



Reading to Young Children is Time Well Spent

In a hurry-up world where parents spend less time with their children than they would like, what joint activities bring the biggest payoff? Try reading - you can't go wrong.

The benefits of reading include:

- a time out from your hectic pace to quietly be alone with your child;
- the warm coziness of curling up together;
- a pace that's soothing to the senses (in sharp contrast to the auditory and visual bombardment of television);
- illustrations to delight the eye;
- Stories that convey positive messages that help children become the kind of people parents want them to be.

Children leave the home at an even younger age, to be cared for by others, then spend much of their "free time" watching television, parents have less and less control over the messages children receive about how the world works and how they should behave in it. With books and stories, parents can choose the messages that convey values important to your family.

Take a picture book that's just right for three-year-olds - *Sam Who Never Forgets* by Eve Rice. In this charming story, Sam the zookeeper feeds all the animals at 3:00 each afternoon. He knows each animal's favorite food and never forgets to bring it right on time. But one day it appears that Sam has forgotten the elephant and all the animals feel very sorry for him.

It turns out that Sam, knowing how much the elephant needs to eat, had gone to get a wagon full of golden hay especially for him. With a thank you and a hug the elephant trumpets for all to hear: "Hooray for Sam! Sam who never ever never, Sam who never, never forgets."

There's much in this 15-page story (it takes all of five minutes to read) about kindness and dependability, about understanding other's needs, and about gratitude, too. There are many other great old books and wonderful new ones that teach developmentally appropriate concepts and values to young children, like sharing things, helping others, showing kindness, giving comfort and working together.

All of these are things parents want their children to learn. You can't beat storybooks for getting the point across. The reason for this is that the slow pace of reading aloud allows children to absorb what the story is all about and make meaning of it for themselves. The same holds true with pictures that are stationary. Children have time to take them in.

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By contrast, television, with its constant movement and quick-paced sound track, is mentally and emotionally overwhelming. TV can rob children of their own thinking. The totality of it is all encompassing and too quick for them to make sense of. It renders children passive, whereas being read to is something they become engaged and actively involved in.

What are more, both parent and child share a common experience and have a common body of information to draw on later. While child development experts may urge parents to watch television with their children and talk together about the content, few parents can or do. Television is too convenient a babysitter. But with books you both know what the story is.

Parents can use this shared knowledge in other situations when they need to remind a child of desired behavior. For example, if your toddler forgets to put away her toys, you can remind her about Sam whom "never, ever forgets." Or, you can ask your preschooler what a storybook character would do in a similar situation.

It's very comforting to children to repeat familiar lines from stories. That's why children will demand that you read the same story again and again, never tiring, while adults may become bored. It gives them an incredible feeling of competence that they know the story, particularly those stories that have great meaning for you and your child.

When's the right time to begin reading aloud? Begin right away by giving babies plastic books to chew on. Books should be part of what's good for children: bottles, blankets and books. When they're a bit bigger, begin reading classics like *Pat the Bunny*, a cardboard book for nine month-olds. By a year of age, an infant should know how to hold a book and turn the pages.

For the next ten years, most children relish the chance to be read to daily. A half an hour or so incorporated into each day's routine is ideal. This may sound like a lot of time to eke out of a busy schedule, but it can be a break that refreshes parent and child alike. Most parents have a lot of struggles during the day with their children. Reading time is struggle-free. It can bring back a feeling of intimacy at the end of the day. (And is a welcome half-hour spent with your feet up before facing the demands of the evening!)

Ask the children's librarian at your local public library for reading recommendations. Make sure that the suggested books have illustrations you like and that the text is lyrical and pleasant to read.

The quality of the illustrations also matters. Books can provide the perfect antidote to the violent and ugly imagery often found on television. Choose artistically solid, visually pleasing, positive images. Be sure the content of the illustrations isn't stereotypical and accurately represents the diversity that is America today. Representational images are easier for children to take meaning from than are cartoon figures. Again, they get plenty of those on TV.

Some very beautiful books are downright painful to read. Skim the text to be sure you're attracted to it and that your child will want to listen to it. Choose the right amount of text and correct vocabulary to suit your child's stage of development and attention span.

Reading is a low-cost, stress-free and fun-filled activity that parents and children can share everyday. Reading together is a great way to feel closer, communicate, teach and learn. It prepares children for reading independently - a skill that is critical to school success. Reading is probably the best thing that parents and children can do together.

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