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Want to Raise Smart, Kind Kids? Science Says Do This Every Day

As parents, we have *big dreams* for our kids.

We want them to be smart so they can go after what they want in life and have a reasonable chance of getting it. We want them to grow up to be kind, caring members of the community. And it would be nice if they also turned out to be the type of people who remember to signal before turns.

That's a tall order. **Especially** when I consider the day a success if I remember to brush all my kids' teeth twice a day.

And yet, now is the time to set our kids up for success in life. Short of morphing into a drill sergeant who fills every spare moment with flashcards and forced kindness, how can we raise smart and kind kids?

Here's the Good News About Raising Smart Kids

As it turns out, we have one magic "keystone habit" as parents that will help us raise smart, kind kids.

If you haven't heard of keystone habits before, they're an elite category of habits that kick off a **chain reaction**, influencing several areas of your life at once. In other words, you can focus on just one keystone habit, and you'll experience several positive impacts. For example:

"Keystone habits explain how Michael Phelps became an Olympic champion and why some college students outperform their peers. They describe why some people, after years of trying, suddenly lose forty pounds while becoming more productive at work and still getting home in time for dinner with their kids." – The Power of Habit

The **best** thing about this particular "keystone habit" for raising smart, kind kids is that it's completely free, it takes just 10-15 minutes a day, and anyone can do it.

To get smart, kind kids, you don't have to sign your kid up for expensive tutoring or have twice-daily screenings of the movie *Wonder*.

All you have to do is **this**: Read to your child. Even if they already know how to read to themselves.

Because research shows reading aloud is the powerful keystone habit that will raise smart, kind kids. (More on that in a minute.)

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But This Is What Gets in Our Way

As parents, the demands on our time are *endless*.

We have laundry to fold, sibling battles to mediate, and healthy dinners to prepare. Our kids need help with homework, the car is due for an oil change, and it's our turn to bring snacks after the t-ball game. We need to make doctor appointments, deposit a check at the bank, and sew that seam that ripped in our best work pants.

On and on *and on*.

This is **why** when it comes to reading aloud to our kids, we tend to prioritize it lower. I know I do. In a 2018 survey of American families, only 30 percent of parents reported reading aloud to their kids for at least 15 minutes a day.

I try to read to my kids regularly, but for two weeks I tracked how many picture books I read aloud, and I was shocked. I'd only read to my kids 6 out of 14 days – not even half of the days.

And so to soothe my guilt, I decided to dig into **exactly** what reading aloud to your kid accomplishes. I wondered: *When it comes to raising smart kids, is reading aloud truly all it's cracked up to be?*

The Single Habit That Raises Smart, Kind Kids?

This is what happens when you read aloud to your child every day:

- **Your child will hear a wider variety of words.** Here's why this is important: "The one pre-kindergarten skill that matters above all others, because it is the prime predictor of school success or failure, is the child's vocabulary upon entering school. Yes, the child goes to school to learn new words, but the words he already knows determine how much of what the teacher says will be understood. And since most instruction for the first four years of school is oral, the child who has the largest vocabulary will understand the most, while the child with the smallest vocabulary will grasp the least." – *The Read-Aloud Handbook*
- **You grow your child's brain, literally.** The more you read to your child, the more the neurons in her brain will grow and connect together.
- **You put her on the path to be a lifelong reader.** Reading is essential for the learning process, and kids who struggle with reading tend to struggle in school. But you have the power to give your child this one key to success in school and life because: "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children." – *Becoming a Nation of Readers*
- **Your child's behavior will improve.** When you read aloud, you increase your child's ability to pay attention and concentrate – skills that definitely help your child in school. Also, reading aloud to a child can even decrease aggressive tendencies in the child.
- **You build a stronger bond with your child.** Kids love when you read aloud to them because of the physical closeness and emotional bonding it offers: "We're blown away that kids time and again said the recall spending with a parent is reading together." This makes sense when you think about it. In our busy modern lives, how often do we stop everything we're doing, *put down our phones*, and just enjoy time with our kids? A strong connection with

your child leads to better cooperation from them, and that's something pretty much every parent could use more of.

- **You increase your child's capacity for empathy.** When you read fiction to your child, her brain is "literally living vicariously through the characters at a neurobiological level." In other words, you're exposing your child to different types of people and giving her the ability to put herself in their shoes while you read. Growing your child's empathy muscle will teach her to be a friend who empathizes, a partner who can see her partner's side in a disagreement, and a compassionate person who helps others in need.

The moral of my little research project? The one single habit of reading aloud to your child kicks off a chain reaction of all these positive outcomes, and more. If you're looking for the **secret** to raising smart kids, reading aloud is it.

So why wasn't I making it happen even *half* the time?

8 Reasons Why We Don't Read Aloud – And How to Fix It

Knowing that reading aloud to your kids is important and actually *making it happen* every day are two separate things.

To explore that disconnect in my own parenting habits, I did some research and reached out to several parents I know to find out why we may not always read aloud to our kids. Then because I'd just read oodles and oodles about how **powerful** a daily read-aloud habit can be for raising smart kids, for each reason I decided to pull together a few solutions that might help me and my fellow parents.

Because sometimes, all we need is a tweak or two to make reading aloud a daily habit and set our kids up for a fulfilling, happy life.

By the way, if you have any other suggestions for making this habit work, please leave a comment to share at the end of this post!

1. I'm busy.

When you're overwhelmed by daily parenting life, reading aloud to your kids doesn't always make the cut.

This is my own Achilles heel. On the lazy days we spend at home, I have **no problem** fitting in read-aloud time. But on busy days where we have errands, extracurricular activities, or appointments, read-aloud time tends to fall by the wayside.

How to Fix It: Make reading aloud a daily habit. Duh, right? But here are a few hacks for making it happen:

- **Bundle it.** Think of another daily habit you never skip, and bundle reading aloud with that. For example, you wouldn't skip brushing your kid's teeth at night, so make a rule that you won't brush teeth until *after* you've read aloud. Or as another example, you could read aloud to the kids while they take a bath or if they're slow eaters, while they finish eating dinner.
- **Give yourself a visual cue.** Visual cues are great for reminding yourself in the moments you're most likely to forget. For example, after reading aloud at bedtime, you could put the book back on your child's nightstand as a reminder to read the next night. Or you might get

a sturdy wire basket, fill it with a few great picture books, and leave the basket on your kitchen counter or in a visible spot of your living room.

- **Track it.** Post a piece of paper on your fridge or use markers to write on your bathroom mirror, and keep track of your goal. You might draw a green checkmark for every day you've read aloud and a red X for any day you miss. Your goal is to keep a string of checkmarks going as long as possible!

2. My kid can read on their own.

When our kids are old enough to read on their own, we tend to stop reading aloud. This is what I did when my oldest started reading on her own. But the **problem** with stopping at this point is that we're not helping our beginning readers get to the next reading level.

“Reading and listening skills begin to converge at about eighth grade. Until then, kids usually listen on a higher level than they read on. Therefore, children can hear and understand stories that are more complicated and more interesting than what they could read on their own...Beyond the emotional bond that is established between parent and child (or teacher and class), you're feeding those higher vocabulary words through the ear; eventually they'll reach the brain and register in the child-reader's eyes.” – The Read-Aloud Handbook

In other words, a fourth grader can listen to and appreciate a seventh grade level story before she can read it herself, and that's how you'll build her vocabulary enough so she *can* read a higher level book one day.

How to Fix It: Lately, I've noticed that if I sit down to read to my younger kids, my oldest will make her way to the same room and sit near us to listen in. **Always** remember that older kids still like to be read to, even though they may not admit it!

But if you've taken a break from reading aloud to your older child and they're used to reading on their own, it may seem odd to start back up again with reading aloud. Here are a few ideas for easing back in:

- Ask them to tell you about what they're reading. Then say, “Ooh, that sounds really good! Do you mind if I read out loud a little bit to you so we can both enjoy it at the same time?”
- Invite them to help you pick out a family read-aloud book, then you can all take turns reading out loud at dinner every night.
- If you subscribe to the newspaper or magazines and you come across an interesting article, say to your child, “Can I read this to you? I read it and thought you would enjoy it.”
- Listen to audiobooks during your commute to/from school or while you do chores together, like folding laundry or unloading the dishwasher.
- Find something funny like a poem or a short story and ask to read it out loud to them. Kids love funny, no matter how old they are!
- If your child was assigned a book to read for school, ask if you can read it out loud to them.

3. I don't enjoy reading aloud.

This can happen for two reasons: you don't like the book, or you just don't like the experience of reading out loud. I can relate to both reasons.

Enjoyable books, we'll get to below. But for the second issue, that can be a little more **complicated**. When I first started reading aloud to my oldest child, I made a mental comparison of my relatively monotone, low-key reading style to the most recent storytime we'd attended at our local library. The librarian was so chipper, so full of energy. And the kids loved her! How could I compete with that?

But I later realized that reading aloud isn't about your ability to perform. It's about connecting with your child. Because of the physical closeness and emotional bonding involved, reading aloud is something that kids regularly call out as their favorite activity to do with their parents.

How to Fix It: The first one's an easy fix because the world has thousands and thousands of children's books to choose from, so just pick another one you'll all enjoy and read that instead. As a starting point, here's my list of the books according to kids *and* parents.

But if you struggle with the experience of reading aloud, try to **reframe** that time in your mind to focus on the connection you and your child will get from it. For example, you might come up with a special name for that time, like "Cuddle and Read Time" or "Cozy Book Hour" or "Hugs and Books Extravaganza."

If that doesn't help, try reading aloud a different genre than normal. If picture books aren't your thing, maybe poetry would be fun. If poetry doesn't cut it, try nonfiction. If nonfiction is a no-go, try reading aloud plays and doing different voices for different characters. Just keep trying until you find something you can enjoy.

4. My child won't sit still.

If every time you try to read aloud, your kid loses interest and runs off to do something else, you're going to get a complex real fast and think your kid isn't interested.

Especially with active kids, listening is an **acquired** skill. But with a daily read-aloud habit, kids *will* learn how to listen. Remember that when you read aloud, you increase your child's ability to pay attention and concentrate – skills that will help your child in school and in life beyond school.

How to Fix It: My third child is super active, so when she was younger I had to be creative with finding read-aloud time. Here are a few ideas for how to make it work:

- Ease your kids into read-aloud time with books that are designed just for active kids. Check out 12 Best Interactive Books for Kids That Will Get the Wiggles Out: happyyouhappyfamily.com/interactive-books-for-kids
- Read at bedtime when kids are starting to calm down for sleep and are already tucked into bed.
- Read aloud when you have a captive audience, like when your child is eating a meal or is in the bathtub.
- Take your child to the park, plop them in the swing, then read while you push them.

Also, make sure your child is enjoying the books you're reading. If they're really into dinosaurs and you're reading about dump trucks, that could be the root of the issue. If you need fresh ideas, check out this list of the best picture books approved by kids and parents:

happyyouhappyfamily.com/best-picture-books

5. I'm tired.

Most of us leave read-aloud time for bedtime, but if your kids' bedtime routine is anything like my kids', by the end of the day you're *burned out*. I don't want anyone touching me or asking me for one more thing, and I **certainly** don't feel like adding 20 more minutes to our already long and drawn out bedtime process.

On nights I'm particularly exhausted, I've been known to skip pages if I think I can get away with it. (And it turns out, I'm not alone in this.)

How to Fix It: Try moving your read-aloud time earlier in the day. You could read while your kid eats breakfast or an afternoon snack, or during bathtime if you're not completely pooped by then.

As another strategy, make sure you're reading a book out loud that you enjoy, too. If you're stuck reading the same picture books every night, try branching out to a chapter book you enjoyed as a kid or a new release you've heard of. Or if you think you can swing it with your kid, try reading out loud from whatever book you're currently reading. Obviously you'd need to skip over any kid-inappropriate bits, but maybe they'll go for it, and you can squeeze in a little reading before you're in bed yourself.

6. My kids are all different ages.

This can be tough. My kids are 10, 5, 3, and newborn. I can read a picture book to the younger three, but that leaves out the oldest. Or I can read a chapter book to the two big kids, but that leaves out the two little kids.

How to Fix It: What I've discovered is that my 10-year-old still enjoys listening to a good picture book, and I've heard from other parents that even their teenagers still love hearing them read picture books out loud.

But if your older child really isn't interested, try reading interesting magazine or newspaper articles out loud to her while she's eating or doing chores. You might say, "Hey, check this out! I thought you might like this..." And then just start reading.

As another idea, you can read out loud to your older kids when the younger ones are in bed at night or while they're taking a nap.

7. My kid interrupts...on every page.

Nobody likes to be interrupted – especially not when you're trying to do something *for* your child and she interrupts you.

But as it turns out, kids asking questions during a book are an essential part of the learning process:

"Those of us who have seen a movie more than once fully realize how many subtleties escaped us the first time. This is even more the case with children and books. Because they're learning a complex language at the adult's speaking pace, there often are misunderstandings." – The Read-Aloud Handbook

How to Fix It: If your child's question is about the story itself, go ahead and answer it right away because odds are, your child isn't fully understanding what's happening and that's why she asked.

If the question is tangential to the story or completely unrelated, try saying something like, "Ooh good question! At the end of the story, we'll talk about that."

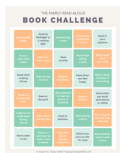
8. Reading the same story over and over again is boring.

Yes, it is. It really, really is.

Unfortunately for us as parents, repeated readings of a book are **exactly** what your child needs in order to learn. They end up hearing the same words over and over again, which cements the vocabulary in their brain. Also, repeated readings help flush out any misunderstandings that are bound to happen when you've been on this planet for such a small amount of time. (See above.)

How to Fix It: Here are a few ideas you can try:

- If there's a book you truly hate, get rid of it. Or at least hide it most of the time. It does your child **no good** if you're gritting your teeth just to get through a book you hate. Better to spend 15 minutes reading something you enjoy than zero minutes reading because you can't stand a particular book. Find something you enjoy instead using this list of the best picture books: happyyouhappyfamily.com/best-picture-books
- If there's a book you actually do think is alright but you just don't want to read it 72 times a day, try coming up with a rule for your house. For example, when I've read the same book twice in one day, my kids know that book is done for the day. There's no shame in setting boundaries so the read-aloud experience can be enjoyable for *everyone*.
- Try keeping things fresh with every read-aloud of a repeat book. One time, you might read it with a Southern accent. Another time, you might read it while marching in place. (Make your kid do this too!) Or another time, you might lay upside down hanging off the couch to read it. When your sanity is at stake, feel free to be creative.
- Visit the library regularly to get fresh new books. When you have a steady influx of new books to choose from, your kids will be less focused on re-reading the same books over and over again. **Bonus:** When the library books are due back to the library, they go back and you never have to re-read them again!



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About the Author

Kelly Holmes is an author, a mom to four, and a recovering perfectionist. At her site happyyouhappyfamily.com, she inspires fellow parents to say goodbye to parenting guilt so we can find more joy while sharing our days with little ones. Kelly's work has been featured in *The Huffington Post*, *Good Housekeeping*, *The Daily Mail*, *Parents.com*, *Upworthy*, and *Scary Mommy*. Kelly loves reading, making lists, and eating baked goods. And also naps.