

Reading Aloud: What To Do and What Not to Do

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Thanks in large part to the success of Jim Trelease's *Read-Aloud Handbook*, now in its 7th edition, reading aloud is now a popular activity. According to Scholastic's 2015 Kids and Family Reading Report, over 75% of American children age 5 and younger are read to at least four times a week and the vast majority of parents and children enjoy read-aloud sessions. Read alouds are not only pleasant, they are also the first step on the road to literacy development. But it is possible to push reading aloud too far, and actually harm literacy development.

What Read Alouds Do Well

Research informs us that:

- Hearing stories results in significant vocabulary development. Children gradually acquire the meanings of unfamiliar words when they hear them in stories.
- Hearing stories develops the ability to understand complex grammatical constructions.
- Hearing stories help children develop a sense of how stories are constructed; they acquire a knowledge of "story grammars."
- Hearing stories results in more knowledge of the world.

All of these factors will contribute to better comprehension of texts when children start to read. Also, hearing stories helps children develop an interest in reading: When children hear exciting stories, they want to read more on their own.

What Read Alouds Do Not Do Well

A current fashion is to try to make read alouds do what they are not designed to do. A series of studies has appeared claiming that if we interrupt the story to point out details of the print, it helps children make faster gains in what are called "emergent literacy skills," which in turn will result in more rapid development of literacy. Emergent literacy skills include "print awareness" (familiarity with the alphabet), performance on tests of "words in print" (e.g. knowing words are separated by spaces), "word segmentation" (e.g. knowing how many words are in an utterance), "print recognition" (e.g. the ability to pick out print when part of illustrations), and "print concepts" (e.g. knowing where the title of a book is located).

The interruptions in the studies consisted of asking children questions and providing explanations such as: "Where should I read on this page? Do you know this letter? This word is 'dangerous.'"

The size of the improvement documented in these studies is, however, usually quite modest, even though, as we will see later, interruption was frequent. Also, unnoticed by the investigators, children develop this knowledge anyway, without instruction, through

reading, and it is developed quite early. For example, interrupting the story to pay attention to print helps pre-school children do better on tests in which they have to recognize that words are separated by a space, but there are few children in first grade who do not know this.

Consistent with this observation is the fact that the comparison groups in these studies also improved in print awareness, often nearly as much as the experimental, or "interrupted" groups. In many cases the experimental group scored only a few items more correct, and the difference in percent gained between the groups was modest.

The danger of interruption

When children normally hear stories, interruptions are quite rare. In the comparison groups in these studies, the verbal interruptions (questions and comments about the print) hardly happened at all, and readers made nonverbal references to print (eg pointing to print) about four times in minute.

But in the experimental groups verbal interruptions occurred about four times per minute, and nonverbal references took place nearly 11 times a minute. Combining the two, this means that stories read to the experimental students were interrupted in some way about every four seconds! None of the research studies claiming interruptions are good for literacy development investigated the children's reactions to the interruptions: None examined whether the interruptions distracted the children from the stories or affected their enjoyment of the stories, or their interest in hearing more stories.

Conclusions

When children enjoy hearing stories, they get interested in reading more on their own, and their increased vocabulary, and knowledge of grammar and text structure makes reading more comprehensible and thus pleasurable. A long-term voluntary reading habit insures continuing progress in literacy development, as well as increasing knowledge of the world. Excessive interruptions focused on small details about print might disturb the enjoyment of hearing stories, and thus disturb the development of literacy.

Of course, stopping to talk about and answer questions about the story can add to the read-aloud experience. Also, there is nothing wrong with occasionally stopping to explain a word the children don't understand. But interrupting the reading in order to try to teach children about print is a bad solution to a problem that doesn't exist. It doesn't produce strong results, children easily develop "print awareness" when they read, and this kind of interruption might destroy the value of read-alouds.

For details of the studies discussed here, please see: Krashen, S. 2013. Read-alouds: Let's stick to the story. *Language and Language Teaching*, issue 3, (Azim Premji University and the Vidya Bhawan Society). [Download at: <http://sdkrashen.com/articles.php?cat=1>]