

# Why Establish a Read Aloud Virginia Family Literacy Program?

## Developing 'Listening Literacy'

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Einstein:

From Aesop's fables to Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, the power of the written story told aloud has ignited the minds of children for centuries. Children, tucked in their nighties and railroad pajamas, tune in nightly to Margaret Wise Brown's simple poetry of *Good Night Moon*, Beatrix Potter's whimsical fantasies of Peter Rabbit and the comedic efforts of Curious George, Madeline and Babar. Night after night, the dogeared copies of the world's most loved stories are imparted to rapt ears at bedtime, some for the first time, some for the thousandth time. *The Velveteen Rabbit* broadened our world and reminded us that "being real" is simply being loved. Children's books taught us much more than ethics, morals, imagination and belief. These books, and the ritual and the reading sessions taught us how to listen. Books taught us how to fire our own imagination and how to foster our own creativity. *Listening literacy is the foundational literacy for everyone. (\*1)* Books taught us how to believe, how to hope...that if we look in every wardrobe, we will find the gateway to Narnia, the mousehole to Wonderland or the Land of Oz.

In our adulthood, we pass such books to our own children, hoping that they too will fall in love with the familiar images. However, as we grow older, our quest for stories does not diminish, although the medium may evolve. Gospel music, Greek myths, Bible teachings and even a visit to a retirement home will illicit stories – wonderful, colorful, fantastic stories of pain, love, insight and journey. Our thirst for stories, as adults discover, doesn't end just because you can put yourself to bed. We crave insight into new worlds, just as we did as children. We search to find out 'what happens next.' Our love for an unfolding tale is evident in everyday life as we ask each other, "What will the day bring? How will my children turn out? What happens after I die?" We keep asking and through story, we keep learning. We learn through yarns spun over the campfire or tall tales told over pints of draught. We learn by listening to others. We learn by wanting to hear what other people say. All of us, that despite all the technology available for higher academia, still love to listen to a good story.

To listen is to learn. For those who cannot read, for those who cannot

write, listening can be a window to every book they cannot master. When stories come from those that we love and trust, we accept them as truth.

Roger Schank, former head of Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at Yale and now a professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Psychology, and Education at Northwestern University, built artificial intelligence into computers. In his research, however, he found something much closer to home. Schank discovered that human behavior and thinking often boil down to the stories each of us make, store, and share. Story, he found, is the basic fabric of intelligence because it determines how we think and behave.<sup>(\*2)</sup> Stories act as raw material for intelligent thinking. Stories, in a supportive nurturing environment, help us define who we are, what we believe, develop our critical thinking skills, and to examine our own judgments.

Is it okay to overfeed a fish when told by adults not to? Dr. Seuss's *One Fish Two Fish* clearly admonishes such behavior and the children ignore this warning, with disastrous results. Children use stories to amass a critical assessment of what a problem is and how to avoid an unsuccessful outcome. Without listening to these stories, mere guessing is the only tool in the child's arsenal. Good judgment, therefore, is vitally connected to learning. This learning process, the 'consequences-based' learning, can be demonstrated with offbeat and comical stories, which prove as effective as a Sunday sermon. All of us can still choose to make a decision that we judge may have negative consequences, but it is an informed choice that we are making...not a guess.

We learn from these funny Seuss stories and we learn from our peer's stories. Stories act as filing cabinets for information; they teach us how to behave, where to go, what to do. And, as luck would have it, stories are portable, free and don't need any batteries. Family trips, after dinner times, school settings, and anytime is an excellent opportunity to share stories. Our minds are receptive; however, our challenge is tapping into its bounty. Research psychologist Dr. Reid Lyons reports, "Speaking (and listening) is hard-wired protoplasmically."<sup>(\*3)</sup> This means that listening is organic and primal, unchanged for Mankind since his first day on Earth. Computers, in all their sophistication, still can't recall the story of 'Dad at the farm' and connect it to E.B. White's *Trumpet of the Swan* in any meaningful way.

You can help change a child. Read Aloud Virginia is focusing its efforts on a program entitled 'Every Child, 20 Minutes Everyday', urging adults to pass on these important lessons. Recommended books can be found in *The Read Aloud Handbook* or at any library. Challenge your children's, "listening level", which is generally two to three grade levels above the child's grade level. Initial anecdotal reports from some of the RAV schools indicate some very positive results. Pemberton ES Principal John Harding reports,

"Our second grade teachers had 100% participation involving one-on-one participation in our Read Aloud Virginia program. Those same students passed to the third grade last year and again 100% participation was recorded. As third graders, those students took the statewide Standards of

Learning (SOL's) tests and amazingly 100% of the students passed 100% of the SOLs."

At another RAV school, Richmond Public School's Swansboro ES, the school was unable to pass the SOL standards. After instituting a schoolwide RAV program, parents/adults read over 1,000,000 pages to children. The school passed the SOL standards the next year. At the 'Listening Leads to Literacy' conference, Dr. Jo Lynne DeMary, Superintendent for Instruction for Virginia, presented an award to Gladys Wylder, librarian for Swansboro. In Dr. DeMary's remarks, she congratulated Ms. Wylder for Swansboro's million-page effort, highlighted by the International Reading (IRA) publication, Reading Today, bringing the city of Richmond great press, and exhorted the crowd to read aloud when they returned to their individual schools. Previously, Dr. DeMary referred to the RAV program as one of the most successful options for 'effective parental involvement strategy' in the No Child Left Behind initiative and has supported RAV's program statewide at PTA conferences.

Listening to stories read aloud should continue throughout all grades for maximum effectiveness. According to the Jim Trelease (\*4) in The Read Aloud Handbook, there is conclusive evidence to support this practice at all grade levels. Likewise, according to Dr. Kylene Beer's research (\*5), listening to audio books on tape is another excellent technique and can be done on road trips, in class, at home, and basically anytime. Developing such listening literacy can improve a child's attention span, create a warm bond between the reader and the

child and enhance rare one-on-one time for parents, children and their busy lives. So, please, put down the remote after bath time and turn off the computer. Help your child design his own sweet dreams. Spend twenty minutes with a child of your choice every day reading aloud and help a young mind unfold tonight.

What about students with special needs? These students usually qualify to be placed in special education programs because their disability is preventing them from accessing their regular education program to a marked degree. Many of these students have come to believe that whom they are is inferior reader, a weak writer, a meager mathematician, an unfortunate friend, an inadequate speaker, or a pitiful speller. If the area of disability, an emotional disability, other health impairment, mental disability, developmental disability, speech and language impaired, autism, multiple disabilities, blind, or orthopedically impaired; then listening to stories is one area that most of these children can do well. Some are overt listeners and give immediate positive feedback, and some are covert listeners and give feedback much later. To all it is an area that they can feel affirmed by just listening.

In conclusion, Read Aloud Virginia offers schools in Virginia an innovative family literacy program where responsibility for the program falls directly on the parent/caregiver in the family unit. The students are the main motivators as they 'love' to listen to the stories and become 'listening literate'. Once listening literacy is established, reading follows as the pattern is established and the motivated student wishes to hear straight from the author, which is why we read. In truth,

once a competent listener is developed,  
more often than not, a lifetime reader  
will follow. (\*6)

## Notes

- \*1. Gary Anderson, The Listening Literacy Handbook, Draft form
- \*2. Roger Shank, Tell Me a Story: A New Look at Read and Artificial Memory (New York: Scribners, 1990).
- \*3. G. Reid Lyon, Research and Chief of the Child Development Branch at the National Institute of Child Health.
- \*4. Jim Trelease, The Read Aloud Handbook, A Penguin Book
- \*5. Dr. Beers is currently in the educational Dept., University of Houston
- \*6. Gary Anderson, The Listening Literacy Handbook, Draft form