

The Pleasures of Reading Aloud

There are lots of reasons to look at books and read aloud to children, starting when they are very young and continuing well after they can read for themselves. It's a time to enjoy moments of relaxation and closeness, to share interests and explore the world. In addition, experts suggest that reading to children 20 minutes a day improves their chances of success in school.

Here are some ways to make the most of your reading time.

The starting position

Your physical position communicates your interest and caring. Place yourself at child level, cuddled on the sofa or bed or sitting on the floor together.

Suit the book to the age

Babies explore books through all their senses, including taste, so choose cloth or cardboard books that will take heavy wear and tear. Later, toddlers are interested in naming things in books with one picture per page. Gradually, children become interested in the stories in books, first very simple ones, then progressively longer and more complicated stories. Eventually, you may be reading longer books over a period of days or even weeks, one chapter at a time.

Follow their interests

Choose a book that suits the child's age and interests. Younger children may lose interest before you arrive at the last page. That's okay. The goal is to make reading fun, rather than to get to the end of the book.

Adapt the text

You can adapt a book to the age of the child you are reading to. For young children, try just describing the pictures or telling the story in your own words. You might also change the names of the characters to names of people the child knows.

Catch children's attention

Bright colours and clear illustrations catch children's interest. You can hold the attention of a squirming child with books that have moving parts—flaps that lift, scenes that pop up, pieces that go into slots. Build on what you know interests them: an activity they enjoy, an animal that appeals to them.

Make your reading dramatic

Making your reading dramatic will also keep children interested in the story. Emphasize the rhythm in nursery rhymes. Use gestures and point to what you're talking about in the pictures. Change your voice for different characters in the story and make sounds for the animals. Encourage the children to imitate you and join in the fun.

Involve children

When children have heard a story several times already, you can involve them by pausing to let them fill in the next words. Some stories have a refrain that makes this easy, for instance, "I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down!" in the Three Little Pigs. Just letting a child turn the page can keep him or her involved in reading.

Ask questions

From time to time, stop and ask questions about the pictures or the story. Even before a child can talk you might ask, "Can you see where the wolf is hiding?" If a child is learning to count, you could ask, "How many cats do you see on this page?" Draw older children into the action by asking, "What do you think will happen if Goldilocks eats the porridge?"

Respond to questions

Take time to answer the children's questions too. For children who don't yet say many words, just pointing at a part of an illustration may be a question. Respond by naming whatever the child is pointing to. Older children might ask why a character did something. Pause in your reading to discuss their ideas.

Over and over again

Children love to hear the same book read over and over again—much to the dismay of some adults who would like a bit more variety. Be patient with this preference for familiar material. Repetition is part of the way children learn the words, the concepts and the story that a book contains.

Keep it up

When your children can read for themselves, you can take turns reading to each other. The good feelings of these moments spent sharing the pleasure of books will last many years.

by Betsy Mann