

# The hidden benefits of reading aloud — even for older kids

Educator Jim Trelease explains why reading aloud to your child, no matter what her age, is the magic bullet for creating a lifelong reader.

by: [Connie Matthiessen](#) | September 22, 2017



*Jim Trelease is the author of the respected, [Read-Aloud Handbook](#), which some parents have called the “read aloud Bible.” The book is packed with information — from what really makes kids love reading, to tips for luring kids away from electronics and onto the page, to hundreds of read aloud titles. The Handbook’s seventh edition will be published in the spring of 2013 and, at 71 years old, Trelease says it will be his last. We reached Trelease recently in his home in Connecticut and asked him to explain why reading aloud is essential for kids of all ages.*

## Can you explain the link between reading aloud and school success?

It’s long established in science and research: the child who comes to school with a large vocabulary does better than the child who comes to school with little familiarity with words and a low vocabulary.

Why is that? If you think about it, in the early years of school, almost all instruction is oral. In kindergarten through second and third grades, kids aren’t reading yet, or are just starting, so it’s all about the teacher talking to the

kids. This isn’t just true in reading but in all subjects; the teacher isn’t telling kids to open their textbooks and read chapter three. The teaching is oral and the kids with the largest vocabularies have an advantage because they understand most of what the teacher is saying. The kids with small vocabularies don’t get what is going on from the start, and they’re likely to fall further and further behind as time goes on.

How does a child develop a large vocabulary even before school starts? Children who are spoken to and read to most often are the ones with the largest vocabularies. If you think about it, you can’t get a word out of the child’s mouth

unless he has heard it before. For example, the word “complicated.” A child isn’t going to say the word unless he has heard it before — and in fact to remember it, a child probably has to hear it multiple times. (That’s not true with swear words, of course. If a child hears his parent swear he’ll remember it the first time, and happily repeat it whenever he gets the chance.) But kids have to hear most words multiple times, so it’s important that their parents talk to and around them from the time they are very young, because that’s how they learn words.

## **Reading aloud: an advertisement for books**

So parents need to talk to their children — but reading aloud is important, too. Because where are children going to be hearing the most words? In conversation, we tend to use verbal shorthand, not full sentences. But the language in books is very rich, and in books there are complete sentences. In books, newspapers, and magazines, the language is more complicated, more sophisticated. A child who hears more sophisticated words has a giant advantage over a child who hasn’t heard those words.

Reading aloud also increases a child’s attention span. Finally, reading aloud to your child is a commercial for reading. When you read aloud, you’re whetting a child’s appetite for reading. The truth is, what isn’t advertised in our culture gets no attention. And awareness has to come before desire. A child who has been read to will want to learn to read herself. She will want to do what she sees her parents doing. But if a child never sees

anyone pick up a book, she isn’t going to have that desire.

## **Why do you think it’s important to read to older kids, too?**

People often say to me, “My child is in fourth grade and he already knows how to read, why should I read to him?” And I reply, “Your child may be reading on a fourth grade level, but what level is he *listening* at?”

A child’s reading level doesn’t catch up to his listening level until eighth grade. You can and should be reading seventh grade books to fifth grade kids. They’ll get excited about the plot and this will be a motivation to keep reading. A fifth grader can enjoy a more complicated plot than she can read herself, and reading aloud is really going to hook her, because when you get to chapter books, you’re getting into the real meat of print — there is really complicated, serious stuff going on that kids are ready to hear and understand, even if they can’t read at that level yet.

Reading aloud to your kids is also a good way to grapple with difficult issues. For example, you can tell your child, “I don’t want you to hang out with so and so,” but that’s a lecture that will probably go in one ear and out the other. But if you read a book about a kid who gets in trouble by hanging out with the wrong crowd, your child is going to experience that directly, and she’s going to experience it with you at her side, and you can talk about it together. You can ask questions like: “Do you think the boy made the right choice?” “Do you think that girl was really her friend?” When

you talk about a book together, it's not a lecture, it's more like a coach looking at a film with his players, going over the plays to find out what went right and what went wrong.

## **Books to blow your mind**

Someone once said that books allow you to examine explosive situations without having them blowing up in your face. Books allow you to develop awareness of people outside your experience and develop a sense of empathy. When I was growing up, I wasn't rich, but by reading books I learned that there are kids out there who are a lot worse off than me, kids growing up with real disadvantages. The wider your world, the more you understand and the more you can empathize.

Another advantage of reading aloud: if you weren't a reader yourself growing up, reading to your kids gives you the chance to meet the child you used to be and read the books you never read. I hear from people all the time, especially fathers, who say, "Wow! I never read *The Secret Garden* as a child, and I had no idea what I was missing!"

I've had that experience myself, and I was an avid reader as a child, but I mostly read boys' books, like *The Call of the Wild*. I didn't read the classics like *The Secret Garden* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, so it was great to have the chance to read them with my kids.

## **Do you think teachers should be reading aloud to kids even in high school?**

Yes, because if you stop advertising, you stop selling. Kids have to read for school but that's not an advertisement for reading. Most of the material kids read in school, no one would read for pleasure. And if all your reading is tied to work, you develop a sweat mentality to reading, so by time you graduate you can't wait to stop reading. You become a school-time reader, not a life-time reader. Of course, kids have to do a certain amount of reading that's tied to work, but you don't want kids to forget that there are books out there to make you laugh, make you cry, and move the soul.

The writer Phyllis Theroux once said that high school is the last stop for gas before the Beltway of adulthood, so the lessons kids get in high school are really important. But in the present climate of testing, there is so much pressure on teachers that few take the time to read aloud. And that's a real loss. Standardized tests have nothing to do with real life, which means that schools are becoming divorced from reality. The challenges I encounter every day as an adult have nothing to do with anything I learned on a test in school. When you reach a crisis in your life, or you encounter someone who needs help, how you react has a lot to do with your sense of empathy and compassion – experience with multiple-choice test questions is not going to help at all.

So teachers are torn between what they know is right and what they're forced to do by regulations. If kids' only experience reading as drudgery, then they're going to avoid it as much as possible. Of course, teachers are busy and have a lot of material to cover, but

even if they only devote five minutes a day to the pleasure of reading, at the end of the year when you add those five minutes up, that will be what most kids remember.

## **Are you disturbed by how ubiquitous electronics are and their impact on reading?**

Screens are addictive. You push a button and magic happens – what could be better than that? So it's easy for kids to get hooked on screens.

Parents need to set limits, because kids aren't going to limit themselves. In too many households, one parent is watching the game, the other parent is online shopping, and the kid is in front of a screen, and before you know it, the kid hasn't done any reading in years and the family's intellectual worth is going down the drain. Boys play more [video games](#) than girls but girls spend hours [Facebooking](#), [instant messaging](#), and [texting](#) — probably more than boys do. The average teen spends 90 minutes a day text messaging, and that's the average, which means lots of kids are doing even more.

## **The distracted generation**

We're entering an age unparalleled since the age of Guttenberg; the world is changing faster than we can keep up with. Today, school districts that used to watch kids suffering as they hauled home 20 to 30 pounds of textbooks are turning to electronic tablets. A student can read a social studies textbook on the iPad. and tap on a hyperlink to, say, watch a PBS special on the Great Depression.

That's the good news. The bad news is that there is evidence that we don't remember information as well when we read it on a screen. Yet people are on screens all the time. We're raising the most distracted generation in the history of the world. The more distractions you add to the agenda, the less well you think. Technology may save space, weight, and time, but there is no science showing that it will save [children's minds](#), especially if they spend all their time on screen and never open a book. So parents have to play a big role. It's up to parents to [limit screen time](#), and to keep reading to kids and continue to plant and encourage their interest in books and reading.