

Notes on Reading with My Daughter

A letter to parents from a parent who's also an educator

Dear Fellow Parent,

I'm a father of three kids and an educator. I used to be an English teacher. Then I was a principal. Now I am an author of books about teaching. This letter describes some reasons why reading to your kids is so important and why harder books, within reason, are often better. On the last page I share some thoughts that might be helpful if you're just getting started reading regularly with your kids.

I love reading with my daughter. She's in first grade and if there's anything better in the world than snuggling up and reading to her while she tucks in against me, I don't know what it is.

A few days ago, though, my wife reminded me of something important. When our older kids were younger, I'd read mostly from chapter books that were more advanced than what they could read on their own. Those were the books they loved best. They told stories that drew my kids in and went on and on.

I remembered *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. I'd read it to my son when he was in first grade. He'd tuck in close and when it was time for 'lights out,' he'd ask me again and again to read just one more page. When we came to an illustration every few pages, he would trace it with his finger while I read, imagining.

With my littlest (I call her "Scoop"), my wife observed, I'd been reading books that were cute, fun and quick. Scoop probably could have read them on her own. I'm sure it was still helpful, but it was different from reading chapter books. And I'd neglected that a bit.

The next day, I grabbed *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and tucked in with Scoop. We read a couple of pages. She was hooked. When it was time for lights out she asked me for just one more page. As I read to her, I realized some things about why it's so valuable. I'm going to try to describe them. Then I'll share a few thoughts about how to read aloud.

- ***Reading aloud to my daughter builds her vocabulary and that's important in a lot of different ways.*** Writing contains far more vocabulary words than spoken language. When I read chapter books to Scoop she hears dozens of new words in new settings. Plus I read far more words per minute to her than she can read to herself. So there are many times more challenging and new words for her than in what she's able to read on her own. Often I just let her drink in the words and become familiar with them. A few nights ago we came across "sympathetically" and "oddities." I explained *sympathy* but not *oddities*. I often decide not to explain a new word but even if I don't it's still valuable. When she hears it again she is more likely to recognize it.

For example, a few weeks ago Scoop was reading to me. She came across the word *pollen*. She started to sound it out: "Puh, puh, poll, pollen," she said! It was a tricky word and she'd never read it before but she read it successfully and off she went to the next sentence. Part of the reason she succeeded was because she *already knew the word pollen*. It sounds so obvious but when you are learning to sound out words you are partly guessing the words as you go, and you

can only guess a word if you've heard it before. Maybe my daughter couldn't define pollen perfectly and only knew it had to do with bees and flowers, but *she didn't have to know it fully for it to help her with her reading.* She just had to be familiar with it. That allowed her to decode it and increase the success she found in reading on her own.

And the data on vocabulary is pretty clear. It's the killer app for learning. As she becomes familiar with more and more words, Scoop's vocabulary will grow at a faster rate because of something that researchers call the 'Matthew Effect.' With vocabulary, the more words you know the faster you learn new ones. Reading to your child is like feeding her a nutritious meal; it's a long term investment in a strong brain.

- ***Reading aloud to my daughter also builds her "sentence vocabulary" and that might be even more important.*** Vocabulary is hugely important. Children need to be able to quickly understand a wide range of words in changing settings to succeed. Sentences work in a similar way. Like words they can be complex and can feel overwhelming. You have to learn to make sense of the shifting forms they take. And as with vocabulary, written words are more varied than spoken words in their sentence structures.

Here's one sentence I read to Scoop the other night:

In her worry about moving day, in watching the tractor, the cat, and finally the rats, Mrs. Frisby had forgotten that she had set out originally to get some corn for supper.

Think of how complex that sentence is! To read it is hard work and requires a familiarity. Reading aloud to my daughter builds that familiarity with sentences like it does with words.

By the time we finish *Mrs. Frisby*, Scoop will have heard thousands of sentences of every variety, each one a complete and grammatical thought, each with a different style and structure- a hundred different ways to start a sentence or to make one stick together.

Listening to conversation doesn't do that. While she is drinking up the story of *Mrs. Frisby*, my daughter will be drinking up the larger story of the sentence, of all the forms it can take and the things it can do. She'll develop an ear for how sentences work. When she comes across a tricky one on her own, she'll be more likely to know how to make sense of it. And if anything this might be more valuable to her than the vocabulary she gets from the reading.

Thanks for reading this. In the end reading with your kids is pretty much the best single thing you can do to help them succeed—better than volunteering at school, better than hawking them on homework, better than an ipad—so I hope you'll give it a try. If you are interested in some how-to thoughts, I've added some on the next page.

Sincerely,

Doug Lemov

Some Thoughts Reading Successfully to Your Child

Get comfortable: Stories have been told and read for time immemorial because they are pleasurable and because sharing them draws people together. This is not necessarily obvious to children. At home, it's good to mix reading with warmth and affection. I try to express that in the way I sit. We tuck in on the couch or in a comfy chair. I try to snuggle with Scoop and even with my older ones, 13 & 11 and yes, I still read to him, I try to smile and tousle hair. Or we lie on the living room floor, all of use, while I read aloud. Even if your child is behind in reading and there's pressure to make progress, try to make reading time feel comfortable and caring.

Read slowly: I like to stop for a couple of seconds about every half page or so when I'm reading to Scoop. The words and the story are more complex than she is used to. I want to give her time to absorb it. Sometimes I stop and look at her and smile when we're reading. Sometimes she doesn't say anything to me when I smile, and that's fine. Sometimes she smiles back. And sometimes she makes a little comment. "Mrs. Frisby is afraid, I think," she'll say. I don't have to do much to show her she's doing well when she does that. Sometimes I'll just nod and smile or kiss the top of her head. And then I keep reading. I read slowly too. Nice and steady to let the words sink in. There's no rush.

Give them a few words too. Scoop loves it when I say, "And the next chapter is called..." and she gets to read the title of the chapter to me. Look for little moments when your child can help you read a more advanced book and see that it's within his or her range someday. Even if it's just reading the word 'I' or 'and,' it helps. "See you're on your way!" is a powerful message.

Express yourself (as much as you can): The power of reading aloud for kids is in developing their ear for language- for what words sound like and how sentences work. Capturing that is key and it's simpler than it might sound. You don't have to act out the roles and make it theater, you just have to capture the sound of language and the cadence of words- which ones run together, which ones get a bit of emphasis.

Don't freak out. Ok maybe you're great at reading aloud. But maybe you're not. Maybe you fear it. Is it ok if you're not confident in your own reading? Yes. But more important than telling my you it's okay I want to suggest a way to make you feel more confident and therefore more likely to read to your kids: preview the section you are going to read. The night before you read to your little one, take the book to bed and read the part you'll read the next night on your own. If you've read it through beforehand, you'll remember even if you don't realize it. Please know that I do this all the time, even though I am a former English teacher and principal. I like to know where the book is going and to be ready for tough spots or content that's challenging. It just makes me confident to know where things are going. If you're nervous about reading, it will help you as well. As will starting simply. I know- I said read challenging books. But you can always build up to them. Reading to your child is a marathon not a sprint so it's fine if you need some time to build your own comfort and skill. Just please don't let that fear stand between your child and what will help them most.