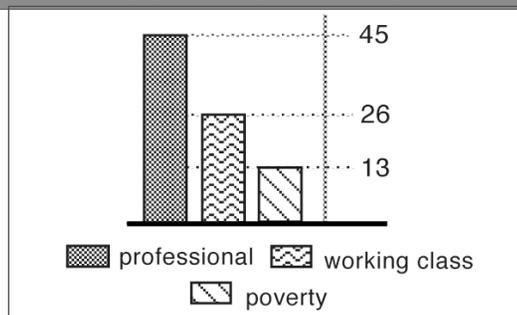


greater phonemic awareness (phonics) than did children who were read to less often, and were almost twice as likely to score in the top 25 percent in reading readiness.

Seventy-five years of S.A.T. statistics reveal that wealthy students consistently score higher than poverty students (this is true internationally as well). Looming large among the causes is that affluent families read to their children more often, their homes have a richer print climate (books, magazines, and

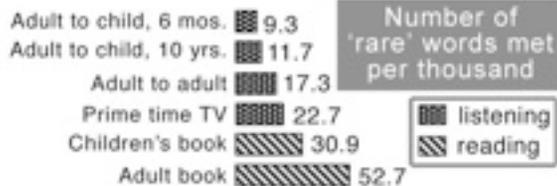
Total words (in millions) heard by child by age 4 (by family income)



SOURCE: *Meaningful Differences* by Betty Hart & Todd Risley

newspapers), and more words are heard in conversation by affluent children. Hart and Risley's landmark study *Meaningful Differences* showed affluent children heard 45 million words by age four, working class heard 26 million, and the poverty child heard just 13 million — that's a 32-million word gap between rich and poor kindergartners.

Reading regularly to a child helps to close that gap and gives the at-risk child a "head" start, especially important since most instruction in school for the first four years is oral — the teacher talks the lesson to the class. The larger the vocabulary, the better the child understands the teacher and the lesson.



A good children's book is three times richer in vocabulary than conversation.

No one would deny the importance of conversation in a child's life (see *Meaningful Differences*). But when it comes to building rich vocabulary, nothing does it like words that come from "print." When researchers counted the words we use most often, the total came to 10,000 different words (the most common word is "the"). Beyond the 10,000 mark, you meet what are called the "rare" words. Though we use these words less frequently in conversation, they make up more and more of what you must know in order to understand complicated ideas and feelings in print, be it *The New York Times*, textbook, or novel. Thus the more rare (book) words a child knows, the more easily he or she will be able to read complex ideas.

How can I give my child words if I don't have them myself?

All the words you may be missing can be found at the "people's university" — the free public library. It has both the books and/or the audio books you'll need. By starting early, both you and the child will grow in knowledge. As for the audio, it's essential the experience be a *shared* one so both of you can discuss the story during and after hearing it — just like Oprah does on her book club shows.

For detailed footnotes on each part in this brochure, see *The Read-Aloud Handbook* by Jim Trelease (Penguin, 2006) and the author's Web site: www.trelease-on-reading.com © Jim Trelease 2009. This brochure may be freely reproduced by nonprofits.

WHY READ ALOUD TO CHILDREN?

BY JIM TRELEASE

Author of The New York Times Bestseller
The Read-Aloud Handbook



By every research measure, reading is an accrued skill; that is, the more you read, the better you get at it. Yet, research indicates a steady decline in reading as students age. Thus by 12th grade, only 19 percent of students read for pleasure daily.

If our objective is to create *life-time* readers—graduates who continue to read and educate themselves throughout life—then the reality is we too often create *school-time* readers—people who read well enough to graduate but pretty much stop on graduation day. That’s a striking system failure.

In 1983, the U.S. Department of Education created its first Commission on Reading to explore the reading decline. Its 1985 report (*Becoming a Nation of Readers*) included these findings:

- “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.”
- “[reading aloud] is a practice that should continue throughout the grades.”

What’s so powerful about something that is so simple you don’t even need a high school diploma in order for a parent or grandparent to do it? *Read on.*

In case you’re wondering where “phonics” fits in: Phonics is part of the essential *mechanics* of reading, the decoding part.

You might also call it the “how-to” aspect of reading. The other part is the “want-to,” the motivational end. Without the “want-to,” all the “how-to” drill work is not going to create a lifetime reader. Your reading aloud is what builds the child’s “want-to.”

Words are the primary building blocks for learning and there are only two efficient ways to get words into the brain: either

through the eye or through the ear. Since it’ll be three to four years before the eye is used for reading, the best source for brain building in a young child is through the ear. What we send into that ear becomes the “sound” foundation for the rest of the child’s “brain house.” Those meaningful sounds in the ear will help the child

make sense of the words coming later through the eye (reading).

We read aloud to children for the same reasons we talk with them: to reassure; entertain; bond; inform; arouse curiosity; and inspire. But reading aloud goes further than conversation when it:

- Conditions the child to associate reading with pleasure;
- Creates background knowledge;
- Builds “book” vocabulary;
- Provides a reading role model.

Not coincidentally, the decline of older students’ recreational reading coincides with a decline in the amount of time adults read to them. By middle school, almost no one is reading to them. If each read-aloud is a *commercial* for reading pleasures, then a decline in *advertising* would naturally be reflected in a decline in teens’ recreational reading.

It’s equally important to understand children have a reading level *and* a listening level and they’re usually not the same. A 4th-grader may be *reading* on a 4th-grade level but can listen to stories on a 6th-grade level.

SCIENTIFIC READING FACT: Human beings are pleasure-centered

This means we choose to eat the foods we like, listen to the music we like, and visit the



friends we like. Conversely, we avoid the food, music, and people we *dislike*. Far from being a theory, this is a physiological fact. We approach what causes pleasure, and we withdraw from what causes displeasure or pain.

Every time you read to a child, you’re sending a “pleasure” message to the child’s



brain, conditioning the it to associate books and print with pleasure. There are, however, “unpleasures” the child comes to associate with reading and school. Learning can be tedious or boring, threatening, and without meaning—endless hours of worksheets, hours of intensive phonics instruction, and hours of unconnected-test questions. If a child seldom experiences the “pleasures” of reading and increasingly meets its “unpleasures,” the natural reaction will be *withdrawal*. Any proof? *Read on.*

The last 30 years of reading research confirms this simple formula—regardless of sex, race, nationality, or socioeconomic background—students who read the most, read the best, achieve the most, and stay in school the longest. Conversely, those who don’t read much, cannot get better at it.

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (22,000 students) found that beginning kindergarten children who had been read to at least three times a week had a significantly