

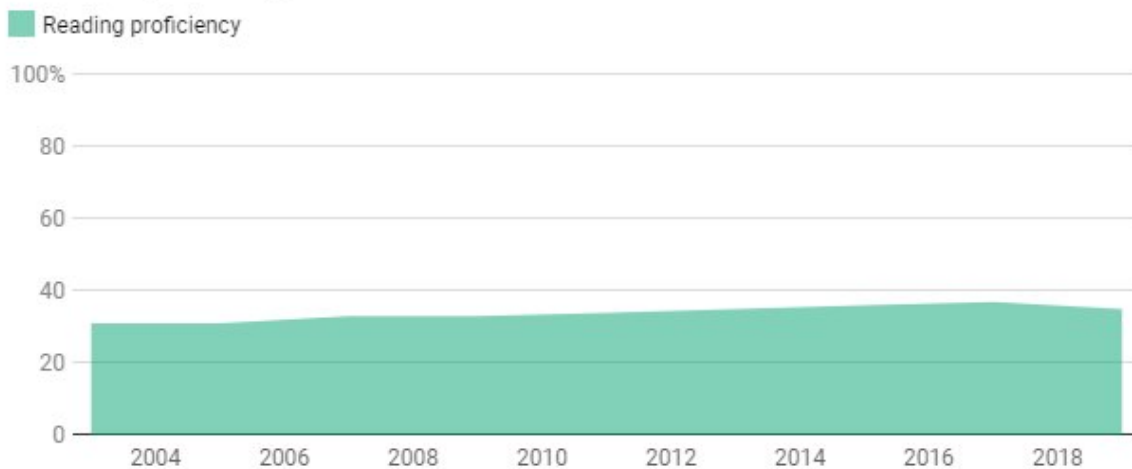
# Teaching kids to read during the coronavirus pandemic: 5 questions answered

September 25 2020, by Keisha McIntosh Allen and Kindel Turner Nash

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## Reading ability in 4th grade

Only about a third of American fourth graders can read at or above a proficient level, according to the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Eighth graders also take this standardized test, which is administered every other year to a large representative sample of students at public and private schools.



Credit: The Conversation

[Keisha Allen](#) and [Kindel Nash](#) research how kids learn to read and prepare future teachers at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. They are also raising children of their own. Here, they answer five questions many families and teachers may have about what they are seeing with virtual learning for early childhood education.

## 1. How do most kids learn to read?

**Nash:** Long before they enter kindergarten, most kids can 'read' the words they encounter in their favorite [books](#) or around their home, on street signs and anywhere else they go.

**Allen:** Establishing routines that involve reading can help, such as reading them books—whether they are printed on paper or accessed through [digital devices](#)—and letting them watching others read. For example, my 1-year-old pretends that she can read because she often sees her 6-year-old brother reading.

[Kids typically learn to read books through a series of phases](#), which often overlap. Initially, they "read" [pictures in their storybooks](#), rather than the words, often in [books others have read to them before](#). Then, they pretend [to read words they've memorized](#).

**Nash:** Making reading fun can also develop a love of reading. Before my four kids, who are now teenagers, went to school, for example, they loved to hear their dad read aloud stories like Virginia Hamilton's "Taily-po" in a scary, mysterious voice. "Taily-po," part of Hamilton's "[The People Could Fly](#)" collection, is a folk tale about a "peculiar" creature that has lost its tail. All four love reading and are avid readers now.

**Allen:** Eventually, usually in kindergarten and first grade, kids [begin to read the words](#), but only the most basic and simple ones. Finally, ideally by third grade, they start to [read fluently](#) – the [technical term](#) for being able to read quickly while comprehending the text.

## 2. Does social distancing make it harder to teach reading?

**Allen:** Social distancing could pose real challenges. This is because learning to read is an [inherently social](#) activity. Also, when children attend school in person, most reading instruction happens between teachers and other students.

**Nash:** Social distancing can be overcome if families and educators work together during this time. If educators do a better job of involving families, some children will probably learn to read more quickly than before.

**Allen:** It's also important for teachers to consider and build upon the [reading routines that families already have at home](#) like those mentioned above. My local library has a subscription to [Ready Rosie](#). This research-based parenting curriculum is intended to help families get children ready to enter elementary school.

### **3. What's potentially at stake?**

**Nash:** Many families and teachers are worried that children will fall behind during the coronavirus pandemic. In terms of reading, this concern is quite reasonable, given that only [35% of fourth graders](#) could read at or above their grade level before the pandemic, according to a federal standardized test.

**Allen:** As an educator and a Black mother, however, my greatest fear is that remote learning will turn my 6-year-old son away from learning altogether. [Children of color](#) are disproportionately negatively impacted by schooling. I fear that instruction that is not engaging in an online context will manifest in my son's [teacher](#) not recognizing his brilliance through the computer screen, especially if it is not legible in the ways some teachers view kids or have been taught to evaluate student knowledge.

**Nash:** Similarly, I fear that the way teachers either do or don't engage my Black multiracial teens could have a lasting academic impact on their attitudes and feelings about school. I am concerned that this might one day affect their ability to get into the college they want or to access honors or AP courses in the future.

#### 4. What role do teachers usually play?

**Allen:** Teachers ideally get to know their students well, which enables them to become familiar with each child's strengths and interests. That makes it easier to select books and other texts that students will enjoy reading themselves or having someone else read to them [over and over](#). Reading books and passages again and again is a great way to develop students' fluency and comprehension.

**Nash:** It works best when teachers sometimes [pause while reading books aloud](#). It is also helpful when teachers have students discuss what's happening in small groups, schedule time daily for students to practice reading on their own and let kids [choose what they read](#). Other good strategies include teaching students [letters and sounds](#), making children familiar with what [the most common English words](#), such as "the," "was" and "you," look like when they are written out, and sharing strategies for figuring out how to comprehend [words that are spelled in tricky ways](#).

Some of these teaching techniques are, of course, easier to do with remote learning than others.

**Allen:** It's also important for teachers of young children to check in on their students, use [practices that are humanizing and caring](#), and do what they can to meet any [immediate needs](#). One good example of meeting immediate needs is [Alicia Arce-Boardman](#), an [author of books for teachers](#) and a bilingual teacher of third graders at Northern Parkway School in Long Island. She considered it so important for her students to

have books in hand so that they were not just reading words on a screen that she personally delivered two books to each of her 16 students before the school year started.

## **5. How can family members and other guardians help?**

**Nash:** It will help a great deal if families see themselves as partners with their child's teachers and appreciate how everyday activities can support the process of learning how to read. For example, families can seek out books that feature characters from their children's favorite television shows and read them with their kids. Further, Netflix, PBS Kids and Amazon Prime Video have an extensive library of [shows that teach reading skills](#). For families with young children who allow recreational screen time, these programs can strengthen reading skills.

**Allen:** Being mindful of a child's personality and interests also helps. I was blown away listening to my son read an "Elephant and Piggy" book by children's author [Mo Willems](#). He read with fluency and excitement that was not visible when they just practiced [sight words](#) – words like "does" and "know" that can't be sounded out. I have followed up by getting him an age-appropriate graphic novel and other books that cater to his sense of humor.

Families can also use digital tools to provide opportunities for kids to create and write their own stories. I have downloaded [blank comic books and other materials](#) from the internet to make reading and writing fun for my son.

**Nash:** With virtual learning, it's so important to provide space and time for children to share stories, books and writing creations with friends, neighbors and loved ones in person or even via video.

If families try harder to make reading at home a fun and routine activity, and teachers can partner and engage with families more than before, we don't believe that [virtual learning](#) has to be an obstacle to learning how to read. Done right, it might actually do the job better.

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