

It's Aloud – Reading and Sharing Stories With Young People

by Mark Binder

You don't have to work hard to help your child to read!

A concert pianist recently told my daughter that the secret of piano **wasn't** practicing.

"It's playing. You have to play," he said. "If you only practice but never play, you'll learn your chops, but have no soul, no joy, and no motivation. If you play and play and play, then you challenge yourself and will practice in order to play better."

Reading stories to children is play. That's why youngsters who have stories read with them learn how to read faster and earlier. They get the joy of the story without work or study. Then they realize the letters spell words, and the words paint the story. The sentences tell what the characters say and do and think. It's like television, but you can take it at your own pace. You can start at the beginning or in the middle or skip straight to the end without pushing any buttons. Your imagination fills in the blanks. And no commercials.

Here are some of my favorite tools for parents, teachers and caregivers of all abilities to play with.

When, Where and What

- Start reading aloud and sharing stories with your kids now. It's never too early (or too late to read aloud and tell stories. Babies love to look at pictures. High school students want to know what your life was like. (Especially the worst parts.) Most folk enjoy whoppers about how different it was "In the old days..."
- If you're telling stories with infants, almost any book will do. Babies love to literally eat up books. You might want to let them chew on the pages, but make sure they don't choke. You want the children to get comfortable in your lap, comfortable turning the pages and looking at the pictures. As they turn the pages, read the words. Over and over and over again. You'll quickly learn that your attention span is shorter than theirs. Pick books you like to read. Look for books with fun pictures, and fun language.
- Collect books. Get them new, used, at garage sales, or discard bins at libraries. Let them pile up, build book shelves. Give books as birthday presents. Trade with other families.
- Whatever book the child picks, read it. With children, familiarity breeds contentment. (If you really hate a book, give it away or recycle it. Once it's lost and out of the house, the child will find a new favorite.)
- Lap reading is great. Children love the warmth, and after a long day at work you could use the snuggles. One day, sooner than you think, you'll be reading a book, sniffing your child's hair and smiling at a memory that will last forever.
- Don't try to be educational—unless the child expresses an interest in a particular subject. If you're always interrupting with "What color is that? What letter is that?" then storytelling and reading will become just another time for learning the rules of life.
- If setting a daily reading time helps, then do it. If not, then do whatever works. Kids love routines, but if you can't manage one (single caregiver families have a really rough time with this) than catch it when you can. After work. Before bed. After brushing teeth. Bring books to the beach. On the bus or airplane... Get creative.



- Keep reading, even with older kids. It gives them a chance to stop being cool for a while. Find chapter books and read them for a year. Make up stories yourself or do it together. Don't make them sit on your lap, but keep them close. They'll be gone soon enough.
- Skip parts you aren't comfortable with. Give Grimm's Fairy Tales happy endings.

How to Tips

People say, "You're a storyteller. I bet your kids get the best stories." Well, of course they do... sometimes. And sometimes I'm just tired. So I'll just grab whatever's nearest and shortest and plod along.

One day I was watching my mother read to my kids. She was awful. Flat voice, reading a little too fast. They didn't care. They loved the special time that she was taking to read to them. Besides, you'll improve—Mom's much better now.

That said, these storytelling tips can make the experience more fun both for you and the child.

- Use voices. High, low, gravely, cartoon, foreign accents. Whatever. Imitate people you know. Make noises and sound effects. Yes it's silly, that's the point. One hitch, with the littlest—if you use a sound in a story, be prepared to use it again and again...
- Don't use voices if the youngsters don't want you to.
- Change your pace. Sometimes read slowly, sometimes read fast. It's not a race. Let the rhythm of the story help you out. Avoid making. Every sentence. Sound the same. Instead, have fun!
- Pronounce consonants. Hit those Ts and Ds and Ks. Find stories with lots of word play.
- If you're child's not done, repeat the same page or sentence.
- You look at the pictures too. Add words or lines if you want. Ask questions. (Sparingly.)
- Make the stories yours. Change character names to your kids' names. Elaborate on descriptions. In Hansel and Gretel, add favorite ingredients to the witch's house.
- When stories get old and boring to you, pretend to mess up. Instead of reading, "Good night mouse" read "Good night beaver." Your kids will correct you.
- Keep breathing. That seems obvious, but sound and breath are intimately linked. Reading time can be a meditation time for you and your family.

So relax, have fun, and read!

Mark Binder is an award-winning author and story performer. His books for families include "Cinderella Spinderella," "Genies, Giants and a Walrus," "Kings, Wolves, Princesses and Lions," and "The Bed Time Story Book."

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