



RAR 113 – Why Reading Aloud to a Wide Range of Ages is Difficult (and How to do it Without Losing Your Mind)

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.

Well, hello there, it's Sarah Mackenzie. I'm your host for the Read-Aloud Revival podcast, and today I have episode 113 for you. We're going to be talking about choosing books to read aloud as a family if you have a wide range of ages because that can be really tricky. Finding something that engages the young ones and the older ones can be hard. So, that's what we're going to talk about on today's Show. You will get the Show Notes for this episode at ReadAloudRevival.com/113.

You're probably going to want to grab those because I'm going to give you a bunch of book recommendations at the end of this Show, of course, and we'll have a book list there for you. There are a few ways to handle this and, of course, it's going to depend on your particular family, your kids' ages, when you read-aloud, what time of day you read aloud, how long you have, and because I don't know your particulars I'm just going to throw out some ideas and you can see if any of them stick. See if something I say today on the Show resonates and you think, 'that might work,' that might be helpful for you. So first of all I want to tell you what I do. Now, if you don't know, I have six children. My oldest is, at the time of this podcast airs, almost 17. I have a 15 year old, a 13 year old, a 6 year old, and twin 5 year olds. So, we have these older kids who are 17, 15, 13 and then these younger kids who are 5 and 6. And, I actually separate them

for the most part for read-alouds. I read aloud to my older kids, my teenagers together and then I read to my younger kids separately; trying to find books that appeal to my 5 year old twin boys and my 17 year old daughter – yeah, that's kind of a challenge. So, I don't actually even try to do it too much. If we're listening to audio books in the car I will use the principles that I'm going to talk about in a second to choose books that will appeal to everybody's age or try to appeal to most of them anyway. But for most of our read-aloud time I actually separate them.

2:28 Don't be afraid to separate

So, that might actually help if you have a really wide age range and you're thinking this seems impossible don't be afraid to separate the kids out. I know some of us have this idea that we want all of our family to be listening together all the time and it's going to be amazing, but sometimes that's just not what reality looks like for us. It's also a lot more difficult to get everybody in the room at the same time especially when you have older kids who have jobs, driver licenses, and classes and activities; it can be difficult to get everybody on the same schedule. So free yourself from the idea that everybody has to be reading altogether: mom, dad, and all the kids – that's not necessarily how it has to look. You can make this look however you need it to look at this particular season in life to make sure that you're having the opportunity to connect with your kids through stories, even if it doesn't look exactly how you expect it. Now, let's talk about choosing books when you are reading aloud with a wide age range.



3:24 Shoot for the middle

One of the things that I do when I choose books for my teens, which do have an age range, of course, my oldest teen is almost 17 (like I mentioned) and my youngest is 13. How do I choose books for them? 13 year old boy, 15 year old girl, 17 year old girl. Well, I tend to shoot for the middle. You may have heard that the advice to read aloud to your kids above your oldest child's reading level—I hear this a lot, especially in homeschooling circles. I think that probably works if you have one or two, maybe three kids who are pretty close in age and if your youngest child already loves reading as much as your oldest one, but for most of the parents that I know that is not a good solution. I remember when my oldest three were younger; they were 10, 8, and 6, and I wanted to read aloud *Anne of Green Gables* and that would have definitely appealed to my 10 year old daughter, I think it would have kind of appealed to my 8 year old daughter at the time, not as much, but definitely not at all, not remotely to my 6 year old son. And, the reason I didn't read it aloud to them is at the time my 10 and 8 year olds already loved books and stories. But, my 6 year old didn't. He was in that hard decoding phase, he was struggling with his own personal ability to read and to decode words and to get fluent, and because of that I really wanted our read-aloud time to be supporting his delight and love for stories, to give him a thirst, an unquenchable thirst, unquenchable desire for more stories. To be honest with you, *Anne of Green Gables* as perfect as that book is (I'm just going to say) it wasn't going to do it for my 6 year old son. So, don't get hung up on this idea that you need to always read above the reading level of your child or your oldest child. You need to look at your own kids

and your own situation, your own family dynamics, and see how you can choose books that will appeal to the most number of people and specifically to the kids who have not yet fallen in love with books. I would even say focus more energy on choosing books that will appeal to any of your children who don't love reading as much as the others because a child who loves stories and loves books, they'll listen and enjoy a lot of things you read even if it's outside of their normal wheelhouse, even if it's a little above their level or a little below their level because story lovers love stories. But if your kids have not yet fallen in love with books and stories and being read to then those are the kids that you want to appeal to, so I would actually focus most on their interests, their age, what would appeal to them, and let everybody else just enjoy whatever stories you choose for them. You don't need to tell your kids you're doing this, just like so much of parenting. Look at your kids and think who needs to fall in love with stories, who do I want to make sure runs to read-aloud time and choose books for that child. I tend to shoot for the middle of my teens, so I shoot for about my 15 year old daughter. She is a voracious reader so it's not that she doesn't like reading as much as the others but because they all enjoy reading now I don't have to choose books so much based on that, I can just choose books for the middle and know that the child who's younger and the one who is older are going to get something from that.

6:36 Keeping them engaged is the key

And let's talk about that for a second. The principle thing we want to be thinking about when we're reading aloud with our kids is



keeping them engaged because reading aloud is all about connection and relationship with our kids. So, the kids who are listening need to be able to more or less be follow the storyline in order to be engaged. Not 100%, it's OK to read a story that's a little above one of your kid's ability to understand what's going on but if you're reading a classic with your kids and your 5 year old or 6 year old totally is lost and is not understanding anything they're not going to come to love read-aloud time and see it as one of their warmest, happiest family memories, so you want stories that will engage as many of your kids as possible and I can give you some ideas for that. One of the things I like to think about is when we are reading aloud with our kids think of it like spreading a feast and I think Charlotte Mason said some things about this. The idea is spreading a feast—when you lay out a big feast you don't spoon feed each individual item of food into your child's mouth, making sure they get exactly a quarter cup of mashed potatoes, four tablespoons of peas; we don't do that. We spread out this feast so everybody takes what they're fit for. And that's what we're doing when we're reading aloud with a wide age range. We're spreading a feast.

7:55 Books under your kids' reading level

Older kids can still get so much from books that are under their reading level. Let me give you an example. Most of what you read is actually under your reading level but let's take a children's book as an example for now. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* which is my example for everything it seems here at Read-Aloud Revival but that's because, yes, Lewis deserves it—he's brilliant. So, we'll talk about *The Lion, the Witch, and the*

Wardrobe. Read that book as an adult and tell me it does nothing for you. It's written at a lexile measure of 940 which in normal people terms that means about the fifth grade reading level. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is written about the fifth grade reading level, but when you read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* don't you come away richer? Even though you're able to read books of a much higher reading level. So, I think we don't need to be afraid of reading things that are under our children's, our oldest children's reading level, and if we let go of that fear realizing that they can still get so much benefit from the books we're reading aloud to them, even if they're not above their reading level, or even at their reading level, that opens up the doors to enjoying so many other books as a family, so many more books, and everybody getting what they're fit for. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is a great example because your oldest kids will still get things from it, just like you do, your younger kids—the 4 year old say, they can still get wrapped up in Narnia and benefit tremendously from the grammatically correct and sophisticated language patterns in the book and, of course, the beauty of the actual story-telling. There's something for everyone, from the youngest to the oldest. And what your 4 year old takes and benefits from when you read that book is different from what your 14 year old takes and benefit from. And that's exactly as it should be. If we think of this as spreading a feast for our kids we won't worry so much about every book giving the exact same things to each child, which is I think, when we get hung up on the idea of reading with a wide age range. Everybody's going to take something a little different depending on where they are, what they're bringing to the story themselves, their abilities, their developmental level, what they're thinking



about, what's happening in their hearts and their minds, and that's all part of the beauty of reading.

10:09 'Life's greatest delights'

And we want them to see reading as one of life's greatest delights. So we want to really protect that delight and enjoyment of reading, then we can choose some books specifically that will do that—that will meet kids at all different ages, differently, that will appeal to everyone, that everyone can follow the storyline and that will really guard that delight and love for reading. So, I want to give you some examples of books that I think are great for big age ranges; they won't scare or lose the younger kids or they won't introduce topics that are inappropriate or our younger ones are not developmentally ready for, but they also won't lose our older kids, they'll still engage them and they'll give them something substantial to sink their teeth into, which is really important too; big ideas, good stories that are meaty enough for our older kids to get something from as well. So, let's do that. Let me give you about 15 books that I think do this really, really well. And then if you have books that you have successfully read to a wide range of ages in your own home we'd love to hear about them in the comments, so all you need to do is go to ReadAloudRevival.com/113 and tell us in the comments what books you've enjoyed reading together, and we can basically, collectively create this massive list of great read-alouds for wide age ranges that Read-Aloud Families all over the world can use to choose books to read together.

11:39 Family and animal stories

OK, first up, I have a couple of family or animal stories that I want to share with you. You've heard me talk about *The Vanderbecker's of 141st*

Street, there is now another brand new *Vanderbecker's* book out called, *The Vanderbecker's in the Hidden Garden*—both of them are superb, both of them are very well written, delightful, perfectly appropriate for kids, young kids and will delight and engage your teens as well. This is the book that I've read most recently with all of my kids, the *Vanderbecker's* books because I think they're probably the first thing that pops to mind when I think of a book that can appeal to this huge, wide age range. So, *The Vanderbecker's of 141st Street* and *The Vanderbecker's in the Hidden Garden*—they're both family stories of a biracial family living in New York that they have five siblings in the family and they have to band together to basically help their family overcome a few obstacles. They're really delightful and fun. You can find those in the Show Notes. And, I should just tell you now all of the books I'm about to mention to you are in the Show Notes, so if you start to feel overwhelmed by the number of titles I'm about to throw your way, go to the Show Notes at ReadAloudRevival.com/113. You'll find them online, so you can click to them easily, but you'll also find a printable list that you can print out and take with you to a bookstore or library, which our listeners tell us they absolutely love because it makes it so easy for them to hop out and find some good books. So, that's all at ReadAloudRevival.com/113. If you like *The Vanderbecker's* similarly I love to recommend *The Penderwicks* for a large age range. *The Penderwicks* are a family story. There are five of them in the series, and the first book has the four girls, their dad going on a summer adventure at Arandel which is a vacation house they're renting in Massachusetts and they meet a boy named Jeffrey, and the girls are about to have a wonderful summer except that Jeffrey's mother,



Mrs Tifton, has some other plans, so you're going to have to read that one to find out how delightful it is, but *The Penderwicks* by Jeanne Birdsall is another favorite for a wide range of ages. Another one that fits sort of in this category, a family, an animal story, it's different because the protagonist and the characters are animals, but it's *Poppy* by Avi. *Poppy* is a mouse and he has to basically outwit an evil owl named Mr. Ockax. Not too scary for little kids but engaging enough for older ones. I think *Poppy* can be a fantastic book for a wide range of ages.

14:08 Historical recommendations

I've got a couple historical recommendations for you. First of all, *The Little House* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder are an obvious choice. I prefer these on audio. I do not like to read them aloud, they're long descriptive passages. I just can't do it. I love these, though, and Cherry Jones does a brilliant job of reading them aloud. You can get them all on Audible so we'll put the audio books and the links to the regular books in the Show Notes so you can find them easily. *The Little House* books on audio are a regular in our family. We are regularly cycling through them over and over again; everybody loves them—from from the littlest ones to my husband who's the oldest in our family. Another series I would recommend for families who really like *The Little House* books but are looking for something similar but a new story is the series called *The Fairchild Family* series. They are less well known but they are very, very delightful. The first one is called *Happy Little Family*. These are by Rebecca Caudill and you can get the audio books inexpensive, at least at the time I'm recording this, the audio books are only \$5 each, so we will put links to those in the

Show Notes. But, you can also just read them aloud or either way they're wonderful. But they're about a family living in Kentucky in the early 1900's and they're pretty delightful. One of the historical books that has been all time favorite read-aloud in my own house is Syd Fleischman's *By the Great Horn Spoon!* which is a story about the California gold rush. Your youngest kids may get lost a little bit in the storyline but they won't care because there's enough funny parts and exciting scenes that I think they'll get pulled back in, and so it's OK, they won't mind. And I think it's a story that can lend itself really well to little kids and to teens. It's just a fantastically fun read-aloud. *On to Oregon!* by Honore Morrow, and this one might be out of print (I'm going to look right now while I'm on air even to see because I'm not totally sure if it's out of print or not—I'm thinking it probably is), this tells this journey of the Sager children which were real children, so it's based on the true events (this is a fictionalized account) of the children having to travel the Oregon Trail without their parents, from Missouri all the way to Oregon in the mid-1800's and I love this book for a wide range of ages because, like a lot of the books that I've recommended, there are characters—when you have these big family stories, like *The Penderwicks*, *The Vanderbecker's*, *On to Oregon*, *Happy Little Family*, you end up having a character at about everybody's age range in your family, or at least a different character that everybody in your family can latch onto and identify with, and I think that goes a long way toward appealing to a wide range of ages, is just if there's a wide range of children's ages in the book that can appeal so broadly to the kids who are listening regardless of their age. So, that's *On to Oregon* by Honore Morrow. I do think that one is probably out of print—see if your library has it, keep your eyes



peeled if you're at a used book sale for it, because I love that story. I wish it wasn't out of print.

17:06 A touch of magic

Some family stories that I love, they're not really fantasy but they've got a touch of magic, I love books like these that just have just a touch, just a touch of magic. One of them, of course, is *Half Magic* by Edward Eager. This is a whole series, in fact. *Half Magic* is just the first, so if your kids enjoy it you are set because there are, I don't even know, 9, 10 books in that series—there's a ton of them. And this is about a band of siblings (there we are again with the siblings) and they find a coin that's magic and it grants your wishes but only by half, so you can imagine (or maybe not) the mayhem that ensues. So, that's *Half Magic* and that one's really fun for all ages. Another one with just a touch of magic is *Emmy and the Incredibly Shrinking Rat* by Lynne Jonell. It's the story of a good girl, talking rat, and a very wicked nanny. We can imagine how much fun we're going to have with this one. I was surprised at how quickly I read this one. I didn't read it aloud to my kids, I read it on my own, but it was fast paced where I was thinking, 'one more chapter, one more chapter, one more chapter.' And it would be a really delightful one to read aloud with a wide age range. It's got a little bit of scary, but not too scary for most young kids, and it's funny, and delightful—great character development which your older kids will appreciate whether they know it or not. *The Bark of the Bog Owl* is the first book in Jonathan Rogers' series, *The Wilderking Trilogy*. I have raved about this series before. We did a whole episode on this series because I love it so much. I refuse to tell you anything about this series

except that you need to read it because I think it's better if you don't know what you're getting when you go in. So, the first one is called *The Bark of the Bog Owl* and you could absolutely read this with a wide range of ages and I would be really surprised if you did not enjoy every bit as much as every one of your children.

18:59 Fantasy books

And then I'm going to leave you with a couple of fantasy recommendations. One is by Jennifer Trafton. It's called *The Rise and Fall of Mount Majestic*. This is another one I successfully read with all six of my kids. At the time, I think they were from 3 to 15, if I'm remembering right. That sounds about right. And, they were more or less all interested. Not so much the 3 year old twins but my 4 year old daughter loved it, and then all my older kids. It's funny, it's witty, it's a little fantastical, not a little, it's very fantastical, and we'll put a link to that in the Show Notes, of course. *The Chronicles of Narnia*, of course, you knew I was going to mention those, right? Because *The Chronicles of Narnia* are probably just about as perfect as you can get for a wide age range. Also, because you can read those over and over, so it's not like if your child has read them – this is true for all good books, but if your child's heard these books at 5, it's not that they can't hear them again at 8 or 10, so if you have older kids and you think, 'Well, they've already listened to that, they've already heard that,' Great! Read it again and they'll get another layer. They will find new things to love and that's true of any book that you re-read. If it's a really good it doesn't matter if your child's heard it before, they can hear it again and they get a whole other level of goodness. In fact, I think there's a C. S. Lewis quote about having ... I'm



going to look ... actually, there is a C. S. Lewis quote about this, of course, because we don't quote C. S. Lewis enough on the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. There's a quote that's attributed to him, it's "I can't imagine a man really enjoying a book and reading it only once." Yes, so if you're re-reading a book because you know it's a good fit for your whole family, let's say *The Chronicles of Narnia* but some of your older kids have already read it before, that's great, that just adds another layer, it adds more depth and richness, so don't be afraid to do re-reading so that your whole family can enjoy a book together. And then, another one I wanted to mention is *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* by Grace Lin. This is a middle grade novel so it's usually targeted at kids about 8-12 but I think kids from 4-16 will love it. It's Chinese folklore meets fantasy. It's beautifully done, gorgeous full color illustrations in it, even though it's a novel. And, I think it's a great choice for a family read-aloud with a wide range of ages. And then the last one I want to mention is *The Green Ember* by S. D. Smith, which I know tons of families who have read together, all as a family. The only one you want to be careful of this one is if you have sensitive younger kids it might be a little on the intense side, but I've met so many families who have read it with their kids from 4 through teens that I'm just going to throw it on this list anyway. I think some of my kids might not have been ready for the intensity in *The Green Ember* before they were about 7. So, just know that if you've got sensitive 4, 5, or 6's you might want to wait on this one. But, if your younger kids seem not to be too sensitive and can handle some intensity this is a great choice for a whole family.

21:50 Go on a literary journey ... together

So, now that I've throw 15 books at you (actually more because I threw you a few series—cheated a little bit) I'm going to leave you with a Show Notes. Those are at ReadAloudRevival.com/113 and that way you can get the book list and remember when you're choosing books to read aloud as a whole family, focus on delight, focus on connection, focus on spreading that feast and trust that your older kids will get what they're fit for and your younger kids will get what they're fit for, without worrying too much about finding just the right book for just the right level for each and every one of your kids. It's the beauty and the joy of reading together, of sharing an experience together, to going on a literary journey together that gives so much beauty and joy and life to your family.

Sarah: If your kids would like to leave a message for the podcast, go to ReadAloudRevival.com, scroll to the bottom of that page and that's where you'll see the place where you can leave a message. We air those in the order that they're received and we air every single one. I just love listening those. I hope this episode today has been helpful to you. Most of all, I want to encourage you not to get discouraged if you feel like your read-aloud life is not looking the way you hoped it would. If you had this ideal of your kids, of all different ages, sitting and enjoying a story together and that doesn't look like your reality, you are free to make things work they way they need to work for your own family. Separate those ages like I do, if you need to, or maybe experiment with reading things that shoot more for the middle ages of your children and let your older kids listen to things under their reading level



and your younger kids listen to things that are over their reading level. Try a few different things so that you can get all those benefits of sharing stories together with your kids, going on a literary journey together, and sharing the experience of stories with your family, which is such a beautiful gift to give your kids of any age and all throughout their childhood. I'll be back next week with another episode of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. Until then, go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.