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How Do We Slow Down and Live?
Thoughts on Reading Aloud to Children

by Lillian Heil

If you want to be a manager of the jet age resources, rather than a victim of its speed, try taking time to read aloud to children. The benefits include the following:

1. Develops the bond of a shared experience with your audience.

2. Helps very young children to develop beginning concepts satisfying their insatiable desire to know “why?”

3. Can help children develop a sense of self by motivating their interest, their emotional development, and their imagination.

4. Develops school-age children’s reading vocabulary and comprehension.

5. Opens the door to discussions with trusted adults of such sensitive topics as drug use, sex, and violence.

6. Increases the reader’s skill and ability to critique the quality of literature, as well as providing the adult with a chance to model enthusiasm for the printed word.

7. Provides a time for adults and children to learn together.

8. Provides an unhurried time when the pace of life can match the rhythm of the book being read.

Parents, long ago, discovered the value of sharing stories with children. Before the age of printed books, they did it by telling stories. Even today, some continue to captivate children with oral tales. The book has allowed parents to pass on the magic of many authors’ skills at organizing words into good literature. Even poorly written books have held the attention of young children as they were nestled on a parents’ lap, enjoying the physical closeness of a loved adult. Teachers and librarians have discovered that groups of children develop
a closeness and rapport with each other by sharing the experience of a book; although Jim Trelease points out that sitting quietly for a story is a learned behavior. If three-year-olds do not have a background of being read to, their attention span for being read to is about 30 seconds long. So parents, start your read-aloud program while children are infants. (Trelease, 1985)

Being read to helps the young child find out about a world he is already curious about. (You've probably all been around a youngster who is in the "why?" stage.) Simple nonfiction books provide great opportunities for the child to find out about plants, animals, rocks, weather, and other things that are part of his daily explorations of the world. *The Carolrhoda Nature Watch Books* contain excellent photographs of animals and could be used without using the text which young children would not understand. *The Eyewitness Juniors* series could be used in the same way. Sybille Kalas's books about geese and beavers also show excellent photographs of animals and their young. Crews' *Freight Train* and many of Gail Gibbon's books show trucks, and the post office, and other places and things that children are curious about. Jan Ormerod's books focus on young children and their interests.

Fiction helps a child's emotional development or sense of self. Pulitzer prize winning writer Robert Penn Warren points out that fiction is close to the heart of human emotion. We enjoy it because it has conflict (as all life does), it allows us to vent emotions, gives us clues to our own lives, and stimulates imagination and creativity as we experience the lives of others. (Warren, 1962) To illustrate: Babbit's *Tuck Everlasting* gives a marvelous perspective to mortality as the 11-year-old heroine faces the problem of a family who cannot die; Bauer's *On My Honor* allows us to experience the anguish of having a friend drown and feeling that it was your fault, as well as the healing comfort of a parent who helped his son work through the guilt and pain associated with the death of his best friend; and *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, by Barbara Robinson, helps the reader experience the real meaning of Christmas all over again or for the first time. You'll add examples of your own as you share books with children.

Impressive evidence of increased vocabulary and comprehension has resulted from children being read to on a regular basis by their teachers in school. Boston fifth grade teacher, Katherine Randolf, has students who score nearly twice as high as other Boston classes. She says she reads 10 to 15 minutes a day to them because it creates excitement about reading. (Boston Globe, 1982) The famous story of Cushla, a child with chromosome damage (diagnosed as physically and mentally retarded at 3) shows what an intensive amount of reading aloud (14 books a day) can do to produce an above-average and socially adjusted child of 5 despite the doctors' gloomy prediction for her future. (Butler, 1980) In Harlem, 20 classes of seven-year-olds, read to for 20 minutes a day, had higher gains in vocabulary and comprehension at the end of one year than those not read to. (Cohen, 1968) Please don't misunderstand.
I am not advocating a structured program of compulsory (or should I say compulsive?) reading aloud to children. If you are doing it to accelerate your child’s reading skill, you are defeating the purposes I am referring to—to enjoy reading together because it is satisfying and enjoyable.

Books can open doors to sensitive topics. How well I remember wanting to ask a parent questions, but not knowing how to initiate the discussion. Another more recent example is a mother in a college literature class who heard us arrive at the conclusion that a particular book was really helpful in getting adolescent girls to feel free to ask questions that were troubling them concerning sex. This mother told the group that her daughter was not afraid to ask questions and she didn’t need such a book to open up communication between them. However, she later decided to try out the book we had been discussing (My Darling, My Hamburger by Paul Zindel). She reported to us that after her daughter read the book, she asked for her response and was amazed at all the questions that were bothering her daughter that had never been expressed before. The same is true with books about drug abuse, eating disorders, and other prevalent modern problems.

Reading aloud can help develop the oral reading skill of the reader, develop the reader’s critical ability to choose books of superior quality, and increase the motivation of the child to want to read himself. Reading improves by reading, so adult readers become better readers as they read regularly to children. (There is even a recent children’s picture book of a grandmother whose granddaughter helps her learn to read using children’s books. The Wednesday Surprise by Eve Bunting) Children are marvelous audiences, and most of us feel comfortable at putting expression into our oral reading when we have the intent interest of a young audience. If you do it often enough, I have found, you lose your fear of reading to older listeners.

A well-told story has to sound good when read aloud. In other words, if the language doesn’t have good read-aloud rhythm, it’s not good language. Vigorous rhythm and sound patterns is what have kept traditional oral tales (folk tales) alive as they were handed down by word of mouth. Times have not changed. Rhythm and sounds are best tested out by hearing them aloud. (That combination of rhythm and sound patterns are what make it crucial to hear poetry out loud if one is to fully appreciate the poem) As you read aloud, you’ll develop an ear for what sounds better and grabs the attention of your audience.

Don’t feel obligated to finish a badly-written book. Time is too precious for that—discard it for a well-written one. You’ll find a good list of fiction books in Jim Trelease’s Read Aloud Handbook and a list of quality nonfiction in Beverly Kobrin’s Eyeopeners. As you read books aloud, you’ll find that your discriminative ability, and your enthusiasm for reading will increase because it is enjoyable to hear good language. It’s just one more bit of evidence to prove that good education is exciting and fun. Finally, you are a better adult because
you are a good model. You are an adult who is showing children that you like
to read and you like to learn.

Nonfiction books, particularly, provide opportunities for adults and children
to learn together. The books written in the last 5-10 years have lost all
semblance of the boring textbook approach to knowledge. If you want to learn
about a brand new area of knowledge, start with a children's book. They are
exciting, well-written, and easy to understand without condescending to the
reader. A few of my favorites are:

*How Much Is A Million?* by David Schwartz and illustrated by Steven
Kellogg. Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1985. You'll gain new insights into
how much a million really is.

*The King’s Day* by Aliki. Thomas Y. Crowell, 1989. You'll be fascinated
by this minute-by-minute account of how Louis XIV of France spent his
day. I had no idea what a public event was made of every move made by
the king.

*Berta Benz and the Motor Wagen* by Minday Bingham and illustrated by
Itoko Maeono. Advocacy Press, 1989. Find out who really sold the public
on the Mercedes Benz. (It wasn’t the inventor.)

*Abraham Lincoln: a Photobiography* by Russell Freedman. Clarion. This
biography conveys the mystery of the man who was one of our most famous
presidents. The narrative is lively and interesting and the photographs are
excellent.

Fritz’s informative and amusing style of writing will give you new
perspectives on the events surrounding the writing of our Constitution.

*Eyewitness Books.* Alfred A. Knopf. A series coming out of England that
you should not miss. Their photographs of birds, plants, animals, rocks,
shells, skeletons, armor, and other topics are magnificent and the
accompanying text is concise and informative. You'll probably want to own
them all.

*Brown Paper School Books.* Little Brown & Company. Another series that
specializes in interesting activities that help you and your child audience
learn about such topics as mathematics, time, astronomy, food, dinosaurs,
and others.
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Science Activities from the Smithsonian Institution. Galison Books. Another series of experiments that provide you and your children an active approach to learning.

Science Experiments You Can Eat by Vicki Cobb. J. B. Lippincott, 1972. An author who has written a couple of books that explain the chemistry involved in cooking. You can eat these experiments!

Ontario Science Centre. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1987. Another group who have done some interesting books describing activities to explore. For example, the magic of food in Foodworks, Scienceworks, that introduce the fun and wonder of science.

When Do Fish Sleep? by David Feldman. Harper & Row, 1989. This book explores such imponderables as when fish sleep (you read it. I’m not going to tell you) or why crickets don’t get chapped legs from rubbing their legs together.

A Book of Puzzlemellps by Herbert Kohl. Schocken Books, 1981. A book of play using language. There are over 50 different activities that are creative ways to play with words and sounds.

To Space and Back by Sally Ride with Susan Okie. Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1986. A kind of you-are-there-description (with numerous photographs) of what it’s like to spend time in space. Did you know that you are taller in space because you are not pulled by gravity?


The Magic School Bus Series by Joanna Cole. Scholastic Inc. The inside account of waterworks, the center of the earth and the human body. You’ll enjoy the irrepressible Ms. Frizzle and her class of school children out to explore the world.

And many more, but I’d better stop here.

Finally we arrive back at the beginning. If you want to control the pace of your life, take time to enjoy it by reading aloud to children. It’s a way to capture what famous folklorist Padraic Colum called the rhythm of night, the calm acquiescent, subdued time that is a basic requirement for a good story time. It is also a basic requirement for real living. We all need thoughtful quiet time to offset the crashing, shooting, often shrieking, of the television, the
repetition of the singing commercials, and the pressure of too many things to do in too little time. Instead, give children the eternal variety of the human voice. That is the priceless legacy you give to children when, on a regular basis, you read to them out, loud.

Bibliography


