

# The Joy of Reading to Children

By Dane Peters

As a father, teacher, head of school, and now a grandfather, I have always loved reading to children. I read to my sons from birth and sustained this habit as they grew up. I saw the amazement in their eyes as I read; they were enthralled and totally immersed in the story. I knew reading to my sons would increase their vocabulary and their interest in reading, but there was also a selfish reason—it gave me great joy. In my work as a teacher and head of school, I also read to many students. Decades later, I continue to find venues to read to children, at my granddaughters' Montessori school and through United Way's K-Ready Readers program.

What I love most about reading to children is their uninhibited response when something does not play out correctly. For example, once, I was reading *The Pout-Pout Fish* to an Early Childhood class. I turned to the last page (or so I thought), ended the story, and smiled. Immediately, a 5-year-old raised her hand and said, "It seems to me that there is one more page to the book." With a know-it-all smile, I said, "Hmm, let's check to see." To everyone's delight, I *did* forget to turn to the very last page—the page that was essential to the fulfillment of the "pout-pout fish" and the book.

I have the most fun reading when I change my voice to fit a given character. For example, *Sesame Street* characters that my children and I followed 40 years ago—Elmo, the Count, Cookie Monster, and Grover—are now equally enjoyable to my grandchildren (ages 2, 4, and 6). They are mesmerized when I change the cadence and pitch of my voice to bring reality to the characters.

A favorite of Upper Elementary and Middle School students is the wonderful short story "The Lion Roared," by Virginia Eiseman. The characters in this classic story take on their own unique voices. The short story "The Lottery," by Shirley Jackson, or excerpts from the books *Growing Up*, by Russell Baker, or *Just Mercy*, by Bryan Stevenson, capture the attention of Middle School students, provoking a plethora of questions. Middle Schoolers also have great discussions about the stories or articles they choose to read and often challenge articles that run counter to their thinking.

Aside from the pleasure gained from reading, research demonstrates that reading aloud increases children's vocabularies and improves reading comprehension in school. However, while 71 percent of parents with a college degree say they read aloud to their children every day, only 33 percent of those with a high school diploma or less do. In addition, Caucasian parents and married parents are more likely than others to read to their children daily (Miller, 2015).



At your local public library, bookstores, online book retailers, or websites such as Storyline Online and Just Books Read Aloud, you can find a wealth of good books to share. Recently, during a video chat with our 2-year-old granddaughter, my wife read *Clifford the Big Red Dog* out loud. Our granddaughter was transfixed by the pictures and story. Ah, the joy of reading aloud to children...and of grandparenting.

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#### Suggested Reading/Resources

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- United Way K-Ready Readers Program: [www.uwgs.org/kreadyreaders](http://www.uwgs.org/kreadyreaders).