

perfect “36,” the family was besieged with questions, the most common being, “What prep-course did he take? Kaplan? Princeton Review?” It turned out to be a course his parents enrolled him as an infant, a *free* program (unlike some of the private plans that now cost up to \$250 an hour).

In responding to inquiries about Christopher’s prep-courses, the Williamses simply told people (including *The New York Times*) that he hadn’t taken *any*, that he did no prep-work. Of course that wasn’t completely true. His mother and father had been giving him and his younger brother prep-classes all through their childhoods, from infancy into adolescence: they read to them for 30 minutes a night, year after year, even well after they learned how to read for themselves.

Theirs was a house brimming with books, but no *TV Guide* or Game Cube or Hooked on Phonics. Even though Susan Williams was a fourth-generation teacher, she offered no home instruction in reading before the boys reached school age. She and her husband just read to them, sowed (and sewed) the sounds and syllables, the endings and blendings of language into the love of books. Each boy easily learned to read, loved it, gobbled it voraciously. Besides being a family bonding agent, they used reading aloud not as test-prep as much as an “insurance” policy—it *ensured* the boys would be ready for whatever came their way in school. That, combined with church and Scouting, *ensured* they were ready for whatever the rest of life threw at them.

Where do you find the *time* these days to read to children?

When my children Elizabeth and Jamie were teenagers, their household responsibili-

ties alternated between setting the table and doing the dishes. And while they did the dishes, I read to them, usually from magazines, newspapers, or anthologies. If I came across an interesting article—maybe an obituary for a rock star—that would be the night’s reading. We can find the time for whatever we value.

Whenever I showed parent audiences the photograph from my book of Jamie doing the dishes when he was in seventh grade, I got some strange looks, to which I answered: “If you have a preteen or teen who *doesn’t* do the dishes in your home, then the child’s IQ is higher than yours. Not a good thing.”

The ultimate objective is to make positive connections between the child and the reading experience to the point where he or she will ask, “Do you have any more books like that one?” Never mind any misgivings you might have about the title, check out *Uncle John’s Great Big Bathroom Reader*. Teens will have a hard time resisting the short but true anecdotes included there about history, politics, family, death, movies, science, law and order, and myths. Don’t miss a special edition called *Uncle John’s Bathroom Reader for Kids Only!*

One caution, no matter what you’re reading aloud: *Always read ahead*. You may not agree with everything the author is sharing. You might want to skip a word or paragraph you think could upset your child or send the wrong message. Looking back on it, I’ll bet you wish you could have edited a few videos this way, right? When reading aloud to his audiences, Charles Dickens skipped whole pages.



For more details on these subjects, see Jim Trelease’s Web site www.trelease-on-reading.com. © Jim Trelease 2009. This brochure may be freely reproduced by nonprofit groups with permission of the author (see Web site).

QUESTIONS PARENTS ALWAYS ASK ABOUT READING ALOUD

BY JIM TRELEASE

Author of the New York Times Bestseller
The Read-Aloud Handbook



What are the benefits of reading aloud to children?

You read to children for all the same reasons you talk to them: to inform, to inspire, to caution, to entertain, and to connect. But beyond those reasons, there are these that are peculiar to reading aloud:

1. It makes a pleasure connection between child and print. No one is born wanting to either play basketball or to read. That desire must be planted by someone outside the child. The parent (or teacher or grandparent) who reads to a child is planting seeds, making a connection to print that doesn't hurt, that entices and gratifies instead. Homework, workbooks, and tests seldom accomplish that. Simply put, reading to the child amounts to a commercial for reading.
2. It stretches the attention span. An unfortunate aspect of today's world is its fragmentation. Teachers complain of students' increasingly short attention spans. Today's culture splinters our attention. We have

Read-aloud is the opposite of the TV and instant-message culture — it *improves* student attention spans.

150 different TV channels, not the 10 of four decades ago. The programs on today's channels are interrupted by a constantly flickering camera angle: two seconds from this angle, three seconds from wide angle, four seconds close-up, etc. Even beloved Sesame Street suffers from the same "St. Vitus Dance" of the eyeball.

Daily exposure to this fragmenting hinders the inability to focus on detail—the opposite of learning. Now add to that the teens' cell phone culture—4 thousand tiny text messages a month (all of which require mini-messages in return). The end result is an environment guaranteed to grow *inattention*. Reading to a child is the opposite of that: It nurtures attention to sound, pictures, detail, and narrative.

3. Reading aloud enlarges vocabulary. The text you meet in good children's literature (like *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter) is three times more sophisticated than normal conversation with a child. *Listening comprehension* (the words we hear) feeds reading and writing comprehension. It's pretty difficult to say a word, or read and write it, if you've never *heard* it.

Does reading to children benefit the parent in any way?

As I look back on years of reading to my children right into their high school years, I realize now that it gave *me* as much as it gave them. It provided me nightly one-on-one time with each of them, time that was spent in a meaningful way that often became a springboard to conversation and created a cultural and emotional bond.

Sometimes I read to them from books I'd loved as a child—like Jack London's *Call of the Wild*. But more often I read books that I'd missed as a child—like Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* or C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Whether going back to the oldies or reading new ones, I gained an insight to childhood that deepened my parenting skills. Anyone who tells you that you're only a child once—they obviously never read to children. As someone once observed, reading to my children gave me a

chance to meet again the child I used to be.

I was never a big reader as a child, so I don't know which ones to read aloud. Where can I find a good list?

There are unlimited resources today for such lists. Your child's teacher should have a list of favorites, as will your local children's librarian. The second half of my *Read-Aloud Handbook* lists hundreds at various levels, many of them noted and updated online at: www.trelease-on-reading.com/biblios.html.

Books are so expensive today. How can I afford to build a home library for my child?

Easy-peezy question! Your local public library not only has books to borrow, but usually holds an annual book sale, along with its discard table where they dispose of slightly-used extra copies. The first book I ever bought by myself (agr 5) was at the Union (NJ) public library book sale and I *still* own it (*Junior Literature*—a junior high textbook with a pirate on the cover). Remember: a used-copy of a book has the same words in it as a brand-new copy, but it's often \$15 cheaper. Talk about bargains! If you order books online, search for used copies at Web sites like Alibris.com, bookfinder.com, and the "used" category at Amazon. And don't forget the Goodwill thrift shop.

Will my reading aloud help my child do better in school?

One anecdote from my *Handbook* says it all. Of the 400,000 students taking the 2002 ACT exam with Christopher Williams, only 57 had perfect scores—he was the 58th. When word got out that this kid from Russell, Kentucky (pop. 3,645) had scored a