

Why Reading Aloud Works

1) The Power of Story

Reading Aloud works because it uses the age-old power of narrative. From the dawn of time, certainly before the advent of writing, man has entertained himself w/ stories. The power of Homeric story-telling is no less w/ us, just because we live in an age of film and video. They, too, rely on story-telling. But only reading can create the mental pyrotechnics that grow synaptic connections, enlarge our children's verbal capacity, and use story and narrative for entertainment and educational benefit.

2) Context and Exposure

- If I told you I had a trick that could a) boost your child's reading level, indeed their ease in virtually all matters scholastic; b) that it required no work and was nothing but fun, fun, fun; and c) that your child learned w/out knowing anything educational was going on, w/out practice or conscious iteration, seemingly by accident - would you use it?
- That trick is reading aloud. All of the verbal gains - vocabulary, understanding of grammatical agreement, the whole lot - come from context and exposure. You don't need to give a child a vocabulary test after reading a book to see if they noticed or retained or wrote down or looked up or memorized or learned the ten (or a hundred) "new" words in the story. But if you test 'em 6 months later, after a steady diet of chapter books (say, one a month), they'll be sure to have a larger vocabulary and a greater facility w/ a larger number of complex or difficult words. By accident. W/out even trying. All from mere context and exposure. That's how reading aloud works.

3) Read to Listening Level

This may be tricky to understand, but there is a difference btwn a student's reading level and their listening level. Jim Trelease likes to point out that students in first grade have heard the Cat in the Hat 100 times already. It is an insult (he says) to read it to them again. They may not be able to read a hundred page book, w/ only ten pictures, to themselves yet. But they can surely listen to one. Reading aloud should be pegged at a child's listening level, usually somewhere 2-3 grade levels above their own respective reading level. To maximize the verbal and other gains that reading aloud makes possible, children must be challenged, exposed to more sophisticated verbal material. This means, if they're listening to picture books, they need to move from books w/ a ratio of one sentence a picture, to books w/ a paragraph (w/ perhaps five complete, grammatically rich sentences) per picture. And if they're beginning to read on their own, then they're ready for chapter books. Happily, this means adult readers will be challenged and more stimulated as well. That's what sophisticated stories do.

4) Active vs. Passive

Reading aloud also works because it stimulates the mind. The listener is required to actively conjure the images and characterization necessary to inform and interpret a story. Television, on the other hand, is a passive activity, which supplies its own images. The brain goes to sleep. Reading Aloud “works” because it stimulates a child’s brain to be active (even though the child thinks he/she is merely being entertained).