DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 866 PS 029 088

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TITLE	The Benefits of Reading Aloud to Pre-School Children.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	60p.; Master's Thesis, Biola University.
PUB TYPE	Dissertations/Theses - Masters Theses (042)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Beginning Reading; Books; Childrens Literature; Emergent Literacy; Language Skills; Parent Child Relationship; *Parents as Teachers; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Reading Aloud to Others; Research Needs; *Story Reading
IDENTIFIERS	Shared Book Experience; Shared Reading

ABSTRACT

Noting that reading aloud to preschool children significantly influences their reading development, this master's thesis examines the many benefits from reading aloud to preschoolers. The thesis reviews research indicating that when parents read aloud, they help their children learn vocabulary, complex sentence structure, and story structure. Furthermore, by reading aloud, parents build their child's self-esteem, encourage curiosity about words, and introduce the pleasures of reading. The thesis identifies additional research showing that early readers experience more success in school than later readers. Children who have been read to develop print awareness and become familiar with language patterns. Their imagination and interest in reading grow as they hear storybooks and poetry. The research cited indicates that parents can model the joy of reading and introduce their children to the richness of literature, thereby fostering their child's development of a lifelong love of reading. Also included in the thesis is a discussion of implications for further research and implications for parents, including obstacles to reading aloud, reading at a young age, and when to begin reading aloud. (Contains 45 references.) (KB)

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THE BENEFITS OF READING ALOUD TO PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

ED 448 866

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Education

Biola University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Janel Christine Pankey

Fall 2000

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M.A. Thesis

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the Faculty of the Department of Education

Biola University

La Mirada, California

USA

By

Janel Christine Pankey

Fall 2000

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ABSTRACT

THE BENEFITS OF READING ALOUD TO PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

Reading aloud significantly affects the reading development of preschool children. When parents read aloud, they help their children learn vocabulary, complex sentence structure, and story structure. Furthermore, parents build their child's self-esteem, encourage curiosity about words, and introduce the pleasures of reading. Research shows that the age of the child when reading begins is important. Children who have been read to develop print awareness and become familiar with language patterns. Their imagination and interest in reading grow as they hear storybooks and poetry. Parents can model the joy of reading and introduce their children to the richness of literature. By reading aloud, parents foster their child's development of a lifelong love of reading.

Janel Christine Pankey

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The Benefits of Reading Aloud to Pre-School Children

I. INTRODUCTION

Parents strongly influence their child's reading development during the preschool and early elementary years. As the child's first teachers, they serve as role models for reading behavior. By praising and encouraging their child's attempts at literacy, they foster a positive attitude towards books and print in general. By reading stories aloud, parents help children become familiar with language patterns; this, in turn, enables the children to experience less difficulty anticipating words and phrases when they begin to read independently (Strang, 1962). According to the Commission on Reading, "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985).

Both parents and teachers consider reading an essential skill for children to learn. Unfortunately, national and state reports indicate that a majority of California's children cannot read at basic levels (California Reading Task Force, 1995). The publication Becoming a Nation of Readers concluded that reading should be our highest priority and called for a blend of skills development and literature, language, and comprehension in a balanced, effective reading program. In the primary grades and in many pre-schools, much attention is given to language arts and beginning reading programs. Clearly, the school plays an important role in the reading development of a child. However, what role do parents play in their child's reading achievement? How do parents influence their child's literacy? What role does reading aloud serve in a pre-school child's growth as a reader? How do parents nurture their child's interest in books? How does reading aloud

affect children's reading development? In this paper, I will review the historical framework and the many benefits from shared reading with preschool age children. I will explain how reading aloud expands a child's vocabulary, exposes them to language structure, builds self-esteem, acquaints them with the reading process, allows them to experience the pleasures of reading, and introduces them to literacy contracts.

II. HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

Early research on reading development focused on the age at which a child can learn to read. In the early 1900s, at the age of six, children began first grade and learned how to read. Although extensive research on preschool early reading was not done prior to 1958, several studies on children who read early gained attention during the first half of the twentieth century. For example, in the 1918 issue of Journal of Applied Psychology, an anonymous parent wrote about how he helped his young daughter learn to read. According to his report, the child was reading fluently at 26 months. In another well-known study in 1925, one researcher, Lewis Terman, reported that 250 of his 552 subjects reported learning to read before starting school. Of all these gifted students, nearly half said they learned before the age of five, about ten percent before they were four; and under five percent before the age of three. The others who reported reading early could not recall when they began reading. Based upon several studies in the 1920s and 1930s, many people believed that children needed to be 6 or 6.5 years old in order to be ready to read. In these small studies among first graders, the results showed that those with a higher mental age learned to read better. However, the research was limited; the studies consisted of a small group of subjects in a formal classroom setting (Morphett & Washburne, 1931). Nevertheless, the idea of postponing reading instruction until it could occur in a school setting persisted.

Some studies before 1950 focused on whether students could learn to read at an early age when given instruction. For example, in 1931, one researcher, Davidson, studied 13 children with mental ages of four years. He wanted to find out whether these

young children could learn to read, and if all children (between three to five years old) would learn to read equally well under the same conditions in which they received ten minutes of reading instruction daily. At the end of this period, the children took reading tests. Results from this study showed that all the children had learned to read some words and that pre-school age children can learn to read. The most successful child identified 269 words, while the least successful identified 20 words. In 1938, another researcher, Wilson, studied four-and five-year-old children who were given help with reading while attending the Horace Mann School at Teachers College, Columbia University. This researcher did not indicate that further studies would be done to trace the later reading of children who started reading as a result of informal instruction in nursery school and kindergarten. In 1954, another researcher, Strang, examined the reading autobiographies of 54 junior high school student with IQs of 120 or higher. She found that approximately half said that they learned to read at five years of age or younger. The years 1956-1957 were part of a time period which devoted the beginning weeks of first grade to developing reading readiness.

In the 1950s, most people believed that a mental age of 6.5 was necessary before children should begin to receive reading instruction. Many educators and parents alike accepted that the first-grade year would include reading readiness programs in the beginning weeks or months of the school year. Furthermore, in the years preceeding and following 1958, most schools discouraged early home help with reading, and parents were warned that helping their preschoolers could lead to confusion or boredom for their child once school instruction started. Later, in the 1970s, many recognized reading as a

constructive act that draws upon a child's oral language skills and background knowledge about the world, people, texts, and written language. As interest in skills development grew, more attention was given to emergent literacy, the cluster of behaviors involving uses of print and oral language that appear during the preschool years. In the late 1970s to early 1980s, research on the role of parent involvement and reading achievement increased. Positive relationships for parents reading and children's achievement in reading were discovered (Becher, 1985; Hess, Holloway, Price, & Dickson, 1979). By the late 1980s, many began to recognize reading as an active process of constructing meaning and to view literacy as a social activity (Dickinson, 1987). In reviewing the literature, it is important to examine how reading aloud to preschool children benefits their reading growth.

III. VOCABULARY EXPANSION

Children learn language by hearing it repeatedly (Trelease, 1995). In one study, Senechal, LeFevre, Hudson, and Lawson (1996) interviewed parents of 119 children from day-care centers and nursery schools in a large Canadian city. The parent who read most frequently to the child responded to questions such as, "how frequently do you and other family members read to your child?" On a checklist, they marked the titles of children's storybooks that they knew. They were given a list of 60 titles; some were popular children's books and some were made up. The researchers found significant positive correlations between the children's book exposure checklists and children's vocabulary scores. In addition, they found that children's interest in reading, the frequency of storybook reading, the number of children's books available, and the questions pertaining to library usage were positively related to vocabulary knowledge.

Shared reading facilitates vocabulary development in several ways. During book reading, mothers use language that is richer and more varied than that used during eating, playing with toys, or dressing their child (Dunn, Wooding, & Herman, 1977; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991). First, books "contain many words that children are unlikely to encounter frequently in spoken language" (Senechal, et al, 1996, p. 520). For instance, in the well-known story of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter, Peter

> gets caught in a gooseberry net and 'gives himself up for lost.' However, 'his sobs were overheard by some friendly sparrows, who flew to him in great excitement and implored him to exert himself' and Peter escapes from the net just as Mr. McGregor arrives to capture him. (Senechal, et al, 1996, p.520).

The words in this passage show that the language of many storybooks is more complex than that of the everyday language that adults use when conversing with children. Children's books contain 50% more rare words than prime-time television or college students' conversations (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988). In Curious George Gets a Medal by H.A. Rey, some sample vocabulary words are: funnel, tap, lather, escape, shed, loop, squealing, rattling, emergency rockets, launching site, lever, parachute, and flash. Clearly, children gain vocabulary as they listen to stories. Trelease (1995) relates the story of a mother in Michigan who read Steven Kellog's picture book, Paul Bunyan, to her four-year-old son, Philip, each night. Repeatedly, Philip heard this paragraph at the end of the book:

> With the passing of the years, Paul has been seen less and less frequently. However, along with his unusual size and strength, he seems to possess an extraordinary longevity. Sometimes his great bursts of laughter can be heard rumbling like distant thunder across the wild Alaskan mountain ranges where he and Babe still roam. (Trelease, 1995, p.51)

One evening, Philip's mother came to his bedroom and asked, "Well, Philip, what story would you like tonight?" He thought for a moment and then declared soberly, "I think—I think I would like a story about 'extraordinary longevity.' Philip had learned two words that most five-year-olds did not have in their working vocabularies. How had he learned them? Repeatedly hearing those words in a meaningful context, from a special person in his life, enabled four-year-old Philip to learn those words. Repeated readings enable children to develop their vocabulary rapidly.

IV. RECEPTIVE COMPREHENSION

As children listen to stories being read aloud, they are learning about the vocabulary and complex sentence structure of standard English that they will encounter in books and at school. Researchers support that reading aloud to young children "serves as an introduction to new and more complex syntactic and grammatical forms" (Senechal, 1996, p. 520). Sentences in books often have clauses built into them or are joined by conjunctions that are specifically chosen to express an idea (Hall & Moats, 2000). For example, Margery Williams writes in The Velveteen Rabbit:

> There were rabbits like himself, but quite furry and brand-new. They must have been very well made, for their seams didn't show at all, and they changed shape in a queer way when they moved; one minute they were long and thin and the next minute, fat and bunchy, instead of always staying the same as he did (Williams, 1978, p. 12).

Her use of the conjunctions (but, for, and, instead) help to express the differences between the real and toy rabbits. Sentences in books tend to contain more adjectives and adverbs and apply correct grammar more often than everyday conversation. In Lyle, Lyle , Crocodile, a children's book by Bernard Waber, the story goes:

> Not wanting to seem unsociable, [Lyle] decided to join the other crocodiles who were cozily piled together. Just when he thought he had gotten himself comfortable on top...he awakened to find himself crushed to the very bottom. Lyle's restlessness so annoyed the other crocodiles, they all just got up and stomped off in a huff (Waber, 1965, p. 36-38).

In this passage, the author uses words and expressions that a child would not usually hear in everyday conversation.

Authors often use language in their writing that is more concise than casual conversation. For instance, also in Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile, one part of the story relates that "a gasping, frightened Mr. Grumps and his cat were led to the safety of the street" (Waber, 1965, p. 44). This written sentence is more organized than an actual conversation about the rescue of the scared Mr. Grumps and his cat by the heroic Lyle would have been. Thus, when parents read books to children, they prepare them to understand the more complex sentence structure that they will find in books at school. A meta-analysis of the literature on joint book reading (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini, 1994) supports that parent-preschooler reading is a necessary preparation for beginning reading instruction at school. It concludes that book reading is as strong a predictor of reading achievement as is phonemic awareness. The results also suggest that book reading affects the acquisition of the written language register, a prerequisite for reading comprehension (Bus et al, 1994). The results from these studies support that book reading is a valuable activity to help young children develop reading skills.

Children who hear more complex reading material learn more about the written language than those who hear simpler reading material. For example, in one study of prereaders, children in the highest stages of linguistic development had more books read aloud to them each week, heard books at higher syntactic complexity levels and were read to by more people (Chomsky, 1972). Clearly, children's listening comprehension is

higher than their reading comprehension. One first grade teacher successfully read aloud to her first graders The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis, a story which can be read as an adventure story or as an allegory of the life of Christ (Trelease, 1995). As the teacher read the end of the chapter where Aslan, the lion who symbolizes Christ, is killed, one first grade boy sobbed from underneath the hood of his jacket. He was sad that they killed that lion and related that the teacher might as well quit since the story was not worth reading any more. As the teacher continued reading the next chapter which described how Aslan's dead face began to change, the Stone Table was broken, and Aslan was returning to life, the listening boy lowered the hood of his jacket to show watery brown eyes; and his teacher could tell that a big smile was replacing the tears. Then the boy yelled, "It's like Jesus!" (Trelease, 1995, p. 90). A first grade boy was able to understand this allegory! This story illustrates that children's listening comprehension level far exceeds their reading comprehension level.

Reading aloud prepares children for reading by nurturing their listening skills. As children hear new words in the context of stories, they comprehend more the meaning of unfamiliar words. Trelease (1995) argues that listening comprehension comes before reading comprehension. For example, if a young reader encounters the word 'tremendous' and has never heard that word, he will not be able to say it. If he is unable to say it, then he will not be able to read or understand its meaning when he encounters the word in the text. By contrast, if a child has heard the word 'tremendous' repeatedly in a story, he will be more likely to be able to read it based on context clues, decoding, and background knowledge of the word when he encounters that word in the text.

Through read aloud times, parents encourage their children to develop listening abilities. What are the characteristics of good listeners? Good listeners are "makers of ideas" (Hennigan, 1992, p.3). They "filter out much of what they hear in order to concentrate on a message" (Talongo, 1995, p. 13). By reading aloud, parents give children opportunities to develop their listening skills- to listen to find the main point of the story. Furthermore, as parents ask questions such as, "what words rhyme in this poem?" or "what will this character say?" they are teaching children to listen for important details in the text. When parents share books, they can play listening games with their children (Brown, 1991). For example, they can ask the child to think of other words that begin with a /b/ sound or a /c/ sound. They can brainstorm that the words: baby, book, basket, brownie start with the /b/ sound while the words: cat, cookie, carousel, kite start with /c/ sound. During shared reading, parents can also allow children to insert the missing words in familiar, predictable text. For example, when reading nursery rhymes, children can insert the correct words into the poem: "Mary had a little _____, little _____ little _____. Mary had a little lamb. Its fleece was white as _____." As a parent encourages a child to participate in reading aloud, he or she is helping the child to become a better listener and to be able to predict the text. Listening skills precede reading skills and lay a strong foundation for reading success.

V. CURIOSITY DEVELOPMENT

By rereading stories aloud, parents help children to develop a curiosity about words. For example, in a study on children who read early, Durkin (1966) reports that stories that were reread were usually the ones that encouraged questions such as "Where does it say that?" or "What's that word?" After interviewing the families of sixty children from New York City, Durkin found that earlier readers were more likely to have been read to at home before entering school. When she asked parents of preschool children specifics about the reading process, they related that they identified words when children asked about them, talked about pictures, pointed to words as they were being read, and asked children questions about story content. Studies reveal that preschoolers often ask as many questions after a dozen readings of the same book because they are learning language gradually, in increments, not all at one time (Trelease, 1995). By rereading the story, parents give children the opportunity to better comprehend the meaning of the words.

VI. REPEATED READINGS

Repeated readings have also been proven to be a valuable tool in building children's self-esteem (Trelease, 1995). First, the reader makes the child feel affirmed by granting his request for another reading. Second, with each rereading, the child increases his ability to predict what will happen next in the story. Children love to be 'experts' at predicting what will happen next in books. (Trelease, 1995). A child generally does not know what to expect to happen each day, but in familiar books, he knows exactly what will happen. Repeated readings help a child to feel good about himself and to associate reading with pleasure. Predictable and wordless books enable a child to build confidence in reading. Predictable books often have a rhyming pattern or a common phrase repeated throughout the text. For example, Dr. Seuss' There's A Wocket in my Pocket or Bill Martin, Jr.'s Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? give children the opportunity to predict what will happen next and to join in on the familiar dialogue of the text. This activity of rereading familiar books helps a child to strengthen phonetic skills, increase sight vocabulary, develop fluency, and integrate the cueing systems (McMackin, 1993). As parents ask questions (McMackin, 1993, p.145) such as the following, they encourage students to integrate the different cueing systems. Visual cues provide information about the relationship between letters and sounds, semantic cues provide meaning for words, and syntax cues enable readers to know the correct word order and structure of sentences.

1) Does this word look like...(say the word the child read)? (visual cue)
2) What sound would you expect to hear at the beginning (or end) of this word (point to a word)? (visual cue)
3) If you were talking to a friend, would you talk this way? (syntax cue)
4) Does this sentence make sense? (semantic cue)

5) Does the picture help you think of anything familiar? (prior knowledge and experience)

The simple, predictable texts are inviting to young children to reread or retell. As children become better at retelling and predicting the story, their self-esteem increases and they feel better about their ability to read.

Furthermore, reading aloud can increase self-esteem by helping children to feel a sense of strength and power at their ability to overcome problems similar to the ones in the stories they hear. As children identify with and live through the experiences and feelings of characters in stories, they are better able to anticipate consequences and understand things from a clear perspective (Shermis, 1991). For instance, in the Berenstain Bears' series by Stan & Jan Berenstain, some familiar stories describe a visit to the doctor, the first day of kindergarten, fighting between siblings, trouble with friends, a messy room, too much television, too much junk food, trouble at school, and other common childhood situations. Since children often worry about the unknown, listening to books about new situations helps them to understand and predict what the situation would be like. Children enjoy fiction where the protagonist is a child who behaves like an adult. When the main character displays courage and overcomes evil or danger, the listening child rejoices inside! In the story of Peter Pan by Walt Disney, for instance, the Darling children overcome the evil pirates and safely return to the nursery. Although the Darlings are children, they demonstrate bravery and act like adults. Likewise, in Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak, the main character is a boy who triumphs in his imagination as he travels through a jungle and then returns to eat the dinner that his

mother prepared. As children listen to stories about characters that overcome their problems, their self-esteem may improve because they recognize that they can solve their problems. Hence, reading books aloud enhances a child's self-esteem by helping them feel a sense of power over the circumstances in their life.

Reading aloud also benefits children's self-esteem by helping them to feel valuable. It is a "form of attention and taking time that builds trust and communication" (Shermis, 1991, p. 9). A child who receives focused attention from a caring parent on a regular basis during a read aloud time is more likely to feel loved and valued.

Sharing books gives parents and children a time of closeness and a time of building shared memories (Otto & Johnson, 1991). It is a "way of transmitting ideas, attitudes, and values between parents and children" (Otto & Johnson, 1991, p. 4). As children read about the experiences and doubts of others with their parents, it is easier for them to talk more openly about issues in their own lives (Shermis, 1991). Books can introduce topics of conversation to be discussed during the shared reading and afterwards. Furthermore, by discussing books, parents can learn about their children's thoughts, dreams, fears, interests, and dislikes. Hence, reading aloud can serve as a way to nourish parent-child relationships by fostering good communication.

VII. EXPOSURE TO STORY STRUCTURE

As children listen to stories during their early years, they absorb much information about story structure. This knowledge about story structure helps the child later to be able to read and write. For example, a child who hears fairy tales comes to expect that each of these stories begins with 'once upon a time' and ends with 'and they lived happily ever after.' A child recognizes that these stories have a main character who is good, such as Cinderella or Snow White, and who faces danger from others, such as an evil stepmother or a wicked queen. Furthermore, the child intuitively knows that fairy tales will contain humorous parts because, in these stories, animals can talk and extraordinary things can happen. As preschoolers hear many stories, they recognize that stories have certain common characteristics:

- The story has a title.
- There are characters, including a main character.
- The story takes place in a setting (time, place).
- The characters usually have a problem to solve.
- The action hinges on how the problem is solved.
- There is a resolution (climax) in the story, before it ends.
- Language is used to create the effect of surprise, sadness, climax, or humor.

(Hall & Moats, 2000, p. 30)

By recognizing the patterns of stories, children have a better understanding of how to read and write their own stories.

VIII. EXPOSURE TO THE READING PROCESS

By listening to stories, young children become familiar with the reading process. They begin to notice that the print on the page corresponds to the same words that they hear in listening and speaking (Hall & Moats, 2000). This correlation between print and spoken words is a key part of the process of learning about reading. Children must recognize that print has meaning before they will become readers (McKay, 1978). In a study of what preschool children believe an adult is reading on the page, E.H. Hiebert (1981), an educator, found that three-year old children believed that the pictures, not the words, were being read. As children become familiar with the reading process, they develop print awareness or an understanding of how print relates to speech and meaning as well as how paragraphs are structured and stories arranged. They develop the understanding that people use books in specific ways. Children do not automatically know that the print is read from left to right, the cover of the book contains the title and the author, the words are in sentences with punctuation, the illustrations do not tell the story, and the book is held a certain way. Print awareness involves knowing the following concepts:

- how the book is turned when it is "right side up"
- that the print is read, not the pictures
- where the beginning of the book is
- the order of reading the print on a page—top to bottom—left to right
- what to do at the end of a line
- what to do at the end of a page (Hall & Moats, 2000, p. 31)

By reading aloud, parents help children to recognize these important aspects of print awareness. Furthermore, by explaining illustrations to a child, parents help a child to comprehend the meaning of the pictures. For instance, an adult may easily recognize a busy city scene, but a fifteen-month old child may have difficulty understanding how the details of the scene form the big picture. Shared reading enables parents to introduce children to the reading process.

Another benefit of reading aloud is that it develops prior knowledge so that when a child reads independently and encounters unfamiliar items in a text, there will be better understanding. A main reason that students fail in reading is they lack adequate background information in order to understand the new ideas encountered (Ediger, 1997). As parents read aloud to their preschool children, they introduce them to new information that will prepare them for learning in school.

How does listening to stories benefit children academically? Literature exposes children to places, ideas, concepts, cultures, people, and animals that they may only meet in a book. It also helps to develop a child's imagination. He or she can dream of what it would be like to grow up in a different land where people speak another language and eat exotic foods. As children hear unusual stories, they can visualize what it would be like to sail to an island, live with dinosaurs, fly in an airplane like Amelia Earhart or Charles Lindbergh, soar to the moon in a rocket, or dive deep in the ocean like a blue whale. Thus, books can be a source of ideas and fantasies that children can use to create their own stories and to influence their playtime (McLane & McNamee, 1990). By reading

aloud, parents prepare their children to be more capable of reading for meaning in school. For example, if during silent reading an elementary school child comes across a passage about which he has little background knowledge, he will be more likely to become frustrated while he reads and will be likely to miss the meaning of the text. Yet, if he or she has some background knowledge about the subject through hearing stories read aloud, that child will find it easier to read for comprehension.

When parents read aloud, they model for children the purposes and motivations for reading. For example, children observe that their parents read the newspaper, magazines, the television guide, the phone book, letters that come in the mail, and books for pleasure. By observing their parents read, children become more motivated to read. In the preschool years, children may often imitate what their parents do while reading. They will hold the book like an adult would, look at the pictures and words, and often tell the story according to the illustrations. This play reading is an important part of the reading process since it shows that the child is aware that the story stays the same and that the print conveys the same message each time. Furthermore, as adults model reading, children learn to recognize that reading is an important, meaningful activity.

IX. PLEASURES OF READING

Although many parents realize that reading to children introduces them to literacy and prepares them for school, most parents are motivated to read aloud because it is an enjoyable activity. When parents and children read together, the child often sits close to the parent or on the parent's lap; there is a sense of intimacy between mother or father and child. Generally, parents guide the reading aloud process by asking questions about things that would interest the child. They are perceptive about what amuses, delights, frightens, or bores their young one. Often, parents discuss the characters, the setting, and the events of the story. For example, conversations may include how the characters might be thinking and feeling, where the story is occurring, and how the plot is developing. Furthermore, parents may help the child to connect the text to prior knowledge. For example, when reading A Pocket for Corduroy by Don Freeman, a mother might introduce the concept of a laundromat by asking, "Do you remember seeing the place where people take their clothes to wash and dry them? Do you remember the shop next to the grocery store with many washers and dryers? That is a laundromat." This type of dialogue about the new vocabulary in the text helps the child to relate what is occurring in the story with everyday events.

Reading aloud exposes children to the pleasures of reading. A child can imagine a time other than now, a place other than here, and people who are different. He or she can learn about the "richly textured lives outside his own experience" (Trelease, 1995, p.21). In The Jungle Book by Walt Disney, a child can imagine what it would be like to be Mowgli, living among wolves and dangerous animals. In Charlotte's Web by

E.B.White, children can envision a farm with friendly pigs, spiders, geese, and cows that talk. One mother explained how reading was pleasurable, even for her toddler in the following anecdote (Trelease, 1995).

During a snowstorm, the mother and daughter sat in front of the window to watch the big fluffy flakes. The girl, Erin, ran to the kitchen, pointed to the calendar picture of the dog in the snowstorm, then ran to the window, and pointed to the snow. She went back and forth between the kitchen with the calendar and the window. When she became tired, she sat on the floor near the coffee table where she saw a book catalog with a small picture advertising The snowman, by Raymond Briggs, and pointed it out to her mother. She told Erin that a copy of the wordless book The snowman was over on the bookshelf, and her daughter became so excited that she actually began to quiver all over. When Erin saw the cover of the book, she was delighted. For the next twenty minutes, they sat at the window, looking through the book and glancing at the falling snow. The snowman became a well-read favorite for the next year.

Reading aloud brings a child the joy of participating in reading, even before he or she can decode the words. Through reading stories repeatedly, children begin to know the words by heart and can predict which ones will come next. For example, after hearing The very hungry caterpillar, by Eric Carle for six months, Erin surprised her mother by inserting words into the story. During the reading of the second sentence—'One Sunday morning the warm sun came up and—pop!—out of the egg came a tiny and very hungry caterpillar'—while she was still forming her mouth to say 'pop,' her daughter said the word 'pop!' with perfect expression. At seventeen months, she started

inserting words into familiar stories. (Trelease, 1995). Clearly, young children enjoy listening to favorite stories over and over.

X. INTELLIGENCE

After reading about the pleasures of reading, one might wonder if reading only benefits children who are bright at a young age. Can all children, regardless of their health and emotional maturity, benefit from listening to stories? The following story (Trelease, 1995) illustrates some positive benefits of reading that parents experienced in a unique child: At eighteen months, unable to walk or talk, Steven Kunishima was found to be suffering from hypoplasia of the vermis. In other words, the transmitter for his brain's messages had not developed. The doctor predicted that Steven would never walk or talk and suggested eventual institutionalization. When his mother recovered from the initial shock and depression, she recalled that she and her husband had read aloud to their other children when they were Steven's age. She thought that maybe a daily read-aloud would help. So someone sat and read each evening with Steven, cushioned by floor pillows that supported his head, even though he did not seem to respond at all. Yet, one day, three months later, when his sister announced it was time for a story, she was amazed to see him begin to pull himself towards the bookcase. He hit at the books and knocked one until it opened. Then he stared at the animals on the page. The scene was repeated the following night with the same book and same page. The family rejoiced to know that he had a memory! The Kunishimas then increased their efforts. They read more books and increased muscle exercise, too. His progress was slow and painful, but the work bore fruit. Though unable to speak words at age four and a half, within a year, he was speaking a few and even more words the following year. By age thirteen, Steven was walking and talking, and even played a little basketball. And remarkably, he was reading

and writing—on grade level! (Trelease, 1995). This story illustrates the importance and potential benefits of reading aloud to children with physical or mental disabilities.

In the preschool years, a parent may introduce a child to the joy and beauty of literature. Children's literature "carries our rich language from generation to generation" (McKay, 1972, p. 2). Through familiar stories, poems, fairy tales, and songs, children learn about our heritage of values and ideals (McKay, 1972). For example, in The little engine that could, children see how a positive attitude helps the work to get done:

> 'I'm not very big,' said the Little Blue Engine. 'They use me only for switching trains in the yard. I have never been over the mountain.'
>
> 'But we must get over the mountain before the children awake,' said all the dolls and the toys.
>
> The very little engine looked up and saw the tears in the dolls' eyes. And she thought of the good little boys and girls on the other side of the mountain who would not have any toys or good food unless she helped.
>
> Then she said, 'I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.' And she hitched herself to the little train.
>
> She tugged and pulled and pulled and tugged and slowly, slowly, slowly they started off' (Piper, 1976, p. 29-31).

After the little train repeated "I think I can, I think I can," it successfully climbed the mountain. In Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty, children rejoice as good triumphs over evil. In the well-known story of David and Goliath, children see the value of faith and trust and how the giants in the land do not always win! In Aesop's Fables,

children learn the importance of not crying wolf, but of telling the truth. In The tortoise and the hare, they see that slow and steady wins the race. All of these stories reflect a part of our nation's heritage of culture and values. Children see the power of literature to convey beauty and truth and to inspire when they see justice prevail and good triumph over evil.

Although most children enjoy hearing stories read aloud, those children who do not seem to enjoy, or who cannot sit still for a story, can engage in other literacy activities in the home. For example, some children, by their temperament may not like to sit on a caretaker's lap during reading. Likewise, some children developmentally are not ready to sit still for the duration of a story. For these children, other literacy activities such as reading a letter from a family member, Mother Goose rhymes, or other short poems may be beneficial. Although most studies report that children enjoy listening to stories read aloud, Scarborough and Dobrich (1994) refer to a study showing that 11% of preschoolers reportedly enjoyed being read to either not at all or not much. If a child does not desire to be read to, forcing him to listen to a story may cause him to have a negative association with reading. Fortunately, most parents find various ways to engage the child during shared reading so that it becomes a pleasurable experience for both parent and child.

XI. PARENTAL INFLUENCES

Parents play a pivotal role in their child's early reading activities. Dolores Durkins (1966) interviewed the parents of early readers about their child's home background and experiences. Her responses showed that the children who read earlier at school were most often read to at home before they started school. She interviewed the parents who read to their preschool children about how the reading had been done. All of the parents related that no particular pattern was used, but they mentioned the following procedures in the percentage of time indicated:

Table 1

Procedures in Home Reading

Procedure in Home Reading	*Early Readers*	*Non-Early-Readers*
Identified words when children asked about them	80%	41%
Talked about pictures	73	68
Pointed to words as they were being read	40	32
Asked children questions	17	36

Parents of early readers more frequently gave help with specific reading instruction as they read with their children. For example, Table 1 shows that the parents of early readers reported identifying words when children asked about them more than twice as often as the parents of non-early readers. Parents of early readers also were

more likely to point to the words as they were being read and to talk about the pictures with their children. In addition, Durkin's (1966) findings are presented in the following table:

Table 2

More parents of early readers gave preschool help with...

	Early Readers	Non-early Readers
Printing	93%	73%
Identification of written words	91	27
The meaning of words	77	27
Spelling	73	27
The sounds of letters	67	27

More parents of early readers reported giving help in printing. They were more than three times as likely to report that they helped their child to identify written words. They reported helping with the meaning of words, with spelling, and with the sound of letters twice as often as the parents of non-early readers did. In answer to the question, "Who were the people who gave (your child) most of the preschool help with things like the identification of numbers and letters and words, or with printing and spelling, and so on?" the parents from New York (n=30) and those from California (n=49) related the following:

Table 3

Influential Persons in Early Reading

Most Influential Persons	*New York Early Readers*	*California Early Readers*
Mother	93%	59%
Sibling	20	53
Other relative	10	4
Father	3	14

Clearly, mothers in California and New York played a more influential role in their children's reading development than fathers, siblings, or other relatives. But why was the percentage of mothers who gave help in reading so much greater in New York versus California? Durkin relates that in New York, the fathers were often described as being on the road most of the time, as working during the day and going to school at night, as spending long hours at the office, as having two jobs. In all but three interviews (out of 60), the mother was present without the father. Interestingly, siblings in California played a significant role in early readers' literacy. Perhaps, older siblings in California care for their younger siblings more often because mothers may have worked, and as a result, did not have the opportunity to read with their child as frequently. Sibling care-taking could be a significant cultural difference between the California and New York families. Larger families might also be a factor. One wonders if more families in California had two working parents instead of one parent who worked full time? That

siblings influenced the early readers in their family to a substantial degree is encouraging news for working parents today.

XII. INTERACTIONS BETWEEN MOTHER AND CHILD

Interactions between mother and child during book reading are important in understanding how reading aloud benefits preschool children. Interactions tend to be conversational and playful as well as instructional (McLane & McNamee, 1990). Most parents do not simply show the pictures to their child but rather discuss them and ask questions to encourage their child's thinking. In a study of 25 mothers and their 6-,12-, 18-, 24-month-olds and 4-year-olds as they read two books, Martin (1998) found the use of the following reading strategies: simplification, cognitive elaboration, and engagement. As part of scaffolding strategies, mothers may omit specific words, replace difficult words, label or repeat a text to make sure that a child understands. Mothers may also change the printed text by using the illustrations and key words as a guide, using just the illustrations to tell the story, or using a sentence caption to emphasize a certain concept. As part of cognitive elaborations, mothers may insert words or label characters or concepts. At the sentence level, they may use expansion sentences to explain the meaning of an unknown word. For example, a mother might explain that a foal is a baby horse. An illustration-based expansion would be when a mother adds information to something that is not referenced in the text. For instance, during the reading of a book about horses, a mother may remark that foals need open spaces to exercise and grow strong. Other expansions may be comments such as, they have very long legs or they have beautiful coats. Furthermore, mothers use preliminary dialogue, follow-up dialogue, and animal sounds during book reading. For example, a mother may discuss the illustrations, preview the text, and comment on the cover of the book. In follow-up

dialogue, a mother may review ideas to make sure that the child grasped them during the first reading. Animal sounds may be added such as "neigh, neigh; the horse says neigh." As part of a repertoire of engagement strategies, a mother may use questions, add sound effects, share control of the text, and use positive reinforcement as well as exclamatory language to direct a child's attention to the text (Martin, 1998). The types of questions (Martin, 1998) that mothers use are as follows:

- Simple identification questions such as "What's this?"
- Questions that elicit predictions using the illustrations like "What do you think?"
- Confirming predictions such as "Is the boy sorry?" "Does he feel bad?"
- Elicit a personal reaction "Did you enjoy that?"

Furthermore, mothers may add sounds to keep the child engaged such as laughter, a gasp, 'oh,' or 'mmmm.' During shared control of the text, a mother may direct her child to turn the page or may present sentences that require participation such as "this is a _____." She gives positive reinforcement by using encouraging words such as, "Yeah; that's right; okay; good job." These affirmations are used when children respond correctly to questions. In direct attention strategies, mothers use exclamations to focus a child's attentions such as, "Look, look!!!" or "See this _____" These utterances direct the child's focus to the book. Without a doubt, mothers employ a variety of strategies to keep their child engaged in reading aloud. A mother may intuitively use simplification, elaboration, and engagement strategies during book reading.

Parental beliefs and attitudes about learning to read affect a child's interest in reading. For example, parents with low levels of education and income tend to focus on skill development and drill activities rather than taking a more casual and playful

approach to literacy learning (Baker, Serpell, Fernandez-Fein& Sche, Goldenberg, Rese, & Gallimore, 1992; Heath, 1983, McLane & McNamee, 1990, Stipek, Milburn, Clemements, & Daniels, 1992). In contrast, in college-educated middle class professional families, the reading and writing activities are a common part of everyday life (McLane & McNamee, 1990). They are a meaningful part of relationships with grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters, and friends. For instance, McLane & McNamee (1990) report the case study of a two-year-old girl, Jennifer, who had been read to since she was about 6 months old. This toddler called to her father outside to tell him that she read a book. An hour earlier, her grandmother had read Johnny Lion's Book by Edith Thacher Hurd, a story about going hunting in the woods. Jennifer put two big leaves, one on the palm of each hand and proceeded to 'read' her 'book' with an expressive voice, similar to reading. "And a big bear (pause) went into the woods and she saw a big lion (pause) and she chased a big lion (pause) and she caught a big lion (pause)." Her father asked, "and then what did the big bear do?" His daughter replied, "Then the big bear went home to her mommy" (McLane & McNamee, 1990, p. 98). At the age of two, Jennifer was able to imagine a simple story and to imitate reading with expression from a 'book' made of two leaves! Her father served as an attentive audience and clearly enjoyed her performance. His question prompted her to add an ending to her story, and in doing this, he may have taught her indirectly that a good story has an ending. By accepting his daughter's playful approach to reading, the father helped Jennifer to grow in her knowledge about literacy. Family members foster a child's interest in reading and writing by praising early attempts at literacy, answering questions, taking the child on

frequent trips to the library together, buying books, writing stories that the child dictates, and displaying his work in an important place at home (Trelease, 1995).

XIII. HOME ENVIRONMENT

The home environment of early readers included several common factors. According to Teale (1978), the first factor was a wide range of easy reading materials that were accessible. For instance, these homes contained signs, names, television guides, newspapers, cookbooks, and labels on food products. A second common factor was that someone in the home helped the child to learn what the printed material said by offering information and answering a child's questions about words. Furthermore, a third factor in all the homes of early readers was that children had access to pencil and paper and enjoyed activities such as drawing and scribbling. Lastly, a significant factor in the home environment of early readers was that important people in the house such as parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents responded to the child's literacy efforts. These findings suggest that parents can facilitate early reading by offering their child help, answering questions, providing paper and pencil, and encouraging attempts at literacy.

By joint picture-book reading, parents introduce their pre-school children to the basic guidelines of literacy. For instance, Ninio & Bruner (1978) relate that book-reading is highly routinized or made up of a set of steps that follow a predictable order. Reading and understanding a text depends on "contracts" and "metacontracts" between literate persons about the use and meaning of texts; these contracts have little relationship with the ability to decode (Snow & Ninio, 1986). A contract is a basic understanding that guides the readers as they make meaning of the text. The first contract described is that books are for reading, not for manipulating. Young children learn that books are to read, not to eat, chew, color, throw, or tear.

The second contract described is that in book reading, the book is in control; the reader is led. For instance, when a parent and child read a picture book together, children learn that the content of the book controls the discussion topic. The rule is that the picture under joint attention determines the conversation topic (Snow & Ninio, 1986).

Another contract described is that pictures are not things but representatives of things. Through picture-book reading, children learn that pictures are symbolic representations. Parents help children to draw connections between pictured objects or events and real-life objects and events. In the following example between a mother and her son, the parent helps the child, Jonathan (11 months, 14 days), to connect the object to his prior knowledge:

Mother: What have we got here, oh lots of nice things to eat (points).

J: (Looks at picture)

Mother: (Points to a picture) Peas.

J: (Touches picture)

Mother: Peas.

What are they, peas?

J: (Leans close to picture, touches it and scratches it, pulls pointed finger across picture)

Mother: Yes, you like peas, don't you?

(Snow & Ninio, 1986, p. 126)

In this example, the parent helped the children to recognize the peas as a familiar food that he liked to eat. Furthermore, parents often relate pictured events or activities to their child's own activities:

Mother: He's operating this crane thing that has hoses on it. The water's coming out.

J: Jim water.

Mother: Jim water. You were spraying water yesterday with your pretend hose.

.....

J: Jim hose

Mother: Yeah, Jim has a hose. You were playing with it, pretend hose.

(Snow & Ninio, 1986, p. 130)

Another contract of literacy is that pictures, though static, can represent events (Snow & Ninio, 1986). Parents teach children to relate the individual pictures to one another to see the whole event. In the following dialogue, Richard (one year, four months, 14 days) communicates with his mother:

Mother: That's mummy.

And that's daddy.

Look.

What are they doing?

R: Teeth.

Mother: They're doing their teeth, aren't they?

They're going to bed.

There's the basin and there're the taps.

They're in their dressing gowns.

They're going to bed, aren't they?

(Snow & Ninio, 1986, p. 132)

Adults are aware of what is important in a given picture, what the main point is, but children are not (Snow & Ninio, 1986). According to their research of shared reading discussions, the most powerful effect of book-reading sessions may be that children learn how to 'see the point' of pictured events in books.

Moreover, book reading enables children to comprehend that book events occur outside real time, not in actual, but in fictional time. For example, after discussions about one pictured event, a child builds on previous discussions during rereadings of the text.

The last literacy contract described is that books constitute an autonomous fictional world. The following example of reading aloud to a child includes many of the previously mentioned contracts. For example, the mother discusses the picture as an event, the point of the story, connects between the pictures and the real world, and reveals that characters in the fictional world have an existence independent of the author (Snow & Ninio, 1986). This contract of the autonomy of the fictional world engages the reader in the story. It gives The secret garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett and Where the red fern grows by Wilson Rawls their appeal. The reader takes delight when the wheelchair-

bound Colin finally stands and walks in The secret garden and when Billy first buys his two prized hunting puppies, Little Ann and Big Dan in Where the red fern grows. The fictional world of books intrigues children and encourages them to use their imagination! The contract of the autonomy of the fictional world is one of the literacy contracts that readers identify and use.

XIV. CHILDREN'S INTEREST

What genres do preschool age children prefer? Most children enjoy folklore and modern fantasy books. In one study, emergent readers (53 preschoolers and 49 kindergarteners) were given the opportunity daily to select a picture book from 40 books representing five genres to take home (Robinson, Larsen, & Haupt, 1997). The genres were Alphabet-Number, Traditional Fantasy (Folklore), Informational, Realistic Fiction, and Modern Fantasy. Genre played a significant role in the selection of books. For example, the preschool and kindergarten children were more likely to select books from the modern and traditional fantasy genre. Some traditional fantasy books were The little red hen, The three billy goats gruff, and The ugly duckling while some modern fantasy books were A pocket for Corduroy, The little engine that could, and Goodnight moon. Furthermore, children's familiarity with books influenced their selection and reselection of texts; this shows that interest in books is nurtured by parents or caretakers who spend time reading aloud with children and identifying a variety of titles (Robinson, Larsen, Haupt, Mohlman, 1997). Their findings support that children will seek out familiar titles, and, thus, parents and educators can display picture book selections so that children are able to view the cover, not just the spines. Why do children especially enjoy fiction? As children and adults, we enjoy fiction because (Trelease, 1995, p. 19):

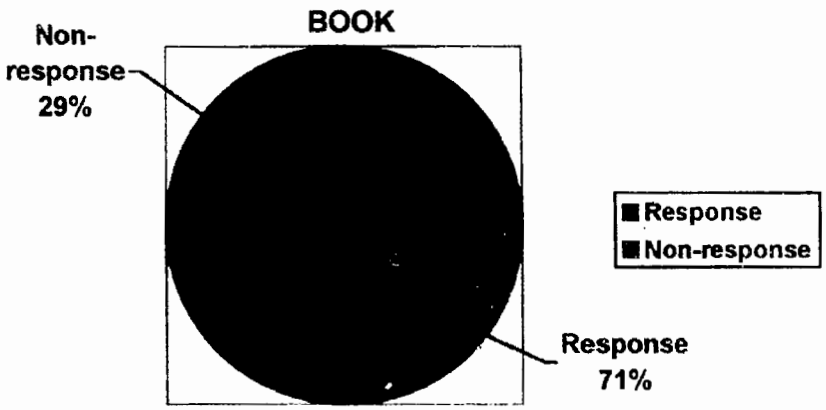
- There is conflict in it—and conflict is at the center of life.
- Its conflict wakes us up from the tedium of everyday life.
- It allows us to vent our emotions with tears, laughter, love, and hate.
- We hope its story will give us a clue to our own life story.

Studies show that while reading aloud helps to build receptive language skills, those parents who often question their child and encourage their child to share in the storytelling help their child master more complex expressive skills (Debaryshe, 1993). Her study also showed that the age at which the mother began to read with her child correlated most strongly with the child's language skills. In her study of 41 two-year-old children and their mothers in Long Island, New York, the majority of mothers read with their child before the child could talk. The results of Debaryshe's (1993) study support the likelihood that there are special, enduring effects of very early reading. Many parents, from all socioeconomic backgrounds, respond in the affirmative when asked if their child is interested in reading (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997). In interviews by Scher and Baker (1996) with the parents of first-grade children, they found the following regarding what parents believe about their child's interest in reading:

Table 4

What is it about storybook reading that your child likes?

Percentage of Parents Mentioning Each Response Category for Questions about Reading



According to Scher & Baker (1996), most parents reported that their child liked the books during reading time. Books, especially picture books, capture the interest of young children.

In the following table, parents also reported that their child showed interest in reading by requesting to be read to, verbalizing interest in reading, showing positive emotions towards reading, and listening (Scher & Baker, 1996).

Table 5

What does your child do that shows he or she is interested in being read to?

Requests	56.4%
Verbal	41.0%
Affect	15.4%
Listens	15.0%

Furthermore, in these studies, children showed that they were interested in learning to read by asking about words, pretending to read, showing interest in reading in general, and reading independently, as the following table indicates:

Table 6

What shows you that the child is interested in learning to read?

Words	64.2%
Pretends	23.1%
General	26.4%
Reads	29.4%

During the preschool years, children develop literacy primarily in a social context. The well-known Soviet psychologist, Vygotsky (1981), described the concept of a child's zone of proximal development (ZPD) as the gap between a child's actual level of development and the child's potential level of development when supported by an adult or through collaboration with a more capable peer. In storybook reading, the adult guides the social interaction by scaffolding the reading to help the child participate in an appropriate way (Dixon, Krauss, 1996). Teale (1986) studied the home influences on 24 young children's literacy development in low-income families in San Diego, California. Over a period of 3 to 18 months, he observed that reading and writing were components of the social activities of the families in their homes and communities; they were not isolated events. For example, in one home, the observation of a group of adults making a list for a daughter's upcoming wedding occurred. While the adults were making a list, two preschool children were in the room playing, talking to people around the table, climbing on laps, etc. as the list-making activity continued for 21 minutes. In other low-income homes in another study, the literacy events included activities for daily needs such as paying bills and obtaining welfare assistance, entertainment such as solving a crossword puzzle or reading a television guide, and religion such as Bible-reading sessions with children (Anderson & Stokes, 1984). Clearly, preschool children experience much literacy learning in a social context at home.

XV. IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

A review of the literature on shared reading reveals the benefits of reading aloud to preschool children. We know that reading aloud is an important literacy activity that builds vocabulary and background knowledge, exposes children to storybook structure, and develops interest in reading for pleasure. After completing a review of the literature, several topics of interest surfaced. For example, why did the older siblings have such a strong influence on the early readers in California? What unique situations in California permitted this teaching among siblings to occur often? Other questions arise such as, "what are the vital components of parent-child interactions during shared reading?" What types of interactions between parent and child best facilitate a child's reading development? How can caretakers structure shared reading events to best benefit children? More research needs to be done on how the relationship between early motivations for reading relates to later reading motivations and achievement.

While researching about the benefits of reading aloud, one wonders how significantly the availability of books affects the amount of time spent reading aloud. Researchers agree that the availability of books is an important factor for promoting reading growth (Teale, 1978). Availability of books includes not only the number of books but also newspapers, magazines, and environmental print, and the use of the local library as a source of reading material as well (Burket, 1981). Moreover, reading and responding to environmental print is one way for children to realize the function of written language (Burket, 1981). For example, if children are given more books to keep in the home, will their interest in reading increase? Does the availability of books in the

home affect the amount of time preschoolers will spend reading? Snow (1994) described good literature as a powerful factor in obtaining the interest and commitment of parents and children to reading. Furthermore, McCormick and Mason (1986) found positive outcomes for their intervention program to increase children's interest in and knowledge about reading. In their study with two and three year olds, they found that children benefited from receiving training for two weeks using little books and receiving instruction emphasizing the print meaning or the letters and their sounds and shapes. These children were then given several favorite little books to take home and share. Three weeks after the intervention, parents filled out a questionnaire and 12 out of the 13 who responded reported that their children were "reading" the books either occassionally or frequently since they had taken them home. The parents were enthusiastic about the effects of the study. Furthermore, the parents described that their children wanted to read these stories again and again to parents, siblings, and even stuffed animals. Another important effect was that these materials made the parents more aware of the children's interest in letters and words, and consequently, the parents became more involved in responding to the child's questions concerning letters and words (McCormick & Mason, 1986).

XVI. IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTS

One of the goals of reading aloud is not only to nourish early readers but also to encourage life-time readers. Reading aloud prepares children for school, builds their vocabulary and background knowledge, and introduces them to the pleasures of reading. If pre-school children find that reading is interesting and inviting, they will be more likely to read as they become older. When parents read aloud to children, they can expand a child's interests and tastes. By reading books from different genres, parents expose children to rich language and new ideas. "Close observation of young children learning to read suggests that they thrive on richness and diversity of reading material, that they need time to develop and try out various strategies for decoding and interpreting print, and that they need months of practice on their own as well as continuing participation in reading activities with others, particularly being read to" (McLane & McNamee, 1990). Parents, as models of the pleasure of reading, can also introduce different types of literature. As children listen to stories, they learn to use their imagination in powerful ways. For example, children can imagine traveling to an unknown place and time; they can picture animals that talk and people that can fly. They can dream of what it would have been like to go to new places and experience different things. As children use their imagination, they develop their minds. Reading aloud exposes children to more complex language than they would hear in everyday speech. Since stories contain language structure that is more complex than conversation, parents who read stories aloud prepare children to grasp the meaning of text when they start to

read independently. When children experience success with early reading, they are more likely to read for pleasure and to become life-long readers.

Obstacles to Reading Aloud

In our culture today, what are the obstacles to reading aloud? Clearly, an increase in the amount of television viewing has decreased the amount of time spent reading books. Since television viewing is passive, parents should limit the amount of television viewing in the home. As children watch commercials and cartoons, they are presented with the myth that most problems have quick, easy solutions (Trelease, 1995). In that way, television can be misleading. Moreover, television viewing decreases a child's attention span because the length of most shows are only thirty minutes, but are interrupted repeatedly by commercials that hold a child's attention for less than a minute. Another significant reason to limit television viewing is because of the violence and inappropriate material that television commercials and programs may contain. As children watch scenes of violence, they become desensitized to violence and its victims. Since children are maturing and forming their values throughout their childhood, it is especially important to protect them from images that glamorize violent actions. In contrast with television, book reading lengthens a child's attention span and gives them a chance to think, ask questions, and proceed at their own pace.

Another obstacle to reading aloud is that both parents in the home may be working. Thus, the parents give their child less frequent attention during a read aloud time. During the preschool years, children benefit from understanding the purposes of reading. For example, when children understand the meaning of print, that is, when they

know why people read and what they are doing when they read (McLane & McNamee, 1990), they become more interested in the reading process. As children see their parents read letters from friends and family and receive written notes and stories, the experience of reading becomes meaningful to them (McLane & McNamee, 1990).

In addition to an increase in parents working and television viewing, another obstacle to reading aloud is the availability of reading material. For example, in some poor homes, books are few. If children are not exposed to good literature, they will be less likely to read as adults. Fortunately, many libraries contain rich resources of children's literature. Parents should make a habit of visiting libraries and checking out books with their child. Other inexpensive places to acquire books are thrift stores, garage sales, and school book clubs. Many children who read often are the ones who visit the library regularly. In addition, parents can request that at birthday parties for preschool kids, people give books instead of toys as gifts. When children see that their parents value books, they will be more likely to appreciate books themselves.

An additional obstacle to reading aloud could be the parents' low level of literacy. If the parents of a child have low literacy, then the child would benefit from books on tape. A child would benefit from a shared listening experience and the bonding that occurs between the parent and child during this time of focused attention. The child would still develop in their vocabulary and awareness of complex sentence structures. Parents could also invest in books that can be sung.

Reading at a Young Age

Why is it so important that children learn how to read at a young age? Studies show that early readers experience more success in school. Research indicates that students who read the most are the ones that read the best, achieve the most, and stay in school the longest. If children perceive reading as a pleasurable activity, they will be more likely to read as adults. Adults need to be able to read well so that they can make informed decisions about how to vote in elections and know how to make wise choices in all aspects of life. Reading also helps to educate the heart as well as the mind. For example, children that read about characters that go through sufferings and trials will learn to empathize with them. Children will learn to see situations from different perspectives as they try to imagine seeing the world through the eyes of another. Through books, parents can teach their children about the values of compassion, honesty, trustworthiness, love, sacrifice, courage, giving, and integrity. Books can serve as an important tool to teach children at a young age about what is good and just.

What are some specific ways that parents can show children that they value reading? First, by reading aloud to children, parents show that they esteem reading. Second, by taking their child to libraries and reading books together about places that they might visit such as the zoo, the park, the beach, parents emphasize the usefulness of reading. Third, by modeling reading for pleasure, parents send a strong message to children about the joy of reading. Fourth, by providing quality books and magazines, parents give children the opportunity to discover the wonder of books. Fifth, by limiting

the amount of television that children view, parents send a powerful message that reading has priority over television.

How can parents encourage early reading activities for their children? Parents can establish the routine of reading a bedtime story to their child by the time he or she is two years old (Hall & Moats, 2000). When a child is between six and eight years old, the routine of being read to can be changed so that the child reads independently for fifteen minutes, and then, the parent reads to the child for fifteen minutes (Hall & Moats, 2000). By establishing the routine of reading before going to bed, parents can introduce children to stories that will entertain and delight them. An important goal of reading aloud is to introduce children to the joys of literature. Thus, parents can use this time to explore different genres of literature. Poetry, fantasy books, realistic books, historical fiction, and biographies can be read. After reading with a child on a regular basis, parents will be aware of particular stories or authors their child enjoys. For example, some children love Bible stories or the Berenstain Bears series and request to be read these stories again and again! Since repeated readings benefit children greatly, this activity should be encouraged.

When to begin to read-aloud

When should parents start to read aloud to their children? Many parents express concern over this matter of when to begin to read aloud. Although few researchers address the issue, many educators believe that a child is never too young to hear good stories told or read aloud. Trelease (1995) relates that if a child is old enough to talk to, then that child is ready to be read to because the same language is used for both talking

and reading. Thus, children less than a year old can benefit from listening to stories and seeing books. The benefits of early book experiences include helping the infants' eyes to focus and recognize objects, developing language, and enhancing listening skills (Kupetz & Green, 1997). In addition, sharing books builds sensory awareness, reinforces basic concepts, stimulates the imagination, extends experiences, and establishes the physical closeness that is needed for the young child's emotional and social development (Kupetz & Green, 1997). A primary goal of reading aloud to children under a year old is to familiarize them with the reading process. Another advantage of reading aloud to young children is to show them how pleasant stories are. When children develop a love of reading at a young age, they are more likely to become life-long readers.

The benefits of reading aloud to preschool age children are tremendous! Reading aloud provides parents and children with good experiences in the intellectual and affective domains. In the intellectual domain, parents see their children develop vocabulary knowledge, print awareness, and knowledge of story structure. They see their children begin to insert words into familiar stories and to memorize parts of their favorite ones. In the affective domain, parents and children benefit by spending quality and quantity time together. As parents invest time into the lives of their children, they will experience the joy of watching them learn and grow as readers. The benefits of reading aloud to preschool children are many; one of the most important benefits of reading aloud is developing a lifelong love of reading.

XVII. References

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