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The Joy of Reading Together

“The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children. It’s a practice that should continue through the grades.” This is the finding reported in 1985 by the Commission on Reading, funded by the U.S. Department of Education in their report titled, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*. The Commission emphasized that reading aloud should take place both at home and in the classroom. Current research confirms this finding and underscores its relevance today.

One commonly held belief is that literacy is primarily about decoding: reading the letters to form words, sentences, and ideas. However, being literate involves many skills, encompassing listening to books, watching movies, discussing characters, telling and listening to stories, switching perspectives, making connections, and so on. One can safely assume that we all want our children not only to be literate, but to also enjoy the process of obtaining and imparting information and ideas. Reading aloud to children is an essential way to foster competence and enjoyment of literacy in all forms.

When my young adult children were growing up, one of the most effective consequences I could impose was to take away their read aloud time before they went to bed. It was merely the threat of not reading to them that would get them to quickly brush their teeth, pick up their rooms, stop arguing with each other, or finish their homework. Thankfully we didn’t have to compete with iPads or video games at that time, but there was certain-

ly the allure of television. Even still, my children relished the idea of curling up on the couch or their bed with a parent, and reading their picks for the night. We went from simple board books with contrasting images when they were babies, to beautifully illustrated picture books, to classics, to poetry, to novels, and sometimes back again to the picture books. Throughout those years, we would revisit their favorites time and time again. Our read aloud time lasted well into their upper elementary school years, with occasional times during middle school. There was truly a sense of loss when the demands of homework and outside activities, as well as adolescence, outweighed their desire to read together. What I firmly believe, however, is that it was this foundation that helped shaped my children into life-long readers.

The benefits of reading aloud are far reaching as it develops language and literacy skills in patterns, rhythm, rhyme and repetition, vocabulary and print knowledge, storytelling, phonics and word play. Additionally, it is a wonderful way to encourage brain development, generate curiosity, create new and shared knowledge, and to instill a love of reading. And, of course, it allows for incredible bonding moments as well as conditioning the child to associate reading with pleasure.

Reluctant or struggling decoders may associate negative emotions with reading, so it becomes even more compelling to provide positive, non-threatening reading experiences that will allow for pleasurable connections to text. As Jim Trelease states in his book, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, “the

mechanics of reading (decoding) are the ‘how-to’ aspects of reading. The other part is the ‘want-to’, the motivational end. Without the ‘want-to’ all the ‘how-to’ drill work is not going to create a lifetime reader. Reading aloud is what builds the child’s ‘want-to.’”

For one reading expert’s take on how to add excitement and enjoyment to the read aloud time, Mem Fox, literacy advocate and bestselling author of books for children and adults, including *Time for Bed*, *Sleepy Bears*, *Harriet*, *You’ll Drive Me Wild*, and *Radical Reflections: Passionate Opinions on Teaching, Learning, and Living*, states “Ten Read Aloud Commandments:”

1. Spend at least ten wildly happy minutes every single day reading aloud. From birth.
2. Read at least three stories a day; it may be the same story three times. Children need to hear a thousand stories before they can begin to learn to read. Or the same story a thousand times!
3. Read aloud with animation. Listen to your own voice and don’t be dull, or flat, or boring. Hang loose and be loud, have fun and laugh a lot.
4. Read with joy and enjoyment; real enjoyment for yourself and great joy for the listeners.
5. Read the stories your child loves, over and over, and over again and always read in the same ‘tune’ for each book i.e., with the same intonations and volume and speed, on each page, each time.
6. Let children hear lots of language by talking to them constantly about the pictures, or anything else connected to the book; or sing any old song that you can remember; or say nursery rhymes in a bouncy way; or be noisy together doing clapping games.
7. Look for rhyme, rhythm or repetition in books for young children.

8. Play games with the things that you and the child can see on the page, such as letting kids finish rhymes, and finding the letters that start the child’s name and yours, remembering that it’s never work, it’s always a fabulous game.

9. Never, ever teach reading, or get tense around books.

10. Please read aloud every day because you just adore being with your child, not because it’s the right thing to do.

RESOURCES AND INFORMATION ABOUT READING ALOUD TO CHILDREN:

<http://memfox.com/>

<http://memfox.com/for-parents/for-parents-ten-read-aloud-commandments>

<http://www.trelease-on-reading.com/>

<http://childrensbooks.about.com/cs/readalouds/ht/readaloud.htm>

<http://www.readaloud.org/>

<http://www.readingrockets.org/>

<http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200303/ReadingAloud.pdf>

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/em/139552>

<http://www.amazon.com/Straight-Talk-About-Reading-Difference/dp/0809228572>