



1984

An Inexpensive Remedy: Reading Aloud

Dorothy Shields

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cbmr>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Shields, Dorothy (1984) "An Inexpensive Remedy: Reading Aloud," *Children's Book and Media Review*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cbmr/vol5/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Children's Book and Media Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

An Inexpensive Remedy: Reading Aloud

By Dorothy M. Shields

In one segment of a recent television special about education in the United States, high school students were asked to name the latest book they had read. Their replies could be summed up in one statement: "We don't read." It has been some years since we first expressed serious concern that Johnny couldn't read. During these years, millions of dollars have been poured into both good and bad--but usually expensive--approaches to solving that problem. In the meantime, less and less time has been devoted to **reading to** children. After all, no salesman is pushing reading to children as a quick and magic cure. There is growing evidence, however, to suggest that children who listen to others read to them regularly are less likely to join those teenagers and adults who simply do not read.

In what ways does it matter? Can TV fill the gap? Apparently not. According to Postman (Teaching as a Conserving Activity, pp. 56-61), television provides a different "curriculum," one that does not require the capacity for abstraction. It is based on the specifics provided by pictures. The requirement of such a visual medium is to feel rather than to paraphrase, translate or reformulate an idea or concept. Television stresses immediate gratification, accessibility, and comprehension, not requiring any learning sequence built on prerequisites. On the other hand, the process of listening asks the listener to understand and consider what is said. Abstract thinking is required for this task. Listening encourages the essential intellectual skill of being able to take a logically connected series of propositions to their culminating conclusion. Children who have books read to them have better listening skills, are more creative, have broader interests and tastes, and learn to read earlier and better than children who do not have this benefit (McCormick, Language Arts 4: February 1977, pp. 139-143).

And even if reading aloud didn't help to improve skills, would you want to give up the warm memories associated with listening to others read? Snuggling close to someone reading a good book to you is a nurturing experience. Most of us treasure at least one book that brings back memories of a special time and place in our

childhood. But wait a minute. Is it only babies who need someone to read to them? No, it would be a mistake to stop reading to those who have outgrown snuggling. For years, I tried to identify a book my fifth-grade teacher read to our class just before Christmas. It was that special memory that encouraged me to read to my own fifth-graders as a teacher. I'm sure they enjoyed those experiences as much as I did, because after we would laugh and cry our way through a book or a story, there was always a scramble to see who would be first to get to read it all again to themselves.

For teens, high interest/low vocabulary books are being churned out in greater numbers. But while they may offer poor readers something they can read, these books do not provide rich literary experiences. When my daughter was in high school, Julius Caesar was a painful experience for her until we sat down together and she listened. What a surprise she had! Shakespeare was actually fascinating! You see, the fact is, we never outgrow the joy of listening to a good story. Some years ago, in a conference focusing on service to others, an elderly woman told of the companionship and feeling of worth she found in reading to friends who were losing their eyesight and therefore could no longer read for themselves.

A regular reading program in the homes of preschool children can be a positive factor in their early educational experiences. Reading aloud not only promotes earlier reading, but acquaints preschoolers with the function of print and sensitizes them to the structure and nature of written language. Teale (Language Arts 55: November/December 1978, pp. 922-931) identified numerous studies reporting that among the factors important to early reading was the need for positive environments, including reading aloud. Perhaps it need not be mentioned, but any regular reading program in the home will require curtailed television viewing. Since televiewing is not a shared experience, the more social, personal reading activity should not only take precedence, but may well be preferred by those participating.

Has reading aloud in the classroom diminished because teachers feel that it is simply an entertaining activity and students can get plenty of that in other places? Have they been misled into believing that additional emphasis on skill mastery will be better use of time? Or do teachers lack a knowledge of which books will not only be worthwhile but also enjoyable? Maybe they have the misconception that you only read aloud to babies. Whatever the

cause for not reading, teachers of all grade levels need to be encouraged to read aloud more often and more widely in the classroom. Teachers have an enormous effect on the actions of their students. Regular reading aloud through the high school years could help develop lifelong interest in reading and in learning through books. School librarians should also seek opportunities to encourage more planned listening experiences in the school. For example, lunchtime read-aloud programs might be featured in the school library. It would also be beneficial if schools encouraged and helped train parents in the skills needed to select and read appropriate books to their children.

Successful experiences require planning and knowledge. What kind of books make good books for group listening? First, don't read something that everyone is already reading or knows all about. Do pick something you feel comfortable reading out loud. There are books that deal with very personal aspects of life that you may want to suggest for an individual to read, but would not want to read to a group.

Read books that present some interesting words and concepts and that require a little stretching of the mind but are still within the grasp of the audience. Find books rich in imagery. Bring the reader's imagination into play. Understanding should not depend on seeing illustrations or pictures. Share books that need introducing to help the child find their special pleasure. Never select a book just because it preaches something you want them to hear; pious moralizing will rapidly kill any enthusiasm you may have built. A message alone is not enough for a good reading experience. Literary quality is essential.

Listeners should be able to identify with the actions and feelings of the characters. They should be able to imagine how they would feel in a similar circumstance. Humor in the right places and amounts is an asset, but avoid the overly sentimental, and be conservative about scary and upsetting books. Be sure the author of a selected book has not presented anything that will injure the self-esteem of any child who is listening. Watch for biases. Characters may display biases. Such biases can help to highlight activities or feelings essential to the plot. However, the author may not present a biased view of groups of people, especially groups who are different from the listeners.

As you read to groups of children, keep a record with a brief evaluation of the experience. Note reactions and any long unnecessary descriptive sections you may want to cut out in future readings. Kimmel and Segal suggest a simple form for this purpose in their book, For Reading Out Loud (pages 220-222).

Most of all, find and share good books with others. Children may not remember you personally, but they will remember the books that bless their lives. If they can't read, don't want to read, or just like to listen, make sure they still have the opportunity to know good books. It doesn't cost a thing but time and caring. Our libraries can supply the books, and librarians often have favorites to suggest for reading aloud. Many sources recommend good books--some even specialize in books to be read aloud. A few of them are listed below for your information. Some selections of actual books to read aloud to various age groups are given as well. Now, it's up to us.

GUIDES FOR FINDING GOOD BOOKS TO READ ALOUD

General:

Hearne, Betsy. Choosing Books for Children: a commonsense guide. New York: Laurel, c1981.
(Helpful, although not written specifically to recommend books for reading aloud.)

American Library Association. Let's Read Together: books for family enjoyment. 4th ed. Chicago: ALA, 1981.
(Recommends books by type (e.g., Sing-along; Fantasy) for five age ranges: Ages 1+-2; Preschool-Grade 2; Grades 3-5; Grades 6-7; Grades 8 and up.)

Elementary and Middle School

Kimmel, Margaret Mary and Elizabeth Segal. For Reading Out Loud! a guide to sharing books with children. New York: Delacorte Press, c1983.
(Recommends 140 books. Discusses why each is a good read-aloud. Gives suggested listening level.)