

# Reading Aloud with Children of All Ages



Derry Koralek

**“THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT ACTIVITY** for building knowledge for their eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children,” stressed *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, a 1985 report by the Commission on Reading.

*Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children* (1998), a joint position statement of the International Reading Association (IRA) and NAEYC, echoes Wells (1985) and Bus, van IJzendoorn, and Pellegrini (1995): “The single most important activity for building these understandings and skills essential for reading success appears to be reading aloud to children.”

*Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, the 1998 report of the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, recommended three key practices to support language and literacy development. The first calls for adult-child shared book reading times that involve talking about the book and other topics.

**Derry Koralek** is editor of *Young Children*, NAEYC’s journal. This article is based in part on *The Read Aloud Handbook* (5th ed.) by J. Trelease (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001) and *Much More than the ABCs: The Early Stages of Reading and Writing* by J.A. Schickedanz (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1999). It was compiled for Reading Is Fundamental ([www.rif.org](http://www.rif.org)).

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## It’s important to read aloud to children of all ages

- Reading aloud presents books as sources of pleasant, valuable, and exciting experiences. Children who value books are motivated to read on their own.
- Reading aloud gives children background knowledge, which helps them make sense of what they see, hear, and read. The more adults read aloud to children, the larger their vocabularies will grow and the more they will know about the world and their place in it.
- Reading aloud lets parents and teachers be role models for reading. When children see adults excited about reading, they will catch their enthusiasm.
- Reading aloud can introduce books and types of literature—poetry, short stories, biographies—children might not discover on their own.
- Reading aloud introduces the language of books, which differs from language heard in daily conversations, on television, and in movies. Book language is more descriptive and uses more formal grammatical structures.
- Reading aloud lets children use their imaginations to explore people, places, times, and events beyond their own experiences.

- Reading aloud gives children and adults something to talk about. Talking supports the development of reading and writing skills.
- Reading aloud supports the development of thinking skills as children and adults discuss books, articles, and other texts they read together.
- Reading aloud is fun.

### Read aloud early, later, and as often as possible

- Reading aloud is important from infancy through the high school years. Families and teachers can create and continue a tradition, introduce and reinforce the pleasures of reading, and, as children get older, set the stage for meaningful conversations about numerous topics.
- Read aloud at a predictable, scheduled time that fits with daily routines at home and school. And read aloud spontaneously—when adults and children are in the mood for a story.
- Families can increase read-aloud opportunities by asking older siblings to read to younger ones; teenage babysitters to read while caring for children; and grandparents and other relatives and friends to read during their visits. Teachers can do the same using volunteers and other visitors to the classroom.
- Read aloud at home and in school and when away from home or the classroom—at the doctor’s office, on the bus, while waiting in line, outdoors, on a field trip.



### Reading aloud is more than saying words

- Talk about what you are reading—before, during, and after a read-aloud session. According to the IRA/NAEYC position statement (1998), “It is the talk that surrounds the storybook reading that gives it power, helping children to bridge what is in the story and their own lives.”
- Use the text to discuss real-life experiences and issues. Stories and books can be springboards to meaningful discussions about many different topics.
- Make the book come alive. Vary your expressions and tone of voice to fit the plot. Use a different voice for each character. Pause when appropriate to create suspense.
- Read for as long as children can pay attention. Gradually read for longer periods of time as their attention spans grow.
- Involve the listener in deciding what, when, and how long to read. Invite active participation during and after the reading.
- Follow up after reading a book. Offer materials for art projects and dramatics. Look for more books by the author or on the same topic. Plan an activity that builds on what you have read.

### References

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## Reading Aloud with Babies

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**READ ALOUD** so babies can

- associate reading and books with warm, pleasant feelings.
- hear sounds, rhythms, and words.
- use their senses—listening, seeing, touching.
- make sounds. They coo, gurgle, babble, and eventually, talk.
- point to pictures that the reader can name for them.
- begin to understand that pictures represent objects.
- have fun!

### **Choose books babies like**

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- Very young babies love to hear familiar voices. You can read anything to them, but they especially like nursery rhymes and other stories with set rhythms.
- Babies enjoy board books with simple, bright pictures against solid backgrounds.
- As babies learn to grasp things, pick light, washable cloth and vinyl books.
- When babies are old enough to hold things, provide brightly colored board books featuring only one or two objects per page.
- As babies become interested in what's inside a book, read books with bright pictures of animals, babies, and familiar objects.
- As babies begin to do activities for themselves, read simple stories about routine events—eating, taking a bath, or going to bed.
- As babies begin to talk, read books that invite them to repeat rhymes, words, and phrases.

- When older babies want to join in, read books with textures, things to touch, flaps to lift, tabs to pull, and holes where they can poke their fingers.
- Babies of any age enjoy homemade books and family photo albums.

### **Try these ideas**

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- Hold the baby in your lap; make sure he or she can see the pictures.
- Play with words, sing, and make up rhymes; include the baby's name.
- Expect babies to touch, grasp, and taste—this is how they learn.
- Offer the baby a toy to hold and chew while listening to you read.
- Read one or two pages at a time; gradually increase the number of pages.
- Let the baby turn the pages if he or she is more interested in the book than listening to you read. He or she will still be learning about books and enjoying your company.
- Point to, name, and talk about things in pictures. Describe what's happening.
- Ask the baby: "Where's the . . .?" "What's that . . .?" Wait for a response.
- Encourage a baby to join in—moo like a cow or finish a repetitive phrase.
- Stay on a page as long as a baby is interested.
- Put the book away and do something else when the baby loses interest.

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# Reading Aloud with Toddlers



## **READ ALOUD** so toddlers can

- continue to associate reading with warm, pleasant feelings while learning about words and language.
- expand their listening skills.
- build their vocabularies with words they understand and can use.
- consider books as fun and valuable play materials.
- make links between pictures and stories in books and things and events in their world.
- remember and join in with repetitive rhymes and phrases.
- begin creating pictures in their minds while listening to stories.
- begin understanding a few print concepts, such as pictures and print are symbols for real things, and that we read words, not pictures.
- have fun!

## **Choose books toddlers like**

- Toddlers are learning to cope with feelings. Look for books with characters handling typical emotions and experiences.
- Toddlers feel competent when they can participate. Read books with rhymes and predictable words they can remember.
- Toddlers can pay attention—for a while—if they are interested. Read wordless picture books and story-books with brief, simple plots and only a few words per page.
- Toddlers are curious. Read books about special interests and books about new people, places, and events.
- Toddlers are increasing their vocabularies and listening skills. Read books a few levels above their current vocabulary that introduce new words and

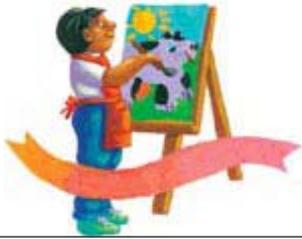
ideas. Also look for books with lots of pictures of things to name.

- Toddlers are beginning to make sense of concepts such as size, color, shape, and time. Read simple picture-concept books that reinforce their learning.
- Toddlers are learning self-help skills. Read books about daily routines such as using the toilet, washing hands, and taking a bath.
- Toddlers are doers. Read books with flaps to lift and textures to feel.

## **Try these ideas**

- Use the tips for babies that are also appropriate for toddlers.
- Read the same books again and again, if asked. A toddler will let you know when he or she has had enough of a book.
- Read slowly so the toddler can make sense of what's happening in a story.
- Offer crayons and paper to occupy toddlers who find it easier to listen when they are busy.
- Vary your voice to fit the characters and plot.
- Use puppets and other props related to the story.
- Repeat interesting words and phrases.
- Stop often to comment, ask questions, and look closely at the illustrations.
- Encourage a toddler to join in: turn pages, name things in pictures, make sounds, repeat rhymes and phrases, and think about what might happen next.
- Talk about the pictures and point out details a toddler might miss.
- Talk about the book and how it relates to a toddler's real-life experiences.

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# Reading Aloud with Preschoolers

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**READ ALOUD** so preschoolers can

- continue to associate reading with warm, pleasant feelings; learn about words and language; and expand listening skills.
- pay attention to the language of books and begin to notice how it differs from spoken language.
- listen to the sounds in words and notice how some are the same and some are different.
- build their vocabularies with words they understand and can use.
- gain background knowledge about a variety of topics.
- talk about the characters, settings, and plot and relate them to their own lives.
- learn more about print concepts, such as print is spoken words written down, the letters in words are written in a certain order, and written words are separated by spaces.
- have fun!

## Choose books preschoolers like

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- Preschoolers feel good about their growing skills and accomplishments. As they learn new concepts and self-help skills, read stories with characters who are having similar experiences.
- Preschoolers have good memories. Read stories with simple plots children can retell in their own words (to themselves, a stuffed animal, or a friend) and pattern books with repetitive and predictable rhymes, phrases, and story lines that let children participate.
- Preschoolers are building their listening skills and attention spans. Read longer picture books and begin to read chapter books that last for several sessions.
- Preschoolers are curious. Read information books on topics of interest. Information books give facts and explanations, and introduce new people, places, and things.
- Preschoolers know a lot about their own world. Read books that let them use their knowledge to understand new information and ideas.

- Preschoolers have vivid imaginations. Read folk tales and books with animal characters that think and talk like humans.
- Preschoolers are learning about the sounds of letters and words (phonemic awareness). Read poems and books with rhymes and alliteration.

## Try these ideas

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- Use the tips for younger children that are also appropriate for preschoolers.
- Introduce the book: read the title, author, and illustrator; look at the cover; talk about what the book might be about; suggest things to look and listen for.
- Run your finger under the text; pause at the end of sentences.
- Answer questions related to the book; save other questions for later.
- Talk about the story during and after a read-aloud session.
- Use information and reference books to answer children's questions.
- Ask children to look closely at the pictures to help them understand the story and make predictions about what might happen next.
- Repeat interesting words and rhymes while reading a book and at a later time.
- Pause and wait so children can say the word that ends a repetitive or predictable phrase.
- Stop to ask thinking questions: "What might happen next? Where did he go? Why did she do that?"
- Follow up on the story. Invite a child to talk, draw, paint, or pretend to be one of the characters.



## Reading Aloud with Kindergartners and Primary School Children

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**READ ALOUD** so kindergartners and primary school children can

- continue to associate reading with warm, pleasant feelings; learn about words and language; build listening skills; expand vocabularies; talk about the characters, settings, and plot then relate them to their own lives; gain knowledge about a variety of topics.
- gain exposure to a variety of writing styles and structures.
- explore social and moral issues and behaviors.
- become more skilled independent readers.
- discover which authors and writing styles they like.
- be motivated to read on their own.
- have fun!

### Choose books kindergartners and primary school children like

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- Children are becoming independent readers. Read easy readers that they can reread on their own.
- Children are expanding their language skills, vocabulary, and attention spans. Read chapter books with developed characters, plot twists, and descriptive language.
- Children are learning to monitor their own behavior. Read longer picture books and chapter books with messages about how to handle problems and cope with difficulties.
- Children are curious about the world beyond their immediate experiences. Read information books on topics related to their interests.
- Children sometimes identify with characters and situations. Read series books featuring the same characters having new experiences.
- Children begin to pay attention to current events. Read junior versions of popular magazines, such as

*Sports Illustrated for Kids*, and topical magazines written for children, such as *Ranger Rick*.

- Children develop special interests, preferred types of books, and favorite authors. Read some books that match the child's preferences—mysteries, science fiction, adventure stories, anything by Lemony Snicket—and some you love that will introduce something or someone new.

### Try these ideas

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- Use the tips for younger children that are also appropriate for this age group.
- Set the stage before you begin reading. Discuss what you read yesterday and what might happen next.
- Defer questions until after you finish reading—unless the answer is critical to understanding what's happening. Asking children to hold their questions helps them get fully engaged in listening to a story.
- Summarize, adapt, or skip parts of books that are too far above a child's level of understanding.
- Relate a book you are reading to one read in the past. Talk about how they are alike and how they differ.
- Ask a child to imagine what he or she might do in a situation similar to that faced by a character.
- Provide materials and activities that let children expand their understanding of a character, historical event, or situation.
- Talk about what you have read. Books often evoke strong feelings that need to be shared. Offer your own reactions and invite a child to do the same.
- Stop reading the book at a suspenseful point so children will be eager for tomorrow's read-aloud time.

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