

The Importance of Reading to Children

Research has shown that the single most important thing that a parent can do to help their child acquire language, prepare their child for school, and instill a love of learning in their child, is to read to them (Russ et al., 2007). Reading to a child is one of the easiest ways to prevent future learning problems, and yet many people do not fully understand the enormous, positive impact that this simple act has on the life of a child. Across the US, just under half (47.8%) of all children five and under are read to everyday, which means that over 13 million children go to bed at night without a bedtime story. In Arizona, only 43.2% of children are reportedly read to every day (Russ et al., 2007).

According to Mem Fox (2001), author of *Reading Magic*, reading with your child should start at birth. When a child is born, their brain is not completely developed and will continue to develop over the course of their first year of life. Reading to an infant helps create brain-pathways and lay the groundwork for language development. A study by Keller and Just (2009) found that when a child listens to someone reading, there is increased activity in the language output center in his or her brain as they are trying to store the spoken words into their memory. This is a crucial step in understanding language because children's knowledge of the sound system of language enables them to move from oral to written language, understand the individual components of language, and develop an understanding that letters make sounds (Roberston, 2011). Thus, being read to reading aloud has been shown to build the kinds of language skills that are essential for later success in learning to read (Russ et al., 2007).

When someone reads to a child, they are exposing that child to more than just the words on the page; they are demonstrating proper speech patterns, the basics of how a book is read (i.e., from left to right, top to bottom, etc.), and the excitement that reading can bring. Research has shown that up to one-third of children entering kindergarten are underprepared to learn. Furthermore, studies indicate that a child who is a poor reader in 1st grade, will most likely remain a poor reader by the end of 4th grade (Juel & Leavell, 1988). Heckman (2006) found that while learning to read occurs throughout the school years, preparing children to read *before* they start school is better than helping them catch up later. Pre-reading skills, such as reading from left to right, turning pages as you read, and understanding that letters make the words that make up stories, are critical for emergent readers to learn prior to their first day of school.

In addition to planting the language seed and preparing a child for school, reading aloud to a child may do something even more important, instill a life-long love of learning and create a bond between the child and the individual who is reading to them (Butler, 2005). When a child is being read to, there are no other distractions that are taking their caregiver's attention away. In today's world where everyone is reachable at all times, it is rare for a child to have a length of time where they are the priority and nothing else matters. Reading to a child is a great way to connect with that child and build a bond around learning. One way to do that is to select books that are enjoyable to both the reader and the listener (Buckler, n.d.). Try reading books that you remember from your childhood, as these books can conjure positive memories that you can then pass on to the child you are reading to. If you are excited about reading to your child, your child will be excited to listen, and the more you do it, the easier and more fun it will become. Soon it will be part of your daily routine and it will be the easiest and most fun way to prepare your child for their future.

With all of the information available pointing to the general importance of reading to children, what are the specific recommendations? As long as the reader and listener are interested in what is being read, it does not matter what the book is. "Even picture books and language in simple children's books enhance children's learning and vocabulary because of the conversations between parent and child which take place around books and stories" (Russ et al, 2007, p. 9). This being said, some of the best books to read to children are rhyming books because they help emphasize recurring patterns of sounds that are particularly helpful to the child when they begin to sound out words and letters (Fox, 2001). It also does not matter what language the child is

read to in. Reading to a child in the language that the parent or caregiver feels most comfortable reading in shows similar benefits as reading in the child's native language. Lastly, just as in exercise, there is a cumulative effect to reading aloud. The greatest and longest lasting benefits have been shown in children who are read to three or more times a week (Markland, 2011).

The research is clear, reading to a child can make learning and achieving in school easier. So the next time a birthday or holiday is coming up, instead of a buying new toy that may be played with only a few times, go to a bookstore and buy them a book that you used to love as a child and read it to them. You will have fun, create a wonderful bond, and help them learn all at the same time.

Research/Resources Cited in This Article:

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Helpful online resources:

<http://www.reachoutandread.org>

Reach Out and Read is an evidence-based nonprofit organization that promotes early literacy and school readiness in pediatric exam rooms nationwide by giving new books to children and advice to parents about the importance of reading aloud.

<http://www.nea.org/grants/886.htm>

NEA's Read Across America is an annual reading motivation and awareness program that calls for every child in every community to celebrate reading on March 2, the birthday of beloved children's author Dr. Seuss.

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

Reading is Fundamental is a program that puts books in the hands of readers, and nurtures youngsters hungry for knowledge and passionate about learning.

<http://www.storylineonline.net/>

The Screen Actors Guild Foundation has created Storyline Online, an on-line streaming video program featuring members reading children's books aloud.

<http://www.phoenixpubliclibrary.org/default.jsp> and <http://www.mclidaz.org/>

Phoenix Public Libraries and Maricopa County Libraries offer free reading screenings for school-aged children. Additionally, they offer reading programs/classes for children and adults of all ages.