

Inspiring Your Child by Reading Aloud

By Amelia Harper

Roger Rosenblatt once said: "There may be no more pleasing picture in the world than that of a child peering into a book—the past and the future entrancing one another." We all know the educational value of teaching a child to read. However, reading aloud with your child—even listening to audiobooks together—can add an even greater value to your child's educational experience as well as his or her social and emotional development.

Most parents read aloud to their preschoolers before the child can read for himself. However, many feel that this phase of education ends when the child learns to reads well on his own. They fail to understand that reading aloud with your child is important for years to come. Best of all, reading times can be shared with children from a wide variety of ages and interests, so it is a learning activity that can be shared with the whole family.

Reading aloud helps create a love for reading.

Children love to gain their parents' attention in positive ways. After a day of constantly having to remind a child of duties and responsibilities, it is nice to have some down time where you are simply sharing with the children rather than having to correct mistakes. Try reading together just before your child's bedtime, when he or she is ready for bed. Or set up a special family reading time after lunch each day, before the little ones go down for naps, and the older ones go back to the books.

When children associate reading with a pleasant activity, such as positive parental attention, they are more likely to love reading for themselves as they get older. If they take turns reading aloud, praise them for improvement in reading skill or for reading with expression. This family reading time should not be the place to criticize. You can read to them yourself if the children are too young or seem particularly reluctant at first, or if you simply prefer it. As their skill improves, your kids will likely want to "help" read the story aloud for themselves. If so, you may want to share the reading with them. During this read-aloud time, don't focus on the skill as much as the story. The skills will come with practice as they come to love the stories.

Reading aloud helps students improve reading scores.

Many studies show that the more a child reads, the more his reading improves. That is why there are so many programs at schools and libraries to encourage reading. Reading with your child—having him read to you, or having him follow along as you read the story—helps your student gain important skills that will carry over into the classroom and on tests. Exposure to more books also increases your child's vocabulary in a natural and painless way. You can increase the benefit by asking them simple follow-up questions at the end to make sure that they understand the meaning or by having them predict what will happen next in the story. You will be amazed at how your child's reading ability will blossom before your eyes.

Reading aloud improves writing and speaking skills.

If you choose good literature to read during these read-aloud times, your child will begin to understand what great language sounds like. Good books are filled with subtle rhythms and beautiful phrases that will naturally affect your child's vision of language—and reading aloud brings these treasures to light in a way that silent reading does not. In a way, this is like the old illustration of how bank tellers are taught to learn the feel of real currency so that they can recognize a fake. The more that your children are exposed to the sound of beautiful, elegant language from great classic literature, the less they will be satisfied with coarse and choppy writing.

Reading aloud also allows your children to hear the correct pronunciation of words as they should be spoken. To be frank, this is one area in which many homeschooled kids struggle. Because homeschooled kids tend to do so much of their course reading on their own rather than in a group setting, they tend to just make a stab at the way words should be pronounced, and this may cause embarrassment farther down the line. When you are reading aloud with your child, you are able to provide the proper pronunciations. This is one area you should gently correct during read-aloud times. If you are not certain of the pronunciation of certain unfamiliar words yourself, jot the words down during the reading time and find the correct pronunciation after the story is complete so that you all learn together. Many online dictionaries have audio clips of the words as they should be spoken.

Use audiobooks at times to enhance the read-aloud experience.

Audiobooks are a great help if you are unable to read with your children due to illness, time, or simple inexperience. Audiobooks that are professionally produced using talented voice actors can truly bring a great story to life. At the same time, these books model good oral reading for the entire family, teaching how simple changes in vocal range, volume, inflection, tone, and emphasis can create clear images of characters in the minds of listeners. You and your children can then put these skills to use in your own read-aloud sessions.

I used to feel that the use of audiobooks was somehow cheating. The cost and availability of audiobooks was also a hindrance to using them on a regular basis. However, today audiobooks are available more easily and affordably on a wide variety of devices such as computers, mp3 players, tablets, and smart phones. This makes it possible for you and your family to listen to great literature even as you travel to other activities. As an added bonus, your children will become quieter traveling companions as well!

Many books of classic literature are now available for free or at a low cost. Sites such as loyalbooks.com and openculture.com/freeaudiobooks offer a limited selection of free classics. Librivox.org also offers free public domain audiobooks, though these may sometimes be read by volunteers rather than professional voice actors. These sites also often offer free e-book copies of the novels so that you can follow along as you read.

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Reading aloud improves bonding with your children.

Books are filled with ideas. As you read with your children, you have the opportunity to discuss those ideas in a way that bonds you together. Discuss how certain characters behaved and whether the behavior was right or wrong. Ask how the child would react in that situation or how the child would change the story, if they were writing it.

Simply use the books as springboards to other emotional and intellectual discussions. In this quiet time, for a few minutes a day, as you and your children are bound together by the magic of words, you will learn more of their hearts than in almost any other setting. And they will learn more of yours.

Amelia Harper is a homeschooling mother of five and a pastor's wife. She is also the author of Literary Lessons from the Lord of the Rings, a complete one-year literature curriculum designed for secondary level homeschooled students. In addition, she is an English tutor and a freelance writer who contributes regularly to newspapers and magazines. For more information, go to www.homescholarbooks.com.

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