

A Family Guide to Building Language Comprehension Through Reading Aloud

Families of children with dyslexia can help their children by reading aloud to them. Although this may seem to be nothing more than a fun pastime, reading aloud to a child supports the development of reading skills and continues to provide benefits well beyond the early years of school. Audio books are useful in their own way, but reading aloud has particular value because it is interactive. As family members read aloud, they can model how to think about the text and then invite rich discussion with the child.

For children to enjoy reading, they need to understand what they read, which involves two distinct sets of skills. They must be able to identify (decode) the words in a text, but they must also be able to make sense of how those words come together to convey ideas; this second task is what's called "language comprehension." As children are being systematically taught the skills needed to identify words, their family members can help them develop language comprehension by reading aloud to them.

When readers play with language in rhyme and poetry, they reinforce the music of reading and the sounds within words. Likewise, the language in books adds many more words to the limited vocabulary we use in conversational speech. Children expand their vocabulary through independent reading, but if they are not yet ready to do this, families can compensate by reading aloud, unwrapping the language of a book through expressive reading and thoughtful conversation. By carefully choosing knowledge-building texts, families build curiosity to read more about ideas that resonate with their children.

Here's how to get the most out of time spent reading aloud to children with dyslexia:

Read Aloud with Fluency

When reading aloud, focus on accuracy, expression, and appropriate reading rate. These three features come together to make a book come alive. This doesn't mean that you need to sound as polished or fluent as an audiobook. While audiobooks can certainly help with language comprehension, students benefit more from listening to a family member read. The family member may stop to remember a shared experience, which helps the listener to connect personally—or choose to linger on or reread a part of the text that is important to understand. Even hearing a reader correct an error can help a child. Additionally, if the child witnesses the reader untangling a difficult sentence, it helps her see that the real reason for reading is to understand.

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Read Aloud to Build Knowledge

Experiencing texts that build knowledge of the world creates curiosity that will guide a lifetime of reading. While you may begin with your child's natural curiosity about more familiar subjects, such as animals or space travel, be sure to stretch interests toward a variety of less familiar topics, such as reading historical fiction of a certain time period (the American Revolution or the Harlem Renaissance, for instance). Read biographies of people with a diversity of backgrounds and life experiences, such as scientists and mathematicians (perhaps George Washington Carver or Katherine Johnson). Talk to your local librarian about books that pull kids toward new topics. One of the most important things to do as a lifelong reader is to recognize the dance between texts on similar topics. This dance is called inference, sometimes referred to as a "knowledge party in your head." When one reads a book on Albert Einstein's insatiable curiosity and then reads a text on Charles Henry Turner's constant questioning, a child begins to understand that curiosity, evidenced in constant questions, is a basic scientific skill. Going forward, every new biography of a scientist will build reverence for the ways curiosity drives knowledge and creates opportunities for discovery.

Read Aloud to Build Vocabulary

The more we read, the more unusual and topic-specific words we encounter. By learning to interact meaningfully with those words in context, we build vocabulary. Consider reading a knowledge-building book about sea creatures, a book like *Sea Horse: The Shyest Fish in the Sea*. One paragraph of the text contains the words *cruise*, *clever*, and *invisible*. What's striking in this excerpt is that the author contrasts the *cruise* nature of another fish with the *slow* nature of the sea horse. He also uses two parenthetical phrases—*now you see him* followed by *now you don't* to explain the meaning of the word *invisible*. Stop to have a casual conversation with your child about how authors help to unwrap vocabulary. This will help her look for clues to understand difficult words later when she reads independently.

When you read a word unfamiliar to your child, ask questions to draw attention to it. For example, if the word *clever* appears in the paragraph ask, "How was the sea horse *clever* here?" When you think out loud or reread to figure out an answer, you invite a child to think about what goes on in a reader's mind. In family read-alouds, keep these interactions relaxed and without pressure to keep the reading joyful.

Read Aloud to Focus on Understanding

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Of course, a child needs more than an understanding of key words to comprehend text. The adult reader's model of *stop, reread, and untangle* can also help them discern confusing sentence structure or complicated topics. This part of reading does not call for prepared comprehension questions, which can make it feel too much like school; instead, pay close attention to what is authentically happening in your mind as the reader and then talk about it.

Try conversation starters that go something like these:

- "While I was reading this passage, my mind started to wander. Does your mind ever do that? I'm going to reread it, because I think that part was important since I'm confused now by what the character is doing."
- "That long paragraph about bison didn't make sense to me. Let's go back and see if we can read it more slowly to build our understanding of each part."

By digging back into passages, the reader sets up the listener with the expectation that the reason for reading is to deeply understand.

Read Aloud to Create Interest in a Variety of Subjects

Read-alouds come with varied text choice and time frames. Closely observe the types of texts that draw your child in, continually peppering those selections into the reading routine. Read books in a variety of genres, perhaps the science fiction classic *A Wrinkle in Time* or the new historical fiction novel *Show Me a Sign*. Reading aloud realistic fiction such as *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* pulls a child into both a fast-moving plot and the world of an art museum. Reading *Bud, Not Buddy* examines life during the Great Depression and introduces the world of jazz. Amazing mythology-based books such as *The Beautiful Stories of Life* and the *Percy Jackson* series build a love for the old tales that appear repeatedly in plots.

And, don't forget the plethora of informational text sources that require a completely different kind of reading. Try magazine articles related to a favorite topic such as the animal focus of *Ranger Rick* or the wider world focus in *National Geographic for Kids*. Read books on topics that explore the worlds of history and geography, but also read books that satisfy a child's curiosity on a particular topic.

Read Aloud, Read Aloud, Read Aloud

A child who receives systematic Structured Literacy instruction and also enjoys opportunities for listening to a fluent reader will be primed to independently and fluently identify unfamiliar words later on. Likewise, a student who witnesses a reader actively thinking through a

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challenging text will understand that we all struggle sometimes while reading, and they will learn productive ways to respond.

Read aloud to your children! It will build their knowledge on many topics, and, perhaps even teach them how much fun reading can be. When you spend time reading aloud, you prepare a child to read on their own.

Resources for Reading Aloud on Selected Topics

American Revolution set:

<https://independencemuseum.org/courses/revolutionary-story-time/>

Bugs, Birds, and Animals set:

<https://www.readingrockets.org/booklists/bugs-birds-and-animals>

Civil Rights set:

<https://www.the-best-childrens-books.org/civil-rights-kids.html>

Great Depression set:

<https://www.the-best-childrens-books.org/life-during-the-great-depression.html>

National Parks set:

<https://www.readingrockets.org/booklists/our-national-parks>

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