

Listening to Children Read

Lorraine Wilson

Each afternoon your young child brings home books from school. You, the parents, are expected to listen as your child reads aloud. How can a parent best help a young child who is reading aloud? Should you correct each mistake your child makes? Should you tell your child every word he does not know?

What is Reading?

First let us look at what READING is. Reading is understanding or making meaning of print. If young children are to be lifetime readers, they need to know that reading is always about something; it makes sense. Importantly young children need to experience the rich benefits of reading; reading can make us laugh, it can make us cry, it can take us to magical places, it can provide information about things which interest us such as butterflies, or dinosaurs. When young children know there is value in reading, learning to read becomes important to them.

Reading as 'Getting the Words Right'.

Back to listening to children read aloud: how can we ensure that our children are reading to make meaning. Is reading just a matter of getting the words right? No. In fact, those children who believe reading is getting the words right, are often very poor readers. Their oral reading sounds good, but when asked to retell in their own words what they have just read, they have no idea. This is not reading. For them, reading operates at the level of individual words. Their focus is naming words correctly rather than, on putting chunks of language together to make meaning.

Oral Reading Errors

Well, what about children who read aloud but who make mistakes; that is, some of the words they read aloud, differ to the actual words in the text?

Let's look at some examples:

Text: Let us run out and play

*Child: **Let's** run and play.*

The child has not read aloud the printed text accurately. He has joined two words to make a contraction (Let's) and has left out a word (out). Has the child changed the meaning? No. Should you interrupt? No.

Text: My Mum wanted to look beautiful for the party, so she bought a new frock.

*Child: My Mum wanted to look **pretty** for the **birthday** party. She **got** a beautiful, new **dress**.*

The child has created a new sentence, changed some of the words, and left out a word. Has the child changed the meaning? No.

In these first two examples we ask,

Does the child's reading make sense? Yes.

Do the oral reading errors alter the author's intended meaning? No.

Should we interrupt the child and make him re-read? No.

Here is a third example:

Text: The dog barks and barks.

*Child: The dog **breaks** and **breaks**.*

Does the child's reading make sense? No.

Did the oral reading errors interfere with meaning? Yes.

Should we interrupt? Yes.

If you are uncertain whether or not the child is reading for meaning, quietly stop the child and ask,

Does that make sense?

or

Tell me that in your own words.

You will quickly learn whether the child is understanding what he is reading: whether his purpose is to make meaning. Where the child cannot re-tell what he has read, this is a concern. Why read something if it has no meaning? Children are not going to want to read out of school hours if they do not see some value in reading.

Thus where the child's oral reading errors make no sense and the child does not try to self correct, do interrupt him.

'Stop. Did that make sense? No – well re-read it and get it to make sense.'

Thus, the issue is not that reading errors are being made, rather, the issue is, do the errors interfere with the making of meaning.

The Reading Process

American researcher, Ken Goodman, (1969), revealed the reading process thus: a reader looks at a text, the eyes take a visual sample which enables the brain to fill in or predict the text, drawing upon the reader's knowledge of language and knowledge of the topic being read about.

What we have learned from Goodman's work is that efficient readers do not look at every letter of every word, or even every word, on a page they are reading.

Think, for example, of when you see 'Once upon a time...' at the start of a story.

Your eye might only see two or three of the first letters before the brain has enough information to fill in the rest, while the eye moves on and fixates on other text.

In this process of making meaning, the reader sometimes omits words, or inserts extra words, or changes words to others of similar meaning.

Consider the following text. Some words have been omitted. See if you can read the text and make sense of it

It was a hot sunny, as we trudged across the hot at the beach. I could not to in the cool

Think how you knew which words to insert, even though you could not see all the text. Think about even though your eye could not see each word, you were able to read for meaning.

When a Child Stops at a Word

Where your child stops at a word he does not know, encourage him to 'Put in a word which makes sense.' Sometimes he will need either to read the whole sentence again, or finish reading the sentence and then go back to insert a word which makes sense.

Try not to say, 'Sound it out.' The easiest words to sound out are those we can read and pronounce. If we do not know a word and do not know how to pronounce it, it is almost impossible to sound it out.

Some words cannot be predicted or gleaned from the context – words such as proper nouns eg Sean. Just tell the child these words, so as to keep the reading flowing.

Make Reading Time an Enjoyable Time

Of course, when listening to your children read aloud, interact with them about what is happening, engage with them on the level of meaning. Laugh and cry with them. If a child brings home a book which is too difficult for him to read aloud, don't make a fuss. You, the parent read it to him.

Remember we want this child to love reading.

References:

Goodman, Kenneth S. (1969). Analysis of oral reading miscues: Applied > psycholinguistics. Reading Research Quarterly, 5, 9-30.