

Slide 1—Title Slide

Picture: Stack of Cookies

Slide 2—Time+Parents+Reading Aloud=Binding Agent

Picture: Baking ingredients

When you bake a batch of cookies, each ingredient is important. Without them all you won't have a cookie. Besides sugar, fats and flour, each cookie needs some type of binding agent: something (usually eggs) that holds all the other ingredients together to make it a delicious cookie at the end of 8 minutes in the oven. I believe that the time parents spend reading aloud is that binding agent in children's educational careers and emergent literacy. Emergent literacy is the way that children develop into people who can get meaning, value and enjoyment out of a body of text. Parents are important, because without them, the cookies (their child's education) might be dry, crumbly and devoid of meaning. The National Institute for Literacy has said that the most essential activity that parents can do to help children gain emergent literary skills is reading aloud together.

Slide 3—2 Reasons to Own Books: 1. Reading Material Anytime 2. Pride of Ownership

Picture: Stack of books

Jeff McQuillan wrote a book called *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions*, in which he examines 275 studies on how literacy develops in children. After doing analysis on all those studies, he found that owning books was the best predictor of high reading scores, even more important than the style of teaching. He also points out that the more books one owns, the more reading generally occurs. After all, it can be very difficult to read when there is no reading material available.

Another reason to own books is pride of ownership. While the library is a great resource for variety, it's hard to feel affection for a library book that you know will eventually be returned. Children love repetition and being able to re-read books and construct meaning from them develops their reading abilities. Mem Fox points this out in her essay on how to make reading more appealing to children by saying, "[An] essential factor in the making of eager, competent readers is that the children have books, and *bookshelves* of their own so that favourite books can be owned and read over and over again."

Slide 4—What Children Learn: 1. Vocabulary 2. About the World 3. About Written Language 4. Connection between the Ideas and the Written Words

Picture: Cracked Eggs

Because reading aloud is often the earliest exposure to print that children have, it opens their world to a whole kingdom of knowledge. Reading with children is the binding agent between all other forms of literacy awareness; it helps them learn new words, learn more about the world, learn about written language and see the connection between words that are spoken and words that are written" (National Institute for Literacy).

Slide 5—Reading builds vocabulary and is good for your bones.
Picture: Bodybuilder or child lifting weights

Hearing books aloud is an important vocabulary builder. Babies learn to talk by hearing those around them talk, but conversational speaking can only take a child so far in learning grammar and vocabulary. The next step is hearing books read aloud because it “exposes children to grammatical forms of written language and displays literate discourse rules for them in ways that conversation typically does not” (Bus, van Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini 2). If children are not read aloud to, they will fall behind in acquiring knowledge of vocabulary and syntax.

Slide 6—Attachment determines effectiveness.
Picture: Horseshoe magnets attracting, scrap yard electromagnet

Now we know why reading aloud is important. So in the rest of my presentation, I’m going to tell you how parents can help their children. To be effective, parents should form firm attachments with their children. If they have a good relationship, then children will feel loved while parents read aloud. They will associate books with feeling warmth and love, which fosters all the wonderful things that happen when children have books read to them. As Mem Fox explains, children from a warm literary environment are “caught up in a bookish world. . . . The relationship between parent and child during the stories is one of warmth and love, which makes the child associate books with warmth and love and pleasure and security. How attractive books become!” (Fox 100).

Studies have been done that show that if the parent and child do not already have a firm attachment that the pleasure of reading a book out loud is low. If that is the case, then it can actually harm literacy skills (Bus and van Ijzendoorn 988). Parents need to read to their children, but making it a positive experience is the goal, not just exposing children to books (Bus and van Ijzendoorn 1009).

Slide 7—Start Early
Picture: Mom reading to baby

Parents should start early to make the most of their reading aloud time. Babies love the rhythms, repetitions and cadences of language. Think of nursery rhymes, they are full of the stuff, even though many of them don’t make sense. It took me until adulthood to really understand what was going on in the “Isty Bitsy Spider,” but as a child I loved the sound and rhythms. This builds a foundation for literacy. Sometimes, it can feel very strange to read to a baby who doesn’t react and would rather chew on the book than read it, so too few families start early (de Groot and Bus). Along with owning books, starting to read early is a key factor in high reading proficiency, since reading to infants shows the family’s commitment and passion for literature, and in establishes a literary family culture (de Groot and Bus).

Slide 8—Touch can help.
Picture: Creation of Man close up

Touch is another important tool. Research shows that when children are touched, they form firmer attachments, stress decreases and it is easier for them to learn (Leo). I always snuggle when I read to my children. It feels natural to me. I'm not sure how much they are really touched during the day while at school and young children need a lot of touch to develop normally (Leo).

Slide 9—Ask Questions

Picture: Group of children? Mouth close up? Tin can telephones

As a parent, I was often frustrated with my children's one word answers to questions I would ask them while reading. I found a great study geared toward teachers, but that has some great ideas for parents too. Talking about what they have been read helps children see connections. Isabel Beck and Margaret G. McKeown suggest that asking questions, particularly "generic probes that prompt [children] to explain," such as "What's that all about?" or "What's that mean?", helps children give answers that expound beyond one word. Beck and McKeown also suggest that "when children [have] difficulty responding to a probe, it [is] useful to reread the relevant portion of the text and repeat the initial question" (Beck and McKeown 16). I can just see how that skill will come in handy when they start writing serious English papers in high school. Talking about the text is an important step in reading aloud to children.

Slide 10—Get Excited!

Picture: Fireworks display

All that we've talked about so far is important, but really, the best thing for children's emergent literacy is for the parents to be excited and positive about books. Parents should *not* read things they don't find interesting. I found this out the hard way with my children. If I don't like to read it, they probably are not going to want to hear me read it flatly and quickly to get it over with. Parents should read with passion, enthusiasm and drama (Fox). Let your dramatic side free reign! Also, Jim Trelease points out that reading too quickly is the most common mistake made by parents, and he advises to "read slowly enough for the child to build mental pictures of what he just heard you read. Slow down enough for the children to see the pictures in the book without feeling hurried."

Slide 11—Yum! Cookies!

Picture: Dad eating cookies with child

It doesn't matter how many different books you read with your children. It doesn't matter how many pages you turn. It doesn't matter how many questions about a book they can answer or how many facts they learn or even if they pay attention the whole time. It *does* matter how your children feel about books. It *does* matter that time is spent with them in exploring books with their parents. Parents have such an important role. Remember our cookie analogy? If parents don't act as a binding agent, then they won't have the opportunity to enjoy the satisfaction that comes with knowing their children will be life-long learners.