In this 47-page illustrated book, George, who is home alone, receives a letter. While trying to write a response, he spills ink which he is trying to pour from a bottle into a fountain pen. The mess becomes much worse as he tries to clean up the ink with soap flakes and water from a garden hose. Having partially filled a room with lather and water, he runs to a nearby farm where he remembers seeing a portable pump.

The events at the farm continue with difficulties. Because the pump is too heavy for him, he decides that he can get a farm animal to pull the pump back to his house. However, his first effort to get a pig to pull the pump results in all the pigs rushing out of the fence once he lifts the latch. He finally realizes that a cow is a better choice and begins the journey home on the cow's back with the pump pulled behind them. However, the farmers see them and a chase begins. George hides in some laundry on a clothesline and then jumps in the back of a passing pickup truck.

The truck happens to be on its way to the Museum of Science to deliver a large box. George, who does not know what a museum is, goes inside to satisfy his curiosity. He explores the rooms with stuffed prehistoric animals and eventually spots some nuts on a tree in the dinosaur exhibit. Since he is hungry he climbs onto the dinosaur's head and accidentally pulls the artificial tree over, knocking down the dinosaur. The guards catch him and lock him in a cage. His friend, "the man with the yellow hat" (who had brought him from Africa in the first book) arrives just in time to save him from being taken to the zoo.

George's friend is carrying the letter that had been delivered by the mailman at the beginning of the story. The letter was written by "Professor Wiseman," the di-

rector of the museum, to invite George to ride in a spaceship which has been built as an experiment. In order to be forgiven for the mess he made at the dinosaur exhibit, George agrees. George blasts off in a tiny spaceship and must bail out by pulling a lever when a light is illuminated inside the ship by remote control from Earth. He parachutes out just in the nick of time and receives a medal for being the First Space Monkey.

Background Information from the Story

There is an amazing amount of background information in this story. Our lovable, curious monkey demonstrates practical things, such as how fountain pens are filled with ink and what happens when soap flakes are sprayed with water from a garden hose. While George goes to the farm, he observes the pigs squealing and grunting and running away as fast as they can. He also contrasts the pigs' behavior to that of the cows, who were gentle and strong and far better candidates to pull the pump for him. All these observations provide background information for the child about the behavior of different farm animals.

George, who had never been to a museum before, makes observations about this unfamiliar environment. George observes that the large animals he sees do not move. The author writes:

They were not alive. They were stuffed animals, put into the Museum so that everybody could get a look at them.²

The book provides illustrations of the several rooms of stuffed animals, including the dinosaur exhibits. For a very young child, this may be his first exposure to a museum of this sort.

As the story continues through the spaceship scenes, there is some additional background provided. George is dressed in a space suit with a helmet, air tank, gloves, and shoes. A satellite dish and monitor screen are shown in the illustrations to explain how the people on earth communicate with the monkey in the spaceship. The blastoff scene is complete with a countdown before the rocket engine is ignited and the ship blasts off. The description of the ship continues:

He pressed the button and the ship rose into the air, slowly first, and then faster and faster and higher and higher, until they could no longer see it in the sky. But on the screen they saw George clearly all the time.³

A young child hearing this story retains an impression of the blasting off of a spaceship and continued communications with Earth.

This classic children's story was written in 1957 and offers the opportunity for a parent to explain that there were no manned space flights then, yet we have achieved enormous progress in space flight during the last 40 years. Other scenes that date the book include the use of a fountain pen with a blotter and the laundry hanging on the outdoor clothesline. These nuances provide an experience from which to launch a discussion about the differences in technology and life in the 1950s versus today.

Benefit: Builds Vocabulary

A child with a large listening and speaking vocabulary has an enormous advantage in learning to read. Reading comprehension depends more than any other sin-

gle skill on knowing the meanings of the individual words in the passage. When a child is trying to read an unfamiliar word after he has learned some phonics and word attack skills, he should begin to sound out the word. The process of relating the print to a spoken word is faster and more accurate when that word is already in the child's speaking vocabulary. For example, if a child encounters the word *museum* for the first time in print, he is likely to say the word correctly if he recognizes that it is a word he has heard and can interpret. And not only can the child figure out the new word faster, but because word recognition has required less time and effort, he has more attention to devote to comprehending the passage.

Imagine that a child who is an early reader doesn't know the word *rocket* and is reading the following sentence:

When we flash you a signal you will have to open the door and bail out with the help of emergency rockets.⁴

As he sounds out *rock-ets* he will more quickly recognize that he has read this unknown word correctly if this word is already part of his speaking vocabulary, and he knows what it means. The context will help him know that he has deciphered the word correctly, and he will have a sense that the word fits the meaning of the sentence. Having a big mental dictionary of words facilitates reading comprehension and reading fluency, and young children acquire a big mental dictionary from having books read to them.

Continuing with our *Curious George* example, let's examine the vocabulary words that appear in this children's story. During the beginning scenes at the house involving the letter writing and attempted cleanup of the spilled ink, lots of rich vocabulary is used. Then while George is on the farm, completely different words are included. The story continues with more rich experiences and vocabulary as George is asked to go up in a spaceship and bail out using a parachute to land safely.

Below is a list of 28 sample words from this book. Although some of these words may be spoken in our daily interaction with our children, many are words we

would not use regularly, and so the child's vocabulary expands. It has been proven that children do not typically learn such words from television, from each other, or simply from talking with adults. Reading books is the key to knowing words.

Benefit: Develops Familiarity with Rich Language Patterns

Not only is exposure to the background information and specific words in books important for children, but so is exposure to sentence patterns and special uses of language that are found only in books. The more exposure to complex and well-structured sentences, the more likely it is that the child will use such sentence patterns himself. Thus, the exposure helps not only comprehension but also speaking and writing ability as the child matures.

In the preschool years, children do not learn about sentence structure from being formally taught. They learn from listening to the patterns spoken around them and modeling their own language patterns after those of other speakers. The brain is hardwired to learn the rules and organization of a language system; all that is required is sufficient input for the brain to sort out the way words can be ordered to make sentences. As a child listens to sentence after sentence, he develops a familiarity with a range of possible sentence patterns and how ideas are communicated. The patterns become part of his internal rule system for putting words together. For example, he learns that questions can be made in different ways:

What did George do when he could not carry the pump?

Did George carry the pump?

(With a rising voice): George didn't carry the pump?

He learns as well that some words have to go in a certain order to fill "slots" in a sentence, and others are not bound by such rules. For example, he learns where to put an adjective that modifies a noun: before the noun, unless it is part of the verb phrase. In English we say *the curious monkey*, not *the monkey curious*, although we can say *the monkey was curious*. This part of language "learning," again, is not conscious or deliberately practiced in the preschool years; it will take place with exposure to language.

What is different about the language in books and the language of speech? Plenty. The language of books is much more complex. Sentences are complete in book language but tend to be incomplete and run-on in less formal conversations between people who are talking to each other face-to-face. Sentences tend to be longer and more complex in books—that is, they have clauses built into them, or they are joined by conjunctions that are carefully chosen to express an idea. They tend to be loaded with more modifiers—adjectives and adverbs—and to use correct grammar more than we do in casual speech. Printed language uses phrases and expressions in special ways that are peculiar to writing but uncommon in speech, such as the greetings and closings in letters. Finally, the way that sentences are ordered and strung together in writing is usually much more organized and less repetitious than the way we speak.

An example of well-written sentences from our *Curious George* book is the letter from the Professor to

Sample Vocabulary Words in *Curious George Gets a Medal*

Scenes at the House	Scenes at the Farm	Scenes at the Spaceship
• curious	• shed	• professor
• fountain pen	• loop	• flash
• funnel	• hurled	• signal
• blotter	• latch	• bail out
• garden hose	• grunting	• emergency rockets
• tap	• squealing	• permit
• lather	• grazing	• space suit
• escape	• rattling	• launching site
• portable pump		• lever
		• groping
		• parachute

George, which is printed in the book, as follows:

Dear George,

A small space ship has been built by our experimental station. It is too small for a man, but could carry a little monkey. Would you be willing to go up in it?

I have never met you, but I hear that you are a bright little monkey who can do all sorts of things and that is just what we need.

We want you to do something nobody has ever done before: bail out of a spaceship in flight.

When we flash you a signal you will have to open the door and bail out with the help of emergency rockets.

We hope that you are willing and that your friend will permit you to go.

Gratefully yours,
Professor Wiseman
Director of the Science Museum⁵

This passage also demonstrates some fundamentals of good letter composition. The first paragraph introduces the topic and tells why the Professor is writing to the monkey. The remainder of the letter clearly explains why a man can't go in the spaceship and why George has been invited to do this job. In addition the Professor describes what George would be asked to do. The last paragraph politely expresses the Professor's recognition that George will need his friend's permission to go.

Another example of the descriptive language appropriate for preschoolers is from the scene where they are waiting for George to react to the illuminated light and pull the lever to parachute from the spaceship. The author's writing is demonstrated in the following passage:

They waited anxiously...At last George began to move. Slowly, as if in a daze, he was groping for the lever. Would he reach it in time? There—he had grabbed it!

The door opened—hurrah—George was on his way!

Out of the blue an open parachute came floating down to earth. The truck raced over to the spot where George would land.

What a welcome for George!

Professor Wiseman hung a big golden medal around his neck. "Because," he said, "you are the first living being to come back to earth from a space flight." And on the medal it said: TO GEORGE, THE FIRST SPACE MONKEY.

Then a newspaperman took his picture and everybody shouted and cheered, even the farmer and his son, and the kind woman from next door (who had worked for hours to get the water out of the room).⁶

In summary, children who have been read to have learned that there is a different language, or a different way of expressing ideas, in books from the way we speak. They begin to develop an "ear" for written English versus spoken English. As described by Canadian educator M. Spencer:

Being read to offers them [children] longer stretches of written language than at any other time, and moreover, this is language put together by someone that isn't there to be seen. The reader, adult or child, lends the text a different voice, so that "I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down" becomes a language event of a particular kind.⁷

Benefit: Develops Familiarity with Story Structure

Children absorb a great deal about story structure from hearing many stories during their preschool years. This knowledge is helpful once the child begins to read and

Many words in books are words we do not use regularly in spoken conversation.

Books greatly expand a child's vocabulary.



write his own stories. It helps with reading because, knowing what to expect, children form a mental outline of the events and remember the details much more easily. It helps with writing because, knowing what the pieces are and where a story should go, the child has a mold to put his words into. Preschoolers who have been read hundreds of stories begin to understand that stories have common characteristics.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF STORIES

- The story has a title.
- There are characters, including a main character.
- The story takes place in a setting (time, place).
- The characters usually have a problem to solve.
- The action hinges on how the problem is solved.
- There is a resolution (climax) in the story, before it ends.
- Language is used to create the effect of surprise, sadness, climax, or humor.

Benefit: Acquires Familiarity with the Reading Process

Children learn about what reading is from observing others read to them. For young children, early experiences of having someone read to them gives them an experience and impression about *how people read*. Children gain an impression about what a person does when he or she reads. Since we cannot see inside the mind, which is where the process is occurring, a child must guess about what the adult is doing. The child begins to form hypotheses about the print on the page corresponding to words that are the same as those the child hears in speaking and listening. This correlation between print and spoken words is an important step in learning about reading.

A study that was completed by educator E.H. Hiebert examined what preschool children believe an adult is reading on the page. Children were shown a book with pictures and print and asked to point to what a reader should read. In this study it was found that three-year-old children believed that it was the pictures that were being read.⁸

There is a set of other things a pre-reading child must learn that educators refer to as “print awareness” or “learning about print.” These concepts are learned from being read to by an adult who shows the child the book and interacts with the child as the story is being read aloud. These concepts include the following:

CONCEPTS A CHILD MUST LEARN ABOUT PRINT

- how the book is turned when it is “right side up”
 - that the print is read, not the pictures
 - where the beginning of the book is
 - the order of reading the print on a page—top to bottom—left to right
 - what to do at the end of a line
 - what to do at the end of a page
-

Benefit: Identifies Reading as a Pleasurable Activity

I can vividly remember the first time that I realized that reading was a great pleasure. It was during spring break of my senior year in high school, which my best friend and I spent in Florida visiting my grandparents. My friend, whose name was Madeline, tossed me her copy of Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* after she finished it. I devoured it during that week, reading late into the night several nights. Although this first “aha” experience came late for me, reading for pleasure has been a part of my life ever since. As a parent, it is my goal for my children to experience the joy of reading early in life and hopefully begin a lifelong love of reading.

Probably the most important thing about reading aloud to a child is to allow the child to experience reading as an enjoyable activity. If the child associates reading with pleasure, the child will have a greater desire to learn to read. As Jim Trelease wrote in the first chapter of his book, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*:

Every time we read to a child, we’re sending a “pleasure” message to the child’s brain. You could even call it a commercial, conditioning the child to associate books and print with pleasure.⁹

There are many things parents can do to make reading pleasurable. Choose a location in the home that your children especially enjoy. My children love to read on the front porch swing during the summer; they have reminded me that we read *Charlotte’s Web* one summer while waiting for the camp bus to pick them up each day. Especially in the winter my children love to cuddle up next to me while listening to a story. At an educators’ conference that I attended, a European speaker showed slides of historical paintings depicting scenes about reading. His point in showing over a hundred slides of paintings was that the overwhelming majority of the paintings showed the child sitting on the adult’s lap while reading a story. The proximity of closeness between parent and child while

reading has been captured in art over many centuries.

Choose a time when you can read for an uninterrupted period. My children are very vocal about how much they dislike it when I answer a phone call and leave them “hanging” in the middle of a key passage of a story we are reading. Get involved and be dramatic: Make the story more fun for you and your children by accentuating the animation of your voice for key lines.

It’s important that parents allow their children to see them enjoying reading. When I was growing up the only thing I remember seeing my parents read was the daily newspaper. In fact I can vividly recall that my father always read the paper in his easy chair each evening after family dinner. Modeling that reading is pleasurable sends strong messages to our children.

Practical Tips About How To Make Reading Aloud Enjoyable

When Do I Start Reading to My Child?

Although Jim Trelease, in his book, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, advises that reading to a child should start as soon as the baby is born, my personal experience was different. Although I occasionally read to my infants when they were less than 6 months old, I found it awkward to cradle my infant and try to turn the pages of a picture book. Read to your infant if it provides stimulation for you during the sometimes tedious hours you spend holding and rocking your baby. However, don’t feel compelled to read at this stage if you find it more rewarding to look into the child’s eyes and talk to him instead. There’s plenty of time to read later.

6–9 Months

Beginning to read to a child around 6–9 months of age is ideal. The child is sitting up and can hold small board books at this stage. It is great to allow a child to begin exploring books by himself during quiet moments in the crib or on the floor. Wonderful vinyl books are available, which are more durable when the child is slobbering during the teething stage. Place the more fragile board books with pop-out sections on the bookshelf to be saved for reading together. Keep several small books among your child’s toys that are the right size and shape for him to turn the pages and carry without help from you. Rotate the books so that he doesn’t grow bored with them.

12–18 Months

By the age of 12–18 months your goal is to have your child bring books to you, signaling he wants you to read him a story. It’s a thrill to see your child with book in hand and arms lifted telling you that he wants to come up on your lap to hear the story he has chosen. This event signals that he enjoys listening to a story.

It is important to make reading times enjoyable ones; therefore, like so many other things in parenting, choosing the appropriate time and occasionally waiting for the child to be ready can be critical. When my active toddler son squirmed to get off my lap, I decided not to force it. Although I was anxious to begin reading to him, I decided to wait to avoid risking that his experience of reading would be negative. If your

child wants to turn the pages faster than the words can be read, abandon reading the story as written and make up a story that corresponds with the pictures. Even with the very simple small board books of about a dozen pages with few words, discuss the pictures and talk about all the things your child sees on each page. Your dialogue about each page should take longer than the actual time to read the words on the page.

2 Years of Age

Establish a routine by the time your child is two years old that you always read a story at bedtime. This routine is important because even if you spend no other time reading during the day, at least this 15 minutes per day occurs religiously. While our child still slept in a crib, our favorite spot for bedtime reading was in a rocking chair in his room with the door closed to avoid interruption. In our family the routine of a bedtime story has continued to this day, and our children are 11 and 8 years old. Our pattern is that on nights when both parents are home at bedtime, one parent reads to one child. The pair then is swapped on the following night so that Dad reads to daughter one night and to son the next night, and Mom does vice versa. Bedtime stories will hopefully continue in our house until as long beyond age 10 as possible. After that age, the child may prefer to read to himself before bed.

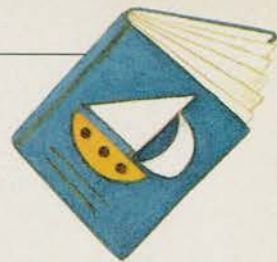
6–8 Years of Age

Once the child is able to read himself, change the routine by having the child read for 15 minutes, followed by the parent reading to the child for 15 minutes. A child needs to practice to learn to be a good reader. If your child is a reluctant reader, have him read from a book on his reading level before you read to him from a book that is somewhat above his own reading level. When children are first learning to decode the words, there will be a gap between what they are able to read themselves and what they enjoy hearing read aloud. Encourage your child to practice reading books he can read comfortably. Then, it is important for the parent to continue reading to the child from books above the child's reading level in order to expand his background knowledge and enjoyment of literature.

What If My Child Resists Being Read To?

The intimacy of shared reading is not always easy to capture. When my son was a toddler it was difficult to feel close during our regular reading time. He was a very active child who frequently squirmed to get down from my lap because he had a greater interest in gross motor activities than in sitting. If your child isn't interested in hearing a story, abandon the effort and try again at another time. Do not push the issue, and he will eventually come back to reading. Choose when to offer to read him a story, and select very short stories initially, thereby matching the child's attention span. Select books on topics about which your child is keenly interested. Ease your child into longer and longer stretches of reading time.

The children of
parents trained
for only one
hour in interactive story
reading improved
dramatically in verbal
expression and vocabulary.



When Do I Stop Reading Aloud?

Many parents believe that once their child begins to read himself, the days of reading storybooks aloud are over. However, there are some very important reasons for continuing to read to your child as he begins to learn to read. Especially in first and second grade while the child is learning to read, his listening level far exceeds his reading level; that is, he can understand passages read to him that far exceed what he is capable of reading himself. Continue to expose your child to good literature that mentally challenges him and enables his vocabulary and knowledge to continue growing. Do this as long as it is fun. Once children prefer to read silently, everyone can share a "Drop Everything And Read" (DEAR) time in the evening.

What Do I Do If My Child Wants To Look Ahead at the Pictures Before We Read?

As frustrating as looking ahead may be to the parent, most educators would encourage you to allow looking ahead at the pictures. This exercise helps the child to activate background knowledge about the setting and topic of the story. In first-grade reading instruction, teachers usually take time to introduce a story before they begin reading it. Children are taught to think about the title of the book and anticipate what the story might be about. Typically a discussion is initiated about the topic of the book. If the story is about going to the zoo, the teacher leads a discussion about what you are likely to see at the zoo. Children will name the animals found at a zoo, as well as discussing the activities one might see, such as zookeepers feeding the animals. The purpose of this discussion is to activate prior knowledge for the children who have visited the

zoo and to provide information to any child who has no prior information about this experience.

What Comes After Picture Books?

Before your child reaches age seven you will begin reading aloud chapter books that don't have pictures. *Charlotte's Web*, a story written by E.B. White about the friendship between a spider and a pig, is a wonderful example of a chapter book appropriate for this age. The vocabulary is challenging and interesting, and the story is captivating for the child. There is plenty of background knowledge presented while the child is thoroughly entertained. Other books we enjoyed included *Mr. Popper's Penguins*, *The Indian in the Cupboard*, and *The American Girl Collection* books.

After your child can read himself, continue to look for opportunities to read aloud to your child. This can be done through round-robin reading of a classic book in front of the fireplace or through alternate oral reading—first the parent, then the child, switching every page or two—to foster better comprehension. It will also enable the family to have active discussions about the characters and the author's intended meaning. Your own love of literature will continue to be communicated through shared reading activities. Remember and find the books you loved as a child. Enjoy them again as you share them with your child.

Interactive Story Reading

Have you ever felt frustrated when your child wants to stop you to ask questions while you are reading a story to him? When my children were preschoolers, I found it frustrating to be constantly interrupted by all their comments about the pictures and questions about the story. I decided that limiting the interruptions was a good thing, because when the child starts school his teacher wouldn't want to be stopped by incessant questions from 25 children. It also seemed that staying "on task" was an admirable skill to be learned.

However, this dialogue during the story reading is actually very positive and is something to be encouraged and developed. As described in *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, active discussion during reading is important:

The benefits are greatest when the child is an active participant, engaging in discussions about stories, learning to identify letters and words, and talking about the meanings of words. One researcher who observed parents reading books to their children discovered differences in the quality and quantity of informal instruction that the parents provided.¹⁰

The importance of engaging the child as an active listener, rather than the parent reading the story from beginning to end without pause, has been researched by other educators. The most interesting of these was a study completed by G. Whitehurst and his colleagues in 1988, which demonstrated the impact of active engagement. In their study they provided training to the parents of 15 middle-class preschool children from two to three years old. The parents received a one-hour training session in interactive story reading in which they were shown how to engage in this technique. They were instructed to:

- expand on the child's answers
- suggest alternative possibilities
- pose progressively more challenging questions

An example of an open-ended question is "What is Curious George doing?" or "Why do you think he is doing that?" The key is to ask questions that cannot be answered with a yes/no response. A control group was identified with children of approximately the same age and language development. The parents of both groups tape-recorded their reading sessions for one month.

The tapes confirmed that both groups read equally often (about eight times per week) and that the trained parents followed the instructions for interactive story reading. The children in both groups were tested before and after the experimental month. The results showed that at the end of one month of interactive story reading the children in this group versus the control group:

- improved 8.5 months in verbal expression, and
- were six months ahead on a vocabulary test.¹¹

The verbal expression measure assessed the child's capability in expressing ideas verbally. These are staggering results for children who have an average age of 30 months! Think what effect using an interactive story-reading approach might have over several years, versus the one month of this study.

Reading aloud to a child is a critical activity in helping a child gain the knowledge and language skill that will enable good comprehension later on. Reading aloud increases background knowledge, builds vocabulary, and familiarizes children with the language in books. The Commission on Reading has advised that not only does reading aloud to a child make a difference, but the way parents read aloud matters. A book becomes a vehicle for using language—before, during, and after reading. In addition to reading aloud, engaging in probing conversations at home can help the child acquire the language skills needed to become a good reader. □

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