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# Parents and literacy : the importance of reading aloud to children

Phyllis A. Christiansen

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# Parents and Literacy: The Importance of Reading Aloud to Children

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Phyllis A. Christiansen

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| 4/24/2000<br>Date Approved | Jeanne McLain Harms<br>Director of Research Project |
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| 4/26/00<br>Date Approved | Rick Traw<br>Graduate Faculty Reader |
| 4/26/00<br>Date Approved | Rick Traw<br>Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction |

Abstract

Parents are vital to their children's emerging literacy. Reading aloud to children offers parents opportunities to extend their child's knowledge about reading. A review of professional literature suggests that reading aloud provides children with reading role models, positive attitudes towards reading, a sense of story, improved listening abilities, exposure to different language patterns, concepts and related vocabulary, exposure to the rhythm and sound of language, book handling abilities, and knowledge about print format.

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Parents are their children's first and most important teacher. Children's literacy environment at home affects their success at school even though families differ in how they provide this supportive environment. Children need a caring adult to read to them and talk to them. Many parents naturally become reading role models for their children by having reading materials readily available, reading with their children, and offering opportunities for verbal interaction (Burns, et al., 1999). Therefore, parents are vital to their children's emerging literacy.

Although reading aloud to children is frequently recommended by teachers, parents do not always understand how this activity benefits children. In this paper, the value of reading aloud to children at home will be examined. Then, specific ways parents can present this activity to their children will be developed.

## Value of Reading Aloud to Children at Home

A landmark analysis of effective reading instruction, entitled *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, published in 1985, emphasizes the importance of reading aloud to children. It states, "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (p. 23). Children who are interested in books and who become early readers come from homes in which parents have read to them on a regular basis (Strickland & Morrow, 1990). Reading aloud to children is the most effective way parents can nurture their children's literacy and eventual success in school.

Other studies suggest that reading aloud to children at home nurtures their literacy. McCormick (1977), reviewed studies of reading aloud and concluded that the benefits of this activity are improved reading performance, interest in reading, and greater language development. The reasons for reading aloud are for entertainment, to share the beauty of language, and to encourage children to want to read for themselves. Trelease (1995) says that reading aloud helps children associate reading with pleasure as well as creates background knowledge and provides role models of readers.

When children experience reading aloud sessions at home, they can gain a sense of what reading is all about (Shapiro & Doiron, 1987). They discover that print is meaningful and begin to develop an understanding of story structure (Teale, 1984). Also, as children listen to written language read aloud, they are able to hear language patterns that may not be a part of everyday speech (Taylor & Strickland, 1986).

Reading aloud also contributes to the social and emotional climate of family life. This special time spent together can result in a sense of security (Taylor & Strickland, 1986; Hill, 1989).

Some families have limited experience with reading and do not know how important daily reading is from infancy through the school years. They may not know how to choose good literature or engage their children in reading (Burns, et al., 1999).

In working with parents of kindergartners, I discovered that access to good literature seemed to be a stumbling block as they tried to improve their home literacy environment. Through informal discussions and conferences, I found that most of the parents seemed to agree about the importance of reading to their children but were not utilizing the public library or purchasing books for the home. These parents were relying on the one book brought home each week from our school library. Unfortunately, this limited practice soon ended when a new librarian decided that too many books were being lost or damaged by primary students and ruled that they could no longer take books home.

## Take Me Home Program

Soon after the librarian's announcement of limitations on book use by the young children, I received word that a Title I paraprofessional, Dixie Andersen, would be relocated to my classroom. She was assigned to work with kindergarten students and brought hundreds of quality books from her previous program and an idea for helping my students as well as their parents. The idea evolved into the "Take Me

Home" program that encourages kindergarten children and their parents to interact daily with good literature. A letter was sent home early in the school year asking students and parents to participate. Children could take a different book home everyday or could renew books of particular interest. Most parents seemed excited about this opportunity. Their response furthered our goal of encouraging families to read aloud to their children everyday by providing easy access to good books.

Soon after the program began, it became apparent that having quality books available was not the only ingredient necessary to get parents excited about reading aloud to their children. I soon began to hear comments from parents, such as "This book is too short," "The book is too easy," or "We already read this one." It became evident to me that these interested parents needed more information about the reading aloud experiences.

Their responses led me to develop a pamphlet format to encourage these parents to read aloud to their children. Important benefits were suggested in the pamphlet. The references accompanying each point were omitted from the parents' pamphlet.

1. Parents as positive reading role models. Each time you real aloud to your child you are providing a positive reading role model. This pleasurable experience between you and your child signals to the child that adults find reading enjoyable and worthwhile (Sloan, 1991).

2. Positive attitudes toward reading. As you read to your child, you are assisting your child to develop positive attitudes toward reading as well as mutual good feelings and memories (Morrow, 1997).

3. Understanding of sense of story. As your child listens to you reading aloud, your child is developing a sense of story structure, a knowledge that stories have a beginning, middle, and ending (Morrow, 1997; Taylor & Strickland, 1986).

4. Imagination stimulated. Reading aloud can be energizing to your child's imagination and curiosity (Trelease, 1995).

5. Improved listening abilities. Sharing books aloud with your child is improving his/her listening abilities that support learning to read and write.

6. Exposure to different language patterns. Reading aloud provides your child with the opportunity to hear written language patterns that are not usually a part of everyday speech (Taylor & Strickland, 1986).

7. Rhythm and sound. Be reading aloud to your child, you are enabling your child to hear the song of the language - - rhythm and other sound elements (Taylor & Strickland, 1986).

8. Extended concepts and related vocabulary. Reading aloud experiences are providing your child with a wealth of concepts and related words. Repeated readings reinforce and extend their meaning. Connections are being made between books and real-life experiences (Taylor & Strickland, 1986).

9. Fostering of comprehension abilities and knowledge about print. Being read to enhances comprehension abilities and knowledge about book design and print. An understanding of the functions of print and a sense of how print is used, and what people are doing when they are reading is being developed. Children with read aloud experience are learning how to handle a book and its front to back progression (Morrow, 1997).

10. Introduction to written form elements. Reading aloud quality literature is exposing your child to standard written usage (Cullinan & Galda, 1994).

For further information about reading aloud experiences for children, the book The Read-Aloud Handbook, by Jim Trelease, will be helpful.

Activities to Extend the Family Read Aloud Experience

This project includes a pamphlet for parents listing ten important reasons for reading to a child, tips for reading aloud, and suggested read aloud books. Ten packets have been developed with each one focusing on a specific reason for reading aloud listed in the parent pamphlet. Each packet includes a quality read aloud book and accompanying tape, a summary of the story, suggestions for reading to a child, and story response activities. The packet format is presented in the next section. The contents of the packets are placed in the appendix.

## Take Me Home Program

Reading aloud to your child is the most valuable way to guide your child towards reading success. Parents who read to their children are more likely to have children who are good readers. The **Take Me Home Program** provides parents with packets that include books, tapes, and activities to extend the home read aloud experience.

## Ten Reasons to Read to Your Child

1. You become a reading role model for your child. You are interested in reading and books.
2. You help your child develop a positive attitude towards reading.
3. You help your child develop a sense of how stories are constructed. They have a beginning, middle, and ending.
4. You stimulate your child's imagination and curiosity.
5. You enable your child to become a better listener and stretch his/her attention span.
6. You enable your child to hear the song of the language - - rhythm and other sound elements.
7. You expose your child to written language patterns that often are not used in speech.
8. You introduce your child to concepts and related vocabulary. You make connections between books and real-life.
9. You show your child how to handle a book, how to turn the pages, where to begin reading, and what reading is all about.
10. You introduce your child to written form elements.

## Tips for Reading Aloud

Before reading together

1. Determine a regular time and place, but also read extra times when the moment is just right.
2. Let your child choose the book, but sometimes choose it together.
3. Read the book yourself before reading it aloud to your child.

While reading together

1. Before reading the story, talk about the title, and look at the illustrations. Predict what the story might be about.
2. Move your hand along the lines of print.

3. Pause in reading when your child has a comment or question about the story or wants to examine an illustration more closely.

After reading together

1. Ask your child to tell his/her favorite part of the story.
2. Reread favorite books over and over.
3. Visit the library often with your child. If possible, attend weekly story hours and enroll your child in the summer reading program.

Book Suggestions for Read Aloud Experiences

(More suggestions will be sent home in the future.)

1. Goodnight Moon, by Margaret Wise Brown
2. Leo the Late Bloomer, by Robert Kraus
3. Gingerbread Man, by Jim Aylesworth
4. It Looked Like Spilt Milk, by Charles G. Shaw
5. The Very Hungry Caterpillar, by Eric Carle
6. Chicka, Chicka, Boom, Boom, by Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault
7. Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed, by Eileen Cristelow
8. Now I'm Big, by Margaret Miller
9. Rosie's Walk, by Pat Hutchins
10. Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?, by Bill Martin, Jr.

Format of Story Activity Packets

The **Take Me Home** program currently consists of ten packets each of which contains a book that matches a particular read aloud benefit. The packets also contain audio tapes, a pamphlet explaining the benefits of reading aloud, and activity sheets to extend the read aloud experience. The activity sheets include the title, author, illustrator, and publisher of each storybook. Also included are a short summary of the book, before and after guides for the reading experience, and a story response

activity. The story response activities were chosen to extend and match a particular read aloud benefit. Each activity can be easily completed after reading the story. A record will be kept of which packets each child has had a chance to experience (see the appendix).

## Summary

Parents reading aloud to their children provide them with a language base that supports their emerging literacy and developing interest in language activity. The packets created for this project in kindergarten, **Take Me Home**, have been developed to provide parents with quality literature for read aloud experiences and related expressive activities.

In the future, I plan to develop more packets. Because our school is continuing to have more children from Spanish-speaking homes, I plan to develop some packets with the information given in English and Spanish. Whenever possible, the literature works will be in both languages. To accommodate the different languages, two books of the same title will probably need to be included in many instances.

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# Appendix

Packet 1: Goodnight Moon,
by Margaret Wise Brown, (1947). Clement Hurd, (Il.), New York: Harper & Row.

Summary:
Written in rhythm, the story tells of a little rabbit who says goodnight to his toys, pets, and even the moon.

By Reading This Book Aloud:
You become a reading role model for your child. You show that you are interested in reading books.

Guide for the Experience

Before you read:
- Look at the cover, read the title and names of the author and illustrator. What do you think this book will be about?
- Who do you think is saying "goodnight" to the moon?

Read and enjoy the story.

After you read:
- Who said "goodnight" to the moon?
- What else did the rabbit say "goodnight" to?
- How do you get ready for bed each night?

Literature Response Activity:
By showing your child that you enjoy reading this book, you become a reading role model. You show your child that reading is pleasurable and interesting. Continue being a reading role model by making the following recipe with your child:

Cheese Moons
1 cup grated cheddar cheese
1 cup whole wheat flour
1/4 cup vegetable oil
Add water to moisten

Stir all ingredients together. Refrigerate for about 30 minutes. Roll a tablespoon of dough into a small ball (the moon). Place the cheese moons on a greased cookie sheet, and bake 12-15 minutes in a 400 degree oven. Makes about 20 cheese moons.

Other bedtime books to enjoy: The Napping House, by Audrey Wood and Ten, Nine, Eight, by Molly Bang.

Re-read Goodnight Moon.

Packet 2: Leo the Late Bloomer,
by Robert Kraus, (1971). Jose Aruego, (Il.), New York: HarperCollins.

Summary:
Leo, the tiger, cannot seem to do anything right. He cannot read, write, or draw. With the patient help of his parents, Leo "blooms."

By Reading This Book Aloud:
You help your child develop a positive attitude towards reading.

Guide for the Experience

Before you read:
- Look at the cover of the book and read the title and name of the author and illustrator.
- Who do you think Leo is?
- Take a picture walk through the book. How does the look on Leo's face change from the beginning of the story to the end?

Read and enjoy the story.

After you read:
- Can you remember some of the things that Leo could not do at the beginning of the story?
- How did Leo feel about himself at the end of the story?
- What does a "late bloomer" mean?

Literature Response Activity:
In this story Leo does not feel very good about himself because of all the things he cannot do. Reading aloud helps your child develop a positive attitude towards reading. Through the story of Leo, your child may develop a positive attitude towards himself/herself.

Save samples of your child's work. Have your child write their first and last name on a piece of paper and draw a self-portrait. Date it. Put it in a safe place. After a few weeks do it again. How do the two compare?

Help your child make a list of things they can already do. Label the paper
I can _____. (for example, brush my teeth)

Re-read Leo the Late Bloomer.

Packet 3: The Gingerbread Man,
by Jim Aylesworth, (1998). Barbara McClintock, (Il.), New York: Scholastic.

Summary:
This often told tale of a gingerbread cookie that comes to life and leads a husband, a wife, a butcher, a cow, and a sow on a chase through the town. He soon meets a fox and that is the end of the Gingerbread Man.

By Reading This Book Aloud:
You help your child develop a sense of how stories are constructed. They have a beginning, middle, and ending.

Guide for the Experience

Before you read:
- Look at the cover. Can you find the picture of a pig, cow, fox, butcher, little old man and a little old woman? Can you find the Gingerbread Man?
- Read the title, the name of the author, and the name of the illustrator.
- What do you think this story is about?

Read and enjoy the story.

After you read:
- Who made the Gingerbread Man?
- Why did he run away?
- What happened to the Gingerbread Man at the end of the story?

Literature Response Activity:
The following activity will help your child understand that stories have a beginning, middle, and ending.

Fold a piece of paper into three parts. In the first section have your child draw and write about what happened at the beginning of the story. In the next section draw and write about what happened in the middle of the story. Draw and write about what happened at the end of the story in the last section. (The child may choose to dictate his/her ideas to you.)

Re-read The Gingerbread Man.

Packet 4: It Looked Like Spilt Milk,
by Charles G. Shaw, (1947). New York: Harper & Row.

Summary:
A cloud in the sky takes on various shapes. The reader has an opportunity to guess what each shape might be.

By Reading This Book Aloud:
You can stimulate your child's imagination and curiosity.

Guide for the Experience

Before you read:
- Look at the cover. Can you name the white shapes?
- Read the title. Read the name of the author. What do you think this story is about?

Read and enjoy the story.

After you read:
- Re-read the book, hesitating before the last word in the sentence. Let your child fill in the word using the pictures as clues.

Literature Response Activity:
By reading It Looked Like Spilt Milk, you are able to help stimulate your child's imagination and curiosity. On a cloudy day, discuss and observe the clouds in the sky. Do you see any shapes that were in the story? Do you see any other shapes? Make your own book by tearing or cutting pieces of white paper into the shapes you see in the clouds. Glue onto blue paper. Add the words

Sometimes it looked
like a _____.
But it wasn't a _____.

Re-read It Looked Like Spilt Milk.

Packet 5: The Very Hungry Caterpillar,
by Eric Carle, (1979). New York: Collins.

Summary:
The story takes the reader through the four stages of a butterfly. It begins with the egg, then moves to the caterpillar stage where it eats and eats, then to building a cocoon, and finally to the adult butterfly stage.

By Reading This Book Aloud:
You enable your child to become a better listener and encourage his/her attention span.

Guide for the Experience

Before you read:
- Look at the cover. Read the name of the title and the author.
- Have you ever been hungry? If so, what did you eat?

Read and enjoy the story.

After you read:
- Why did the caterpillar eat so much?
- Can you name some of the foods the caterpillar ate?
- What are the four stages of a butterfly? (egg, caterpillar, cocoon, and butterfly)

Literature Response Activity:
Help your child understand the stages of a butterfly. You will need one knee sock (preferably brown) and a small paper butterfly. Place the butterfly in your hand and pull the brown sock up over one arm. The long knee sock is the caterpillar. Next pull the knee sock down over your hand and hold your hand down (looks like a cocoon hanging from a tree). Finally, shed the knee sock and in your hand will be the final stage: the butterfly.

Re-read The Very Hungry Caterpillar.

Packet 6: Chicka, Chicka, Boom, Boom,
by Bill Martin, Jr., & John Archambault, (1989). Lois Ehlert, (Il.), New York: Simon & Schuster.

Summary:
Letters of the alphabet in a rhyming chant race each other up a coconut tree.

By Reading This Book Aloud:
You enable your child to hear the song of language - - its rhythm and rhyme.

Guide for the Experience

Before you read:
- Look at the cover of the book and read the title and the names of the author and illustrator.
- Take a picture walk through the story.
- What do you think this book will be about?
- What kind of tree is on the cover?

Read and enjoy the story.

After you read:
- What was trying to climb to the top of the coconut tree?
- What happened when all the letters reached the top?

Literature Response Activity:
As you read aloud, your child will soon be joining in with the rhythm and rhyme of Chicka, Chicka, Boom, Boom. Help your child find and recite the alphabet on the end pages of the book. Read two sentences from the story. Do you hear any rhyming words? Which words rhyme?
Example:
Chicka, Chicka, Boom, Boom!
Will there be enough room?
The rhyming words are boom and room.

Re-read Chicka, Chicka, Boom, Boom.

Packet 7: Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed,
by Eileen Christelow, (1989). New York: Clarion.

Summary:
Five little monkeys getting ready for bed disobey their mother and doctor and jump on the bed. They fall off one by one but soon go to sleep. Mother then takes a turn at jumping on the bed.

By Reading This Book Aloud:
You expose your child to written language patterns.

Guide for the Experience

Before you read:
- Look at the cover. Count the monkeys jumping on the bed.
- Read the title and the name of the author. What do you think about jumping on a bed?

Read and enjoy the story.

After you read:
- How many monkeys were jumping on the bed?
- Do you think the monkeys learned a lesson about jumping on the bed?
- What did mother do at the end of the story?

Literature Response Activity:
This story may help your child connect oral language to written language. It is based on the following finger play.

Five Little Monkeys

Five little monkeys jumping on the bed (Hold up 5 fingers)
One fell off and bumped his head (Knock on head with fist)
Mama called the doctor (Pretend to dial a phone)
And the doctor said,
"No more monkeys jumping on the bed!" (Point finger and make scolding motion)
Repeat with 4, 3, 2, 1.

Re-read Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed.

Packet 8: Now I'm Big,
by Margaret Miller, (1996). New York: Greenwillow.

Summary:
Six children discuss how they were taken care of when they were little and what they can do for themselves now that they are big.

By Reading This Book Aloud:
You introduce your child to concepts and related vocabulary. You help make connections between books and real-life.

Guide for the Experience

Before you read:
- Look at the cover. Read the title and the name of the author.
- Discuss what is happening in each of the small pictures on the cover.
- What do you think this story will be about?

Read and enjoy the story.

After you read:
- Can you think of the things that your mom or dad had to do for you when you were a baby?

Literature Response Activity:
Connect the events in this story to your child's real life accomplishments. Begin a personal photo album based on Now I'm Big. On one page, place a photo of your child as a baby. On the opposite page, place a current photo of your child doing something they can do well now. Example: photo of a child crawling (When I was a baby, I crawled) and photo of child playing soccer (I can run and play).

Re-read Now I'm Big.

Packet 9: Rosie's Walk,
by Patricia Hutchins, (1968). New York: Macmillan.

Summary:
The misadventures of a fox as he tries to capture a hen out for a morning stroll is told in this story.

By Reading This Book Aloud:
You show your child how to handle a book, how to turn the pages, where to begin reading, and what reading is all about.

Guide for the Experience

Before you read:
- Look at the cover and read the title and the name of the author.
- Can you tell what this story will be about?
- Look at each page and ask your child to tell what he/she thinks is happening.

Read and enjoy the story.

After you read:
- Hand your child the book. Ask your child to show you the front of the book and the back of the book.
- Find the page that says "Rosie the hen went for a walk...". Count the words on the page. (7) Point to the first word. Point to the last word. Point to a letter.

Literature Response Activity:
Rewrite the story using your child's name.
Example:

Joey's Walk,
by Joey Smith

Joey, the boy, went for a walk
across the carpet
around the chair
over the dog
past the television
through the doorway
under the table
and got back in time for dinner.

Illustrate each page.

Re-read Rosie's Walk.

Packet 10: Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?,
by Bill Martin, Jr., (1983). Eric Carle, (Il.), New York: Holt.

Summary:
Questions and answers are given about what Brown Bear and other animals see. The story is repetitive and predictable.

By Reading This Book Aloud:
You introduce your child to written form elements.

Guide for the Experience

Before you read:
- Look at the cover. What do you think this book is about?
- Find the title page. Read the title of the book, the name of the author and the illustrator.
- Take a picture walk through the story. Can you name each animal?

Read and enjoy the story.

After you read:
- What did Brown Bear see?
- Name some of the animals in the story and tell what color they were.
- Which animal in the book did you like best?
- Could this be a true story?

Literature Response Activity:
Act out the following rhyme:

Brown Bear, Brown Bear, touch the ground.
Brown Bear, Brown Bear, turn around.
Brown Bear, Brown Bear, touch your nose.
Brown Bear, Brown Bear, touch your toes.
Brown Bear, Brown Bear, turn off the light.
Brown Bear, Brown Bear, say "good night."

Now substitute the name of each animal from the story and repeat the rhyme until all the animals have been named (for example, Redbird, Redbird, touch the ground).

Re-read Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?