

The Importance of Reading Aloud to Children

by Liz Gibbons

One of the best activities that a parent, a grandparent, or any other caregiver can do is read a story aloud to a child. This simple act of reading a story has a profound effect. First it creates a special bond of intimacy between the child and parent, grandparent or caregiver. You can begin reading to children when they are infants. Even though they cannot understand the words, reading to them provides a nurturing connection.

Reading aloud to children generates conversation that helps them make sense of their own lives, particularly when they are very young. It helps them use their imagination. It opens doors to new people, places, times and worlds beyond their own experiences. It also expands their vocabulary. Book language is different from the language heard in everyday life. Book language is more descriptive, and the grammatical structure is more formal. As a child grows older reading together can be a springboard to discussions on other real life issues

Young children usually have difficulty sitting still very long. It has been found that with regular reading children eventually learn to sit for the duration of the story. Make story time fun. Use lots of expression when you read. A child develops not only a longer attention span but increased memory retention by being read to regularly. This also aids in cognitive development which includes learning to think and understand, to problem solve, and to make decisions. These abilities will be helpful when the child starts school.

Jim Trelease, author of the *The Read-Aloud Handbook* says, "Every time we read to a child, we're sending a 'pleasure message' to the child's brain." This conditions the child to associate books with pleasure. They are more likely to read on their own and continue to do so the rest of their lives.

His Handbook has an annotated list of read aloud books. First published in 1982, he updated it every few years to include information on newly published children's books. The 7th edition was published in 2007. Jim retired in 2008. Last year he assigned a professor at Arizona State to update and edit future editions of his book which will be available this fall with the title *Jim Trelease's Read-Aloud Handbook*.

In this day of electronic devices some may opt for e-books. But most parents still prefer print books. The large illustrations in children's books may be hard to duplicate on a screen. Reading a print book also engages all the senses. You can't involve the child to turn the pages in an e-book.

The importance of reading to children cannot be overstated. As Jim Trelease says, "You don't have to be Steve Jobs to change a world. Read to a child."