

# The power of reading aloud: not just for babies and little children

By Rosemary Johnston

A recent study on children's reading found that fewer children are reading for fun. Worse, as children grow up the less they read for fun.

Does it matter if children don't read for fun? They are (sort of) reading on devices and mobiles and using social media anyway. And isn't this mostly for fun?

I believe it does matter, and reading stuff on social media is not enough. Evidence is growing that sustained reading is important, but not only for the sake of getting better at reading. According to an influential study on reading by researchers at the University of Edinburgh and King's College London, it also impacts education, health, socioeconomic status, and creativity.

The same study concludes:

Since reading is an ability that can be improved, our findings have implications for reading instruction. Early remediation of reading problems might aid not only the growth of literacy, but also more general cognitive abilities that are of critical importance across a person's lifetime.

Employers are now listing creativity as one of the most important future-focus skills.

But children need more than the skills to read; they need the desire to read. A recent report commissioned by Scholastic found that the more children read, the better readers they become, and the better readers they become, the more they enjoy reading.

## Parents are role models

So how to encourage reading? It helps if parents are reading role models and have a pile of books on their bedside table, and if teachers give time in class for children to read a book of their choice independently. It also helps if children are encouraged to browse in libraries and bookshops and choose their own books.

But one of the best ways to encourage a child to read is very simple and very enjoyable: reading aloud.

## So read aloud !

This is a message for both schoolteachers and parents.

When do you start reading aloud to your children? As Dorothy Butler said back in 1980 (in her classic *Babies Need Books*), you start when the child is a baby, the younger the better. Reading aloud celebrates words; the sound of them, the melody of them, the flow of them; and syntax, how words fit together, nouns naming and verbs doing.

It celebrates rhyme and rhythm and the comfortableness of prediction. Think about lullabies, 'Lula lula lula lula bye bye ... .'

Reading aloud with very young children is part of Jerome Bruner's idea of 'the courteous translation' – not just 'inculcating' but welcoming children into new knowledge gently and respectfully – and Donald Holdaway's stress on exposing children to books 'beyond their immediate needs'.

Books are about creative response as much as intellectual comprehension. Adults can stage manage creative responses by how they read.

## Read aloud to proficient readers too

Don't underestimate the power of reading aloud to very proficient readers. Children report that they enjoy parents reading with them even when they can read well themselves. Listening well is also a literate and imaginative practice.

I read aloud with my university students, not just to model how it can be done and not only to offer a courteous, enticing translation into a complex text. I want them to hear and experience the sounds of the words – the cadences and rhythms and assonances of the sentences. Read aloud to yourself the haunting opening paragraphs of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*:

Will you look at us by the river? ... Unless you knew, you'd think they were a whole group, an earthly vision. Because, look, even the missing are there, the gone and taken are with them in the shade pools of the peppermints by the beautiful, the beautiful the river. And even now, one of the here is leaving.

### **When to read aloud**

Reading aloud doesn't have to happen only at bedtime. I was sometimes just too tired so I read to my kids in the bath, sometimes in the garden, and we always had a holiday book (which they chose) for reading aloud in the afternoons after all the activities of the morning.

### **What books to read aloud?**

I like the idea of an unlimited uninhibited continuum – to let children roam freely in the wonderful world of books (when I first read *Gone With the Wind* I was also reading the *Famous Five*). I think both parents and children need to interrogate by practice conventional ideas about the difficulty of certain texts.

Be adventurous. I've written elsewhere that there is not so very much difference between the following. There is magic in all these lines:

Each peach pear plum / I spy Tom Thumb / Tom Thumb in the cupboard / I spy Mother Hubbard / Mother Hubbard down the cellar / I spy Cinderella ...

*Janet and Allan Ahlberg Each peach pear plum*

Where the bee sucks, there suck I / In a cowslip's bell I lie / There I couch when owls do cry / On the bat's back I do fly / After summer merrily. / Merrily, merrily shall I live now / Under the blossoms that hang on the bough.'

*Shakespeare The Tempest Ariel's Song*

The woods are lovely, dark and deep, / And I have promises to keep / And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep.'

*Robert Frost Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*

### **What reading aloud does for children**

Reading aloud with children (and the 'with' is important, encourage young children to help with sound effects!) grows the wealth of stories that helps to shape our world, both present and future.

The theorist Jürgen Habermas wrote of the idea of the 'interpretive horizon': 'The horizons of our life histories and forms of life...'. That is, horizons, how far ahead we can look, are interpreted in the context of our repertoire of stories, both real and virtual.

Reading aloud gives children opportunities to listen in different contexts and engage in stories that grow confidence, social and life skills, improve physical and mental wellbeing, and enhance senses of identity.

### **A teacher reading aloud is special**

'There is something special about reading books together at school. A clever teacher can turn the reading experience into an almost theatrical event, and transform 'the class' into a keen and interactive audience. A shared story is communal; it is protective to those who are most struggling, who are learning about words, how they sound and what they do; they are helped by hearing others say them. It helps to bring about a shared class-consciousness, a shared memory that enriches and motivates. Reading a shared story every day is one of the most rewarding teaching experiences and one with highly productive outcomes.

### **The magic of those 26 letters**

It's magical, isn't it, that reading experience? I point out to my university students that when the first Harry Potter book was turned into a movie, J.K Rowling insisted on the film being true to the book. And it was. To enable this truth to book, we had the efforts of cinematographers, scriptwriters, producers, Jim Henson's digital effects, editors, and a long list of fantastic actors. It's a great movie.

But isn't it amazing that all those people and their different skills and expertise were needed to be 'true' to a book that consisted of no more than black marks on a white page?

And that those black marks represent various arrangements of only 26 letters of the alphabet?

That's the power of the imagination stimulated through the process of reading! That's the importance of reading!

And that's what parents and teachers who read aloud can inspire and give to their children. It is the gift of a lifetime.



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