

Reading aloud matters

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Jack's dad was a voracious reader as a child. When he picks up his well-worn copies of *Burglar Bill*, *Cops and Robbers*, *Peace at Last* and other golden oldies, he's transported to his Reception class in the 1980s. He reads all these – and many more – to Jack, because he wants his son to develop his same love of reading.

Norman is the same age as Jack but neither his mum nor his dad reads with him.

Jack and his father read together, often twice a day, for at least 30 minutes, and always at bedtime. So, by the time he starts school, Jack has been listening to stories and talking about them for about 1,000 hours. This means that, when he can read for himself, he will understand the stories he reads, while Norman is likely to struggle.

Primed for sounds

By reading aloud to Jack from when he was very young, Jack's father primes him for the individual sounds of the language. He has tuned his sensitivity to alliteration, rhyme and rhythm. Listen, for instance, to the assonance and alliteration in Lynley Dodd's *Hairy Maclary and Zachary Quack*:

*Pittery pattery, skittery skattery,
ZIP round the corner came Zachary Quack
who DIZZILY DIVED in the craziest way
whirling and swirling in showers of spray.*

Pays attention

Jack has learnt how to pay attention, how to focus and how to share a common purpose – the enjoyment of the story. He begs for his favourite stories to be read over and over again, even if his dad has to hide his weariness after reading *Hugless Douglas* for the twentieth time in a week. Jack thrives on such repetition and now has a fund of stories in his head.

Jack knows what it feels like to have someone's love and undivided attention. His father chooses stories he thinks they will both enjoy, and the act of reading becomes fused with his father's love for him. When his father's eyes light up at the story, so do Jack's. His father loves adopting different voices to bring the characters to life and building anticipation of what's coming next... 'I daren't turn the page...!' he says to Jack. Together, Jack and his dad hypothesise about what a character might be thinking, and they talk about what they might have done if they had been in a similar situation: 'I'd have been really angry if he'd said that to me,' says Jack's Dad. 'What about you? How would you feel?' From his father's commentary on the story, Jack begins to infer from a character's actions what she or he might be feeling: 'Hmm... I think she's a bit fed up.' Jack's father uses asides to share his reactions and ponders aloud when he thinks there is something Jack might not understand.

Empathises

Through being read to, Jack starts to understand himself and his own emotions, because he hears about people and creatures who feel like he does. When his father reads *My Wobbly Tooth Must Not Ever Never Fall Out*, Jack smiles as Charlie helps Lola to come to terms with the loss of her tooth; Charlie explains how the moose feels about losing his antlers for the first time. He overcomes his own anxieties when he listens to *Ruby's Worry*. He talks about his fear of the night when he and his father read *The Owl who was afraid of the dark*.

Learns different perspectives

His father also helps him to understand that other people might have different experiences and perspectives. In Jessica Love's *Julian is a mermaid*, Jack learns about a little boy who likes to dress as a girl. At first, the reader thinks that Julian's 'nana' disapproves, but she surprises him by taking him to a carnival where he can dress up and see other people just like him. Julian begins to feel that there is a place for him in the world. In Tim Hopgood's *Here Comes Frankie*, Jack learns what it must be like to live with synaesthesia.

Expands his imagination

By reading aloud to him, his father expands Jack's imagination. He encounters real places through *Moon, Lost and Found* and *The Storm Whale*, but also the worlds of the imagination: the mysterious territory of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*; the little girl's memory in Julia Donaldson's *Paper Dolls*; the dolphins dancing among the sheep and the cows in Carol Ann Duffy's *Underwater Farmyard*. Listening to his father reading, Jack's mind is filled with the mental images these stories create.

Broadens his vocabulary

By reading aloud to him, Jack's father is constantly broadening his vocabulary and supporting his understanding of language more widely. Here is some of the vocabulary that Jack came across in *Room on the Broom*:

*wailed thundering bounded clambered fluttered glee leapt croak cloak moor tumbling roar
squelched spluttered cauldron muttered searched grinned shriek magnificent politely
clutched keen grateful.*

Isabel Beck has called such words Tier 2 words, because children are unlikely to come across them in everyday life.¹ They are the words that we encounter from reading.

Together, Jack and his father use the language of books to share private jokes, quoting favourite phrases from the stories they have read: 'Is there room at the table for a dad like me?' and 'I am Jack, as keen as can be.'

¹ Beck, I.L, McKeown, M.G. & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: robust vocabulary instruction*. New York: The Guilford Press.

As well as meeting Tier 2 words, Jack is being introduced to the grammar of sentences that he might not hear in ordinary speech. In *Perfectly Norman*, for instance:

Long car journeys were unbearable, the swimming pool dreadful, and that was nothing compared to his friend's birthday party.

It occurred to Norman that it was the coat that was making him miserable and not the wings.

This is the grammar of written language, not general conversation.

Develops knowledge of narrative structure

By listening to the stories his father reads to him, Jack develops his knowledge of narrative structure, problems and solutions, twist and turns. For example, consider how many problems are solved in *The Worst Princess*, with its challenging gender stereotypes or *Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*, with its reworking of the fairy tale, or the *Stick Man* with the twists and turns of his journey home. He learns that stories sometimes have strong messages. In *After the Fall*, Dan Santat shows how Humpty Dumpty tackles adversity after pain. In *The Trouble With Dragons*, Debi Gliori's fable of greedy dragons helps to explain climate change and the threats to wildlife on our planet. Jack encounters the moral messages of stories, too, as in Martin Waddell's *Farmer Duck*, in which Waddell draws on George Orwell's *Animal Farm* to explain how working hard together brings fairness and just rewards.

Importantly, listening gives Jack opportunities to become familiar with stories written in language that is beyond his present reading ability.

And talking with his dad, gives Jack opportunities to chat about the stories, the plot, the characters, to hypothesise about what might happen next, share his anxieties that are highlighted by a character, enjoy saying favourite lines together...

Without any explicit teaching

Jack has absorbed all this learning without any explicit teaching. His comprehension is therefore already 1,000 hours ahead of Norman's. It is impossible for Norman to make up for what Jack has received and it is certainly impossible for this to happen in 200 Reception days. Even if Norman heard two stories a day, that amounts to only 50 hours a year. And, in any case, since Jack would be listening to those stories, too, the gap would be as wide as ever.

All that *can* be done is to stop the gap widening:

- As soon as possible, teach Norman to read for himself. He can then read as much as he wants to, at home, every day of the year. This is the only way he can start to make up for the hundreds of story hours that he has missed before school.
- Read to and talk with Norman– and the rest of the class – about the stories every day, with love and enjoyment, as soon the children arrive at school.
- Keep reading to Norman until he leaves school; never stop, even when he can read.

Action Story time!

1. Timetable a story every day, in every year group. Don't squash it in as an afterthought.
2. Make story time sacrosanct - the best time of the day for your class.
Decide a core set of books for each term. (Include story books, poetry, rhymes, non-fiction; topics from across the curriculum).
3. Choose some 'old and gold' and 'new and bold' stories. Use '*Choose the best stories for your story times*' to help you.
4. Start the year with a 'favourite five' and then move onto the next five... and the next...
5. Read the stories again and again – with feeling. This means preparation. Watch Film 3. *Live the Story*.
6. Get children into the habit of talking to a partner to respond to questions, and then selecting partners to respond to the group.
7. Chat about what might happen, a character's actions, anxieties and fears, say funny sentences together...
8. Do what you can to persuade Norman's mum and dad to read to him, too.

Don't

- Don't respond to the 'hand-raisers'. You are likely to choose the 'talk a lot' children and deny others a chance to share their thoughts.
- Don't talk about how the story is put together – writers write stories for children to enjoy, not to deconstruct.