

Read aloud to your children to boost their vocabulary

13 February 2019, by Margaret Kristin Merga



Children still benefit from being read to after they've learned to read by themselves. Credit: Herald Post/flickr, [CC BY-NC](#)

Words are powerful, and a rich vocabulary can provide young people with significant advantages. Successful vocabulary development is associated with better [vocational, academic and health outcomes](#).

When parents read books aloud to their [children](#) from an early age, this offers notable advantages for children's [vocabulary development](#). This gives them a broader range of possible word choices.

Research also suggests children who don't have the opportunity for shared reading are [comparatively disadvantaged](#). If we want our children to be able to draw on a rich [vocabulary](#) to express themselves clearly, we need to read to them. Developing a child's vocabulary is a valuable investment in their future.

Benefits of reading aloud

In the very early years, spoken vocabularies have been associated with higher achievement in reading and maths, and better ability to regulate [behaviour](#). Vocabulary is also [linked to success](#) in [reading comprehension](#) and related word

recognition skills.

Much of a child's vocabulary is acquired through [daily conversations](#). Shared reading aloud can provide a valuable additional source of new words children can use to power their expression. Research suggests the text of picture books offers access to [more diverse vocabulary](#) than child-directed conversations.

At some point, most of us have experienced the frustration of searching for an elusive word that is essential to clearly communicate an idea or a need. When children speak or write, they draw on their vocabulary to make word selections that will optimise the clarity and accuracy of their expression.

Beyond vocabulary, reading aloud offers numerous additional benefits for children. Reading aloud may support students to develop sustained attention, [strong listening skills](#), and enhanced [cognitive development](#).

Recent research also suggests children who are read to from an early age may be less likely to experience [hyperactivity](#). Children who are at risk of [reading difficulties](#) may particularly benefit from being read to. Children who are learning [English as an additional language](#) may experience better reading comprehension when they are read to in English.

Reading aloud with your child is also [valuable parent-child time](#). It can strengthen the parent-child relationship and foster reading engagement, which is essential if we want our children to enjoy the benefits of being a life-long reader.

How can I optimise vocabulary growth for my child?

Vocabulary development can be improved through [explicit teaching techniques](#) such as providing

definitions for new words. For example, while reading to your child, when you encounter a new word you may pause and ask the child what they think it means.

If they're unsure, you can then read a little further along so the word is encountered in a context that can give valuable clues about meaning. If the meaning is still unclear, you can provide a definition for your child so you can move on.

A [recent study](#) found approaches that involve pointing, providing definitions, and asking some questions as you read together can be good for vocabulary building.

[Recent research](#) found nearly identical gains in vocabulary where children were read to either using explicit techniques (such as pointing and giving definitions) or a more engaging storytelling approach. In the storytelling approach, the adult reading to the child added contextual information, which made the child more interested and engaged in the [story](#).

Children will also benefit from hearing the same story [a number of times](#). It's also a good idea to use some of the new language in subsequent conversation if possible. This can increase exposure and strengthen retention of new words.

What if I don't have a book?

We may not always have a book at hand. In these cases, you can draw on your creativity and tell a story, which can also benefit vocabulary.

While there is limited research in this area, [one study](#) compared telling a child a story or reading them a story with a child reading silently to themselves. The study found all three groups of children learned new words. But telling a story and reading a story to a child offered superior gains in vocabulary.

Beating the barriers

[Research suggests](#) that children may be aware of the benefits of listening to books read aloud. This awareness can be a source of [regret](#) for the child

when reading aloud at home ends, but they still enjoy shared reading. Children may continue to enjoy and benefit from being read to [beyond the early years](#). You should keep reading with your children as long as they let you.

By far, the biggest barrier raised by parents to reading aloud to their children was the formidable barrier of [time](#). If reading aloud becomes a routine part of family life, like dinner and bedtime, this barrier may be overcome as the practice becomes an everyday event.

Due to diverse issues faced in homes and families, not all parents will be able to [read](#) their child a book, or tell them a story. This is why it's still so important for schools to provide opportunities for students to regularly listen to engaging and culturally diverse books.

But reading aloud is [not a typical daily classroom practice](#). We should increase the number of opportunities children have to hear stories both at home and in schools so children can experience the many benefits of a rich and varied vocabulary.

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APA citation: Read aloud to your children to boost their vocabulary (2019, February 13) retrieved 24 June 2019 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-02-aloud-children-boost-vocabulary.html>

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