

MindShift

Why Reading Aloud to Older Children Is Valuable



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Educator and author **Jessica Lahey** reads Shakespeare and Dickens aloud to her seventh- and eighth-graders, complete with all the voices. Her students love being read to, and sometimes get so carried away with the story, she allows them to lie on the floor and close their eyes just to listen and enjoy it. Lahey reads short stories aloud, too: “My favorite story to read out loud has to be Poe’s ‘Tell-tale Heart.’ I heighten the tension and get a little nuts-o as the narrator starts to really go off the rails. So much fun.”

While reading Dickens aloud helps students get used to his Victorian literary style, Lahey said that it’s also an opportunity for her to stop and explain rhetorical and literary devices they wouldn’t get on their own. And they read the Bard’s plays together, divvying up the parts, because “that’s how they are meant to be experienced.”

Reading aloud to older children — even up to age 14, who can comfortably read to themselves — has benefits both academic and emotional, says **Jim Trelease**, who could easily be called King of the Read-

“Shared words have power, an energy that you can’t get from TV, radio, or online.”

and Trelease is releasing the seventh, and final, edition in June.

Obviously, Trelease firmly believes in the value of reading to kids of all ages.

“The first reason to read aloud to older kids is to consider the fact that a child’s reading level doesn’t catch up to his listening level until about the eighth grade,” said Trelease, referring to a 1984 study performed by **Dr. Thomas G. Sticht** showing that kids can understand books that are too hard to decode themselves if they are read aloud. “You have to hear it before you can speak it, and you have to speak it before you can read it. Reading at this level happens through the ear.”

Research collected on middle school read-alouds showed that 58 percent of teachers read aloud to their students – and nearly 100 percent of reading and special education teachers. And, while middle-school students reported liking read-alouds, little data has been collected on the “extent and nature” of reading aloud to twelve- to fourteen-year-olds.

“Research indicates that motivation, interest, and engagement are often enhanced when teachers read aloud to middle school students,” wrote research authors Lettie K. Albright and Mary Ariail. Teachers surveyed for the study cited modeling as their number-one reason for reading aloud.

Trelease acknowledged that modelling the pleasure of reading is important, but there are more reasons read-alouds work so well — like “broadening the menu.”

“Let’s take a nine-year-old who’s just finished two solid years of drill and skill, a lot of testing, a lot of work, and they’re competent, but they’re thinking in terms of reading as a sweat experience,” he said. When a teacher reads a good book above student reading level, he show students that the good stuff — the really great books — are coming down the road, if they stick with it.

“Broadening the menu” becomes even more important if a child has difficulties with reading. According to Wandering Edutators’ Dr. Jessica Voigts, who homeschools her daughter Lillie, reading aloud can make reading more pleasurable for someone with dyslexia. “Reading together – with her watching the words as I read, and then her reading to me – is a way to be together, to experience the world, to enjoy a common pleasure. I read to her, about two-thirds of the time, and then she takes over for one-third of the time. We pass the book back and forth, although we’re usually right next to each other,” she said.

And though her daughter struggles, Voigt admitted she reads to Lillie for more than just academic benefits. “This is a time — tweens, teens — when life is full of craziness. This is one way to have a place of rest, of being, something to count on each day. Shared words have power, an energy that you can’t get from TV, radio, or online,” she said.

Aloud. Trelease, a Boston-based journalist, turned his passion for reading aloud to his children into The Read-Aloud Handbook in 1979; it has since been an unequivocal bestseller with sales in the mult-millions,

For Trelease, the power of shared words is a big reason to keep on reading aloud after children are able to read for themselves. Students might interject questions, comfortably wading into complicated or difficult subjects because they are happening to the characters in the story, and not to themselves. “Why do you think so many children’s stories have orphans as characters? Because every child either worries or fantasizes about being orphaned.”

While Trelease maintained that read-alouds can happen through any device (“Look at all the truckers listening to books on CD,” he said), and Lahey reads from a physical paper book, dogeared and scrawled with all her notes in the margins, both emphasized how students recall read-alouds with fond memories. Trelease recently received a letter from a retired teacher who reconnected online with former students some 30 years later. She wanted to know the one thing her former students remembered about her class.

“Without fail, it was the books she read to them.”

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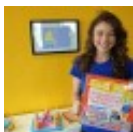
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