

HOW TO CHOOSE CHILDREN'S BOOKS TO READ ALOUD

By Jill Fitzpatrick

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Why (and how) to Read Aloud with Your Child [\(Back to Top\)](#)

Reading to your child forces you and your child to slow down. Our lives, and the lives of our children, have become increasingly busy and active. While there are many positives to this, children (and adults) need “down time” or “quiet time”. Reading to your child is something that can’t be done (at least not well) while you are driving the car, working on the computer, fixing dinner, etc. It can’t be done (at least not well) while he is playing soccer, doing homework, watching tv, etc.

Reading to your child is time and attention focused entirely on your child. How many times have you been cooking dinner, talking on the phone and trying to listen to your child tell you a story about something that happened at school all at the same time? How many times have you said “uh-huh” to your child and later realized you have no idea what he was telling (or asking) you? We all do this at times, it’s unavoidable, but reading time is one time when you and your child know that she has your full attention. It is best done in a quiet spot with few distractions, with your child by your side (or if possible, on your lap) and both of your attention focused on the book and each other. It can be done at any time of the day, and it can be the best part of your day and his.

Reading to your child gives you an “opening” to discussing other topics of interest or concern.

As children get older, reading a book can get you and your child talking about what’s going on in her life or yours. Can’t get your son to give up the blankie? Read Kevin Henkes’ Owen together and see if he might be convinced to try Owen’s parents’ technique or come up with one of his own. Need to discuss the unexpected death of a grandparent or other close relative? The Fall of Freddie the Leaf by Leo Buscaglia can open the door. There are books for children that discuss virtually every topic, from the mundane to the gross (Everybody Poops!) to the philosophical.

The best way to encourage a good habit or skill is to model it. If you want your child to be a good reader, you must show them that reading is fun. Reading to your child is the best way to do this. Letting your child see YOU read is equally important. I know most parents read at night after the kids are in bed, but it’s important to let your child see you reading for pleasure, whether it is a newspaper, magazine, or the latest “beach/airport” novel. Even if it is just for 15 minutes during the day, or on the weekend, let them see by your example that reading and being read to is something enjoyable and worthwhile.

Reading to your child is FUN! Especially if you liven it up. Don’t be afraid to use accents or silly voices (I read The Lorax holding my nose every time the Lorax speaks), vary the volume from a whisper to a shout, make funny faces. Yes, it may feel strange or embarrassing at first, but it’s just you and your child. Your child will be more interested and engaged, and you will probably find that you’ll enjoy it more too. Reading to your child also gives you the chance to “rediscover” your old favorites. Browse the bookshelves at the library or bookstore and you may be surprised to find an old favorite you’d forgotten. Turning those pages again is like stepping back in time. Sharing that with your child is nothing less than magic.

A final note about Reading Aloud

To get started on ideas for reading aloud, you can’t do better than Jim Trelease. Trelease is the major proponent of reading aloud, and he has a series of books with suggestions of read-aloud titles. The best one to start with is The Read-Aloud Handbook.

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Some Suggestions For Reading Aloud To Younger Elementary School Students

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Anything by Dr. Seuss!

Beatrix Potter's books

Little Bear series by Elsa Holmlund Minarik

Frog and Toad series by Arnold Lobel

Winnie the Pooh by A.A. Milne

Thomas the Tank Engine Treasury by Rev. W. Awdry

Junie B. Jones and Judy Moody series

Nate the Great, Cam Jansen, A to Z Mysteries and Encyclopedia Brown mysteries

The Magic Tree House series, by Mary Pope Osborne

Bobsey Twins, Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew mysteries

Anything by Roald Dahl, including but not limited to Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, James and the Giant Peach, Danny the Champion of the World, Fantastic Mr. Fox

Charlotte's Web, Stuart Little, The Trumpet of the Swan all by E.B. White

The Boxcar Children by Gertrude Chandler Warner (there is now an entire series based on this book)

Little House on the Prairie series by Laura Ingalls Wilder

The Secret Garden and others by Frances Hodgson Burnett

American Girl series, published by Pleasant Company

Misty of Chincoteague and others by Marguerite Henry

Mr. Popper's Penguins by Richard Atwater and Florence Atwater

Wayside School books by Louis Sachar

Harry Potter 1st, 2nd and 3rd year

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Some Suggestions For Older Elementary School Students [\(Back to Top\)](#)

Many of the books towards the end of the above list can be read to older students as well

Harry Potter 4th through 7th years, by J.K. Rowling

Wrinkle in Time series by Madeleine L'Engle

Magic series by Edward Eager

Chronicles of Narnia series, By C. S. Lewis

The Golden Compass and others by Phillip Pullman

Little Women and others by Louisa Alcott

Tom Sawyer and others by Mark Twain

All Creatures Great and Small and others by James Herriott

Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass by Lewis Carroll

Dark is Rising series by Susan Cooper

Black Beauty by Anna Sewell

Holes by Louis Sachar

The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien

Hoot by Carl Hiaasen

Because of Winn-Dixie by Kate DiCamillo

Anne of Green Gables series by L.M. Montgomery

So, your child is reading on his own, you don't need to read to him anymore, right? Wrong!

Read to your child for as long as you possibly can! If she thinks she is too old to be read to, suggest that you take turns, with her reading a chapter to you one time, you reading a chapter to her the next. This is a great way to stay in touch with your child, know what he is reading, where his interests lie, what's on his mind, etc.

So now that you are more convinced than ever that you should read to your child, how and where do you find the right books?

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How to Choose the Right Book(s) for Your Child [\(Back to Top\)](#)

Age-Appropriateness

This is the hardest part of buying books for children. The challenge is to buy a book that will hold the child's interest, encourage the child to love reading (that book at least), and not frustrate the child by being too difficult to read. Sounds easy, right?

Picture Books cover the most ground in terms of age levels. Some picture books, like Goodnight Moon and Pat the Bunny are introduced almost at birth. Some, like the Carl the dog series of books and Eric Carle's "bug" series, are perfect for toddlers and preschoolers. Some can be visually stunning and tell long, complex stories, appropriate for older readers with longer attention spans and degree of experience.

In general, the number of words per page determines the age level of the reader (if the child is reading it himself). For preschoolers and beginning readers, the pictures should "tell" the story, usually a simple one, with few words per page (or in some cases none). The child will begin to "read" through a combination of memorization and "telling" the story through the illustrations.

As the child grows and learns to read, the amount of words per page increases to, in some cases, paragraphs, and the book will tell longer, more complicated stories with gorgeous, detailed illustrations.

"Chapter" books and novels are for the beginning reader to young adult readers. The "chapter" books for beginning readers are characterized by chapters that have a distinct beginning, middle and end. This allows the child to feel a sense of accomplishment in reading a chapter. Some chapter books are a collection of stories about the same character or characters, such as Little Bear or Frog and Toad. Others tell a single story, but each chapter is written in such a way that it can be read on its own and still tell its own "little story". These "little stories" combined tell the larger story. There are usually smaller, half-page illustrations.

As the child becomes more accomplished at reading, the chapters in the books they read no longer need to tell a "little story". The cliffhanger chapter is introduced now, to reward the reader for a longer attention span and encourage her to keep reading. Stories told become more complex and include more characters. There are few, if any, illustrations. Series books, from classics like Little House on the Prairie to the contemporary bestselling "Harry Potter" and "Goosebumps" series become popular now.

Age-Appropriate Suggestions for Various Age Groups

- Baby/Toddler (birth – 1½ years) – Tactile (Touch and Feel) books
 - Simple board books
 - Cloth and Bath books
- Pre-School (approx. age 2-5) – More complex board books
 - Picture books with visual appeal, few or no words per page
 - Concept books – alphabet, numbers, colors, shapes, etc
 - Lift-the-flap books
 - Nursery Rhymes, simple poetry
- Beginning Readers (age 6-8) – Picture books – more words per page, but still mainly visual. The child should be able to "tell" the story by looking at the illustration.
 - "Chapter" books with each chapter telling a story with a beginning, middle and end, usually includes smaller illustrations.
 - Beginner's dictionary, atlas, etc.

- Intermediate Readers (age 9-12) – Picture books with detailed, complicated illustrations and longer stories, with many sentences and sometimes paragraphs per page.
“Chapter” books and novels, with “cliffhanger” chapters that no longer need a beginning, middle and end.
Poetry, mythology, folk and fairy tale collections
Non-fiction books about nature, science, history, biography, etc
Dictionary, atlas, other reference books

The above lists give suggestions for ages and reading levels for the children to read on their own. ***However, when reading aloud to a child, remember to “read up”.*** If your child is reading easy readers, read beginning reader books to her. If your child is reading beginning readers, read intermediate books to him. If your child is an intermediate reader, you can read longer intermediate books, classics or young adult or adult novels. Just make sure the subject matter is appropriate for your child’s age and maturity level.

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How to Choose the Right Book(s) for Other Children [\(Back to Top\)](#)

Okay, so now you've got the hang of choosing books for **your** children, but how do you choose the perfect book for your nine year old niece's birthday? Or worse, your husband comes home and tells you he thinks you should give his client's son a Christmas present this year (he thinks he's eight, or maybe ten?)

Have as much information about the child as you can. This is the best way to make a good match between child and book.

- Age – This is the most important information you will need. Two years doesn't seem like much of a difference to an adult, but the reading abilities of a 7 year old and a 9 year old can be vastly different.
- Grade Level/Reading Level – The grade level is easier. The reading level is more helpful. Some first graders read at a third grade level. Some fourth graders read at a first grade level. This can make a big difference in buying a book that will be enjoyable and challenging but not too frustrating for the child. The hard part is that some parents either don't know their child's reading level, or exaggerate it. EVERY parent I worked with at the bookstore had a child with a high reading level. But if you can get accurate information about a child's reading level, it is invaluable information.
- Gender/interest/hobbies – There are some books that appeal to boy or girl, regardless of interests. Currently, virtually all kids seem to like reading fantasy (like Harry Potter) and/or "horror" stories (like "Goosebumps") and animal stories have cross-gender appeal. But in most cases, it helps to know where the child's interests lie.

"Cheats" and Tips for Choosing Books for Children (yours or others)

Choose "up" – If you're uncertain about what book or reading level to buy, choose the higher level. If a book is too "easy" or "babyish", it may be read once and never looked at again. Better a book that the parent has to read with the child at first, but which will challenge him to want to read it himself. One exception to this is if the child is not a strong reader and you want to encourage her to read. A book that is too challenging to an already weak or disinterested reader may frustrate or turn her off.

The Back of the Book – This is a real trade secret. On the back or spine of most beginner "chapter" books and many intermediate reader books is an indication of the reading level. In the case of the beginner reader books, it seems that every publisher has its own name for it—"steps", "levels" etc. But most do have some indication of how old and at what level the child should be to read the book. Sometimes it gives just an age, other times a grade or reading level, depending on the publisher.

In the case of the intermediate books, here's the secret... Often in the lower right hand corner is a code of numbers. Usually it will at least give the suggested age of the reader. It looks like this—08-10, which means the reader should be about 8 to 10 years old. In some cases, below that code of numbers is another, more helpful code. It looks like this—5.3. This means the reader should be in the 5th grade, 3rd month, or at that reading level. Not every book will have this information, but when it does, it can give you a pretty clear picture of the age-appropriateness of the book.

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Where to Look ([Back to Top](#))

- **“Superstores” – Barnes & Noble, Borders**
If you have a question, ask for a Children’s Dept staff member. “Superstores” like B&N and Borders have a separate Children’s staff. Especially at the holidays, part-time staff members may have little book knowledge (hired only for the holiday rush).
- **“Mall stores” (Waldenbooks, B. Dalton, Little Professor) and other small bookstores**
Since smaller stores usually don’t have a separate Children’s department, direct questions to a manager, assistant manager or full-time bookseller. Again, part-time staff may not have the degree of book knowledge a full-time bookseller or manager will.
- **Children’s Bookstores**
These may not have as great a selection (although probably comparable or better than a “mall store”) but book knowledge of entire staff should be very good. You should be able to get great recommendations and personalized attention from these stores, as that is their “edge” over larger chain stores. Check the yellow pages for a children’s bookstore near you.
- **Library**
Obviously not for purchase, but great for getting ideas. Talk to the Children’s Librarian for ideas, suggestions, age-appropriate titles. If you’re not shy, ask a child of the same age what he/she likes to read. (This goes for stores as well!).
If you find a book you love at the library and want to purchase it for your home, keep in mind that not every book in a library is available for purchase. Make sure you ask the Librarian to suggest books that are in print and readily available at the local bookstores.
- **Internet**
Probably the best-known online bookstores are Amazon.com (www.amazon.com) and Barnes & Noble (www.barnesandnoble.com or AOL Keyword BN). For bargain hunters, try half.com for great deals on used and in some cases even brand new books.
The biggest advantage of ordering online is convenience. Shop in your bathrobe at 2:00 am, if you want. Many titles are discounted at least 20%, and although you lose some of that with shipping and handling, both B&N and Amazon often offer free shipping on orders of a certain amount. You’ll also get plot summaries, age ranges, quotes from reviews and in many cases customer reviews.
The disadvantage to shopping online is that you don’t get feedback. If you have a lot of questions, you may not find what you’re looking for.

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Awards/Medals – There are three “medals” that you will often find on the cover of those books that have received certain awards. They are the **Caldecott**, the **Newbery** and the **ABBY** (recently renamed to the less-catchy **Book Sense Book of the Year Award**). There are others, but these are the most frequently seen. The Caldecott and the Newbery Medals are given by the **American Libraries Association**. The ABBY Award is given by the **American Booksellers Association**.

The **Caldecott** is awarded by the ALA to the best-illustrated picture book of the year. The **Newbery** is awarded by the ALA to the best novel. The Medal is the highest award (a gold sticker on the book) and the “runners-up” receive the Honor Award (a silver sticker). As soon as the awards are given, new book jackets are printed for the winning books, displaying the medal sticker. Thereafter, all printings of the book include the medal on its cover. These awards have been given since 1922 for the Newbery and 1938 for the Caldecott and if those award or honor winners are still in print, the book cover will still have the gold or silver medal on it. This can be a helpful “cheat” when looking for a quality book. I would still recommend looking it over to make sure it is age-appropriate, but it is helpful for narrowing the field. Some bookstores (at least B&N) have a separate section for Caldecott and Newbery Award winners.

The **ABBY** is a much newer award, only around since 1993. It is given by the ABA to the book that booksellers most enjoyed recommending to customers. Its recipients tend to be “warmer” and more accessible than the Caldecott and Newbery winners can be.

Reviews – There are a number of magazines that specialize in Children’s book reviews. The most notable are Booklist and The Horn Book. You should be able to find them in the library. Also, especially at the holiday season, most parenting and child care magazines, such as Parents, Parenting, Child and Family Fun, have book reviews and best of the year reviews. Using a search engine topic of Children’s Book Reviews on the Internet turned up a number of sites with either reviews or links to other sites that review books.

Websites – Check out the American Libraries Association’s website at www.ala.org/alsc/index.html and the American Booksellers Association website at www.ambook.org. You can find comprehensive lists of award-winners such as the Newbery, Caldecott and other lesser-known awards at the ALA site and the list of ABBY winners at the ABA site. There are many other great websites out there with information about children’s books. One of the most comprehensive of these was the Children’s Literature Web Guide at www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/index.html. However, a recent visit to this site revealed that it hasn’t been updated since April of 2001. I would still consider it a valuable source of information. Another valuable site is www.thebestkidsbooksite.com. Read-aloud proponent Jim Trelease has his own website, www.trelease-on-reading.com. Children’s author Jon Scieszka has a website called www.guysread.com aimed specifically at male readers. Busy parents will appreciate www.lazyreaders.com, which features short, quality reads for children and adults. Using a search engine topic of Children’s Book Reviews or Children’s Books will yield others. If you find a really great one, share!

Ask Questions – If all else fails, ask questions. Ask the librarian, the bookstore staff, your friends with children the same age, children the same age in your neighborhood, the bookstore or library. Everyone has a favorite book they’d love to recommend. Let them share it with you.

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