



RAR 95 – The Lowdown on Reading Aloud with 4- to 7-year-olds

Sarah: You're listening to the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. This is the podcast that helps you make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.

Hey, hey, hey, Sarah Mackenzie here, and you've got episode 95 of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. Today we're going to talk about the lowdown on reading aloud with kids age 4 to 7. So, we're right in the middle of a series of episodes we're doing over the course of about a month, where we're talking about the specific challenges, benefits, and favorite books for different ages. Last week on episode 94 we talked about reading aloud with kids age 0 to 3. And, today we're going to talk about reading aloud with kids age 4 to 7, so we're going to get into that. It's going to be really great. I love reading aloud with this age range, and I've got some great books to recommend for you.

1:14 A common question

Now, before we dive in, I wanted to answer a question we're getting about *The Read-Aloud Family* which is the brand new book I released last week. It's available anywhere books are sold. It's called *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids*, and the question I'm hearing is, if I'm already a read-aloud family is there anything for me in this book, or is it just for people who are not reading aloud yet? And, like I told you last week, sometimes it can be a little hard for authors to objectively answer questions about their book because we spend years with our book before it ever hits the shelves and it can be

a little hard to be objective. So, I asked some early readers what they thought. Should people who are already reading aloud regularly with their kids get this book? And, Melissa wrote back to me and said, "Absolutely. We consistently read-aloud but this book rejuvenated all of my efforts. It helped remind me that it doesn't have to look perfect for it to be meaningful." And Julie wrote in and said, "Yes. The list of 10 compelling questions to ask about a book are good for starting all kinds of conversations about the books we read together, and even about other stories, like movies as well. The chapter on how to become a literary match-maker for my kids is something I've wanted to be able to do but didn't feel like I knew how. I also appreciated knowing how publishers assign age ranges to books, as well as the book lists in Part 3." Part 3 is several chapters worth of book lists recommended for your kids and I recommended about 400 books in this *Read-Aloud Family* and I've read them all. And, I recommended particular ages to read the books aloud with your kids. And, I actually explain in there, as well, how publishers decide what age recommendation to put on a book, and how you can decide if they're right or not. I let you in on what I think of the age recommendations they usually give and you'll find all of that in Part 3 of *The Read-Aloud Family*. OK, so today we're going to tackle reading aloud with 4 to 7 year old kids.

3:26 Reading aloud with 4- to 7-year-olds

Reading aloud can get quite a bit easier when your child turns around 4. There's just a marked difference between reading aloud with a child who's between the ages of 0 and 3, like we talked about on last week's episode, and reading aloud



with a child who's between the ages of 4 to 7. They tend to have longer attention spans, they tend to listen for longer stretches of time, they really like looking at bright and beautiful illustrations, but they're also beginning to be quite capable of listening to stories without illustrations. I have found 4 to 7 year olds to have something of an insatiable appetite for stories. And, that's really fun as a parent because you feel like you can read a lot more than you have before. And, it just gets easier which is just pleasant. So, here's the thing we know: we know that research indicates that even when kids reach school age repeated picture book readings of the same book, at least three times, increases their vocabulary acquisition up to 40%. And, if you've read my new book, *The Read-Aloud Family* you know that vocabulary is everything when it comes to academic preparedness. So, that's pretty amazing. And, here's the thing: I think it takes a lot of pressure off. We feel like we always need to be changing out and getting new books for our kids and taking them to the library and swapping things out, and while obviously going to the library and giving our kids a very rich reading life is a wonderful thing, repeated readings are still very, very important for 4 to 7 year olds. They want to hear the same story multiple times. At this age they're going to be more interested in hearing new stories when they were younger, but they will still appreciate re-reading their old favorites, so don't let that worry you if your kids are asking for the same book over and over. Especially if it's a book that's dealing with an issue they're dealing with in their own life. So, an example would be a child who's afraid of the dark who wants you to read *Llama Llama Red Pajama* over and over or *Bedtime for Frances* over and over. There's a reason for that; that book is very calming and comforting to

them, and reminds them of the things that they need to hear again and again that are true. OK? So, keep that in mind.

5:48 It's OK to still read picture books

Now, when you're reading with a 4 to 7 year old one thing I want to encourage you is that even though your child is probably inching toward being able to listen to stories that don't have pictures you don't want to dive into chapter books too early. I've made this mistake before. And, what happens when you dive into middle grade novels too early with your young kids is that you get discouraged and you, sort of, tend to accidentally devalue picture books. At least, that's what I did. But, picture books should still make up a healthy part of a child's literary feast. So, you want to be spreading a feast for them when it comes to their reading life; reading a wide range, fables, fairy tales, folk tales, modern books, classic books, audio books, historical fiction, things that set in contemporary times— this wide feast but a lot of that feast should be coming in picture books, for a lot longer than age 7, but since we're just talking about ages 4 to 7 today, I'll say all the way to age 7.

6:50 Safeguard delight

The second thing is that a lot of kids are starting to learn how to read at this age, and you don't want to let your desire for your child's reading skill development to get in the way of a love for stories. It is really, really crucial to make sure that we are safeguarding that delight and enjoyment of stories at this age. The last thing we want is for our kids who are learning how to read to think that the books they're capable of reading when



they're still in the decoding phases are as good as books get, so you want to keep reading aloud them, keep the read-aloud time and the book connection with your kid based on delight and enjoyment. It's a really, really big priority. I would say it's more important in this 4 to 7 year age range to maintain that love of stories and books than it is for them to develop a skill of reading. And, for any of you who are worried about your late readers, I had several late readers who did not read fluently in this stage as well. We'll give you some links in the Show Notes for some encouragement for you if your kids are not yet reading and you're getting a little worried, but at this age group, 4 to 7's, you want to concentrate on delight on finding really good stories and reading aloud to them every day that you can. OK?

8:01 Do you have to do extension activities?

Now, here's something else that can trip you up: extension activities. And, I've been guilty of this as well. It's really easy to become distracted with extension activities—you know what I mean, right?—like, crafts that are based on a book or recipes that are based on a book or science experiments. And, these can be really fun and they can be really exciting, and some families love them. But, I just want you to know that if you don't have the time or energy for extension activities the story alone is enough. Really, if you give your kids the time and space to play, and you read-aloud with them, then it is very likely that organic play will be probably spring out of the stories on their own. So, you don't necessarily have to do the craft your kid made very well turn all the dining room chairs upside down, and decide that that is their wagon train

after you read a book about the Oregon Trail. It's just what kids do. So, if you like extension activities go for it, and sometimes I like to do those, too. And, sometimes I don't have the energy for them, so I just wanted to assure you that if you feel like all we're doing is reading the books and is that enough? Yes, yes that is enough. Reading the book and talking about the books is enough.

9:17 What to look for

OK, so what are we looking for with books for kids who are about 4 to 7? Well, there's two different kinds of books we should talk about. We should talk about picture books and we should talk about longer novels, either chapter books or middle grade novels that we're reading aloud with kids this age. In picture books we're still looking for beautiful illustrations. You want to just look for illustrations that make you want to stare at them a little longer than necessary. That's the easiest way to say 'beautiful illustrations.' And, so if you come across a book where the illustrations make YOU want to stare a little longer than necessary, or make your kids want to stare a little longer than necessary, that's a good fit. These don't necessarily have to be gorgeous, lush illustrations. Gorgeous, lush illustrations do that—I'm thinking of books by say, Jerry Pinkney, the Caldecott Award Winning illustrator who's done a lot of fables and gorgeous picture books—those speak to me very lush and gorgeous and they make me want to stare. But, some of the books that my kids like to stare at longer than necessary are like the Richard Scarry books. There's a new picture book that reminds me of the Richard Scarry books called, *Cycle City* that my kids like to look at for a long time. Any of those books where there are a lot of little drawings that are



detailed. The picture book, *Lola Dutch* that's brand new this year—that's another one where my kids like to look at it for a long time. So, they can be a wide variety of illustrations. One style is not preferred over another but do your kids like to look at them and stare at them longer than necessary? That's what you're going for.

You're also going for rich language. And, so we're not looking for simplified language or dumbed-down language, we're looking for rich language, and very often picture books have much richer language than even chapter books or some middle grade novels, so, it's helpful to remember that. That's another reason why it's really, really helpful to remember that picture books are just an important part of a child's reading life at this stage. The easiest way to describe rich language is just that it is exquisite rolling off the tongue. It's pleasant to read-aloud. You don't feel like the sentences are short and choppy and difficult to read. So, you want the sentences to be easy and delightful to read. So, that's what you're looking for. And, in chapter books and middle grade [novels], now, all kids are different so it's hard for me to say—I get this question a lot—how old should my child be when I first start reading them novels or chapter books? And, I can't give you a clear cut answer. I can say, "Around 5-ish, seems to be fairly common." Some kids are 3 and 4, some kids are 6 and 7. And, there's no right answer. It's whatever works for your family. There's no real benefit to reading those earlier. So, if you feel like, 'Oh no, my child's 5 or 6 and they still aren't listening to chapter books,' there's no benefit to your child listening to chapter books now instead of a year from now, so read more picture books, enjoy picture books, and don't worry about it. But, when your child's ready for chapter books or middle grade novels then you

want to look for a couple of things. Those first chapter books and middle grade novels probably you want to look for something that has short chapters, really likeable characters that you can picture easily in your mind, and a quick plot, and that's not always what we're looking for in novels as we grow, but I think those first few novels and chapter books, it's really a good idea to look for those three characteristics—short chapters, likeable, easy to envision characters, and a quick plot. And, that's because it really helps the child get into the habit of envisioning what they hear, of seeing pictures in their head when they hear language, because that's a skill, and up to now they've probably read mostly picture books, or you've read-aloud mostly picture books, and so now they're going to start practicing that muscle of envisioning the images instead of seeing them. And so, those three characteristics—the short chapters, likable and easy to envision characters, and a quick plot can help them do that a little bit easier. And, so I'll tell you a recommendation for that in just a moment. You'll find, if you've got a copy of my brand new book, *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids*, which is available now wherever you like to buy your books, you can go grab it, Chapter 13 is all about reading aloud with 4 to 7 year olds, and you'll find a ton of book recommendations in there, including chapter books and picture books for this age.

13:58 Book recommendations

I'll give you a couple examples right now of some favorites. One is, *Water Can Be...*, and actually there is an entire series of books. These are all written by Laura Purdie Salas and illustrated by Violeta Dabija, and they are gorgeous. They are actually non-fiction picture books. They're



poems. *Water Can Be...*, *A Leaf Can Be...*, and *A Rock Can Be...* So, just as an example, “What can water be? It can be a thirst quencher, a kid drencher, a cloud fluffer, a fire snuffer.” When you see the images that go along with those words you will find that these books are really rich in gorgeous vocabulary, they help you think through metaphors and think through what words mean and the images that come to mind, and really stretch your brain. So, I really love these – my kids really love them, and the illustrations really are stunning. Another book I really love for this age is *Tops and Bottoms* by Janet Stevens. Now, this is a really funny tale. Basically, it’s about a bear who’s as lazy as a bear could possibly be, and then he’s got a friend, neighbor, named Rabbit. And, Rabbit convinces Bear to partner up and grow food, because Rabbit needs to support his big family. And, so this is Rabbit’s plan: Bear can keep on sleeping as long as Rabbit can plant a garden in Bear’s yard because Rabbit had the work ethic he needed but he didn’t have the place to grow a garden. And Bear had the garden but he didn’t have the work ethic to actually grow food or grow a garden. So, basically they decide they’ll split the harvest 50/50 and Bear can choose which half he wants: tops or bottoms. This is a trickster’s tale. It is really fun to read. It’s got wonderful illustrations which I’ve come to expect from Janet Stevens, and I think your kids will really enjoy it. So, *Tops and Bottoms* – I’d be surprised if you couldn’t find this one in your local library. As far as chapter books or novels go, I almost always recommend that families start with *My Father’s Dragon* by Ruth Stiles Gannett. This is an older book so you may have read this when you were a child, but it’s just always the one I tend to recommend to anyone who’s just getting ready to start reading aloud longer narrative with their kids. It’s got all of those characteristics we

talked about earlier: short chapters, likeable characters, and a quick plot. In addition, it is moderately illustrated. So, not every page is illustrated but there are several illustrations in the book, and that can help you transition from getting picture books where there illustrations on every single page to a book like, let’s say, *Ramona the Pest* or something where there are not illustrations at all, hardly at all. It’s the first in a series. It’s really short as far chapter books or middle grade novels go, so I’ll think you’ll like it. *My Father’s Dragon* and once again, that’s one that’s almost always able to be found at a local library. In the book, *The Read-Aloud Family*, you will find a far more complete list of favorites, several other chapter books, a whole bunch more picture books, as well as a list of what your kids age 4 to 7 can do while you read-aloud. And, I also recommend my favorite Bibles to read with ... actually, in the book I recommend my favorite Bibles to read with every age, but as pertains to today, you’ll find out which Bibles I like to read best with kids age 4 to 7.

17:29 Other resources for this age group

In the Show Notes to this episode which you’ll find at ReadAloudRevival.com/95 you’ll find some links to a few other episodes that I think will be helpful to you if you’ve got kids in this age range. One is episode 50, that was Jennifer Pepito who came on and talked about how books spark easy projects and play, and that’s a really great episode if you want to help spark play in your kids after reading the books that you share together, and kind of, help your kids grow in their ability to play imaginatively based on books. It’s a really good episode. Another one is episode 45 where the Read-Aloud Revival Team talked about



our favorite picture books to read-aloud with kids; tons of book recommendations in that episode. And, then there's an episode, a bonus episode, called "The Most Important Part of Teaching Kids to Read," and I personally think that's one of the important episodes we've ever done at Read-Aloud Revival because it reminds us that there is something more important than just teaching our kids to read, or there's a more important purpose of teaching our kids to read. And, so we'll put links to all three of those episodes in the Show Notes today, which you'll find at ReadAloudRevival.com/95.

8:47 Let the kids speak

Now, it's time for Let the Kids Speak. This is my favorite part of the podcast where kids tell us about their favorite stories that have been read-aloud to them.

Child1: Hi, my name is Elsa, I am 11 years old and I am in 6th grade, and my favorite read-aloud book right now is *The Ramona Quimby Audio Collection*. And, me and my sister will listen to it, hours and hours and hours, and I really like it because it still has Henry Huggins in it and all the characters we know, but it's more girlie.

Child2: Hi, I'm Oliver. I'm 9 years old and my favorite book is *The Lego Ninjago* book. Why I like it is because it's cool.

Child3: Hi, my name is [****inaudible****] and I like *The Twelve Days of Christmas* because it's close to Christmas and it's my book and I like the part where the man is on the boat.

Child4: Hi, my name is Henry and my favorite book is Richard Scarry's *Cars and Trucks and Things That Go*. What I like about the story is Goldbug.

Child5: [Mom: This is Abner, he lives in Maryland, and he is only 2 years old, and his favorite book is the *Little Blue Truck's Christmas*. What makes it special?] Cars, right here. [Mom: you like the cars?] Yeah. [Mom: but what he really likes...] Light on it. [Mom: the lights. The light up lights, do you like that? Say, bye.] Bye.

Child6: Hello, my name is Noah. I'm 10. I'm from Mapleton, Oregon. My favorite book is C. S. Lewis' *The Last Battle*, book seven in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. I was surprised at the ending of the book. I don't want to spoil it for you so you'll have to read it yourself.

Child7: My name is Josiah. I am 4½ and I live in North Carolina. My favorite book is *Blueberries for Sal* by Robert McCloskey. My favorite part is Sal follows the mommy bear and then the baby bear follows Sal's mom.

Child8: My name is Hayden and I am 7½ years old and I live in North Carolina. My favorite book is *House at Pooh Corner* and my favorite part is when Pooh's going out for a walk and he sees Piglet and Piglet was planting haycorns because Christopher Robin said if you plant haycorns in the ground it will grow up to be a big oak-tree, and so he did, while he was, and then Pooh comes along and he says, "I've planted mastershalums all over my front door," and Piglet goes timidly, "I thought they were called Nasturtiums," and Pooh goes, "I think they are called mastershalums." And then Piglet goes, "No, they are called Nasturtiums." And that's funny because they keep getting the words confused but Piglet's right.

Child9: My name is Mariah. I am 7 years old. I live in Missouri and my favorite book is *The Velveteen Rabbit* and I like it because it reminds me of one of my stuffed animals.



Sarah: Well, that's it for today. Thank you kids for your recommendations. I always love hearing the books that you love to hear read-aloud or love to read on your own. If your kids would like to leave a message for Let the Kids Speak to be aired on the podcast, just head to ReadAloudRevival.com, scroll to the bottom of the page, and you'll see how to leave a message. We air every message we receive in the order we receive it in. I will tell you what: I was basically tickled pink when Tomi DePaola offered to read an early copy of the book I wrote, *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids*. In his endorsement of the book he said, "It's obvious that Sarah has done the homework. Her insights, suggestions, and enthusiasm are contagious - and - they WORK! Brava, Sarah." And I just died, as I'm sure you can imagine. Another endorsement that really meant a lot to me was Ken Ludwig, he is an award-winning playwright, he's got plays on Broadway, on London's West End. I believe that a play of his is being performed somewhere in the world every single day around the year. I mean, yeah, he's kind of a big deal, and I love Ken's work. He wrote the book, *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare* which I really like. And, he read my book early on and said, "With this marvelous book, Sarah Mackenzie could change your life. We all want our children to be great readers. It will certainly make all the difference in their lives and Sarah provides an inspiring blue print for success. She has done us all a great service with this wonderful book." So, Tomi and Ken, thank you so much. It just made my day when I saw both of your recommendations for *The Read-Aloud Family*. If you haven't yet picked up your copy of *The Read-Aloud Family*, what are you waiting for? Head to a bookstore near you or hop online or go to your library and request that they

purchase it because that's an enormous help as well. So, I would love for you to get your hands on the book. I think whether you're reading aloud to kids 4 to 7 or anywhere between 0 and all the way up till they leave home, you're going to find something in *The Read-Aloud Family* that will help you make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids, and that's what it's all about, right? OK, next week we're going to talk about reading aloud with kids who are 8 to 12. Spoiler alert: that's my favorite age of all to read with. I can't wait for this episode. I'll be back in your ear buds next week, but until then, go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.