

EPISODE 170: **HOW (AND WHY!) TO READ WORDLESS BOOKS**

Autumn: [00:00](#) Sarah, this is Autumn Baer in Lee's Summit, Missouri, and I wanted to thank you so much for the January challenge of reading aloud for 10 minutes a day. My third grader began reading just 10 minutes, completed the challenge, but we're reading through the Little House on the Prairie books. We've continued doing that 10 minutes and then he would pass off the book to me and today he read through a whole chapter because he forgot to give me my turn at reading the book. His reading has so much improved. Thank you for that 10 minute a day challenge. It has changed our lives.

Sarah: [00:52](#) You're listening to the Read Aloud Revival Podcast. I'm your host, Sarah Mackenzie, homeschooling mom of six and author of The Read-Aloud Family and Teaching from Rest. As parents, we're overwhelmed with a lot to do. It feels like every child needs something different. The good news is you are the best person to help your kids learn and grow and home is the best place to fall in love with books. This podcast has been downloaded 7 million times in over 160 countries, so if you want to nurture warm relationships while also raising kids who love to read, you're in good company. We'll help your kids fall in love with books and will help you fall in love with homeschooling. Let's get started.

That message at the top of the show was from Autumn. Autumn, thank you so much. That's a message Autumn sent in last year after during the January Read-Aloud Challenge and it's a message that we hear quite frequently from families who start the challenge, not really sure what 10 minutes of their kids practicing reading aloud each day will do. And it's so fun to hear your messages and to know what an impact a simple act like spending 10 minutes having your kids read aloud a day, it's a challenge for them, not for you, right? For them to do the reading aloud for 10 minutes a day for 25 days, it makes a huge, huge difference. And it's a lot of fun. So you are not too late to join our Read-Aloud Challenge for January. Go to readaloudrevival.com/challenge to pick up your free challenge packet, or you can get it by texting the word challenge to 33777 and get in on the good stuff there.

2:46 Now, if you're participating in that January Read-Aloud Challenge, you may have read or heard my tip to let your

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pre-reader or your developing reader "read aloud" from wordless books. And that works especially well with kids who are still getting their sea legs under them when it comes to reading fluently, because there's no right or wrong way to read aloud a wordless book. Now for the January Read-Aloud Challenge, I hope you know, your pre-readers, your developing readers, they can simply flip through a picture book and tell you the story in their own words and that counts. Wordless books work especially well for this, because particularly when it comes to a child who's been read to a lot who's developing really good taste in stories who knows a good story when they hear it because they hear a lot of stories, probably your kids, right? They can get frustrated when the story doesn't sound right to their ears.

So a wordless book can solve that in part, because there are no right or wrong words to read, but really whether you're listening to this during the January Read-Aloud Challenge or not, I wanted to dedicate a whole podcast episode to wordless books because they really are a delight in their own right. They are excellent read-alouds. Yes, really, I'll tell you why and they offer us and our kids a whole lot when it comes to connecting through stories. So in this episode, we're going to ask the question, can you even actually read a wordless book? We're going to consider why wordless books are worth our time and attention. I'll give you some tips for engaging your kids with wordless books. And then of course, I'm going to share some favorites. You knew I would, I can't help myself.

4:35

Actually. I've made you a book list of my own favorite wordless books and also a one page tip sheet for those tips and tricks for reading out loud wordless books, the how section, and I've got some questions and prompts for you. So if you want that book list and the one page tip sheet, you can get it by texting wordless to 33777, or you can just head to the website, readaloudrevival.com/wordless and then tell me which email to send that to and I'll get it sent your way.

Now, if I can get through this whole episode without saying, "A picture's worth a thousand words," we'll all be kind of lucky. I think it's going to be hard. Okay. Before we

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dive into all of the goods about wordless books, I'm going to answer a listener question.

Deidre: [05:23](#) Hi Sarah, this is Deidre and I was just wanting to ask you a question about what you think a study of vocabulary has in homeschool and how you've handled that. My son was a later reader and when I decided that the tears just weren't worth it anymore, I kept him supplied with audio books and he's 11 years old and he's listened to Moby Dick, the whole thing, Persuasion, other similar books. He just loves to listen to books and now he does also enjoy reading. So I don't want to kill the love of reading with a formal study if it's not necessary, I just wondered how you handled that in your own homeschool. Thank you.

Sarah: [06:21](#) Hey Deidre. Great question. Thank you so much for sending it. I don't do any formal vocabulary study in my homeschool pretty much for the reasons that you mentioned. We read aloud a lot, we listen to a lot of audio books and we read a lot of books once my kids are fluent readers. I find that they pick up a lot of vocabulary right in the context of story, without having to go look up the word. So often when we encounter a word we didn't know before, but we read it in context of a sentence or a paragraph or a story, we can infer the meaning. And that's in fact how we pick up most of the vocabulary that we use.

If you think about it when you're teaching your small child to speak and as they're growing and they're becoming toddlers and then preschoolers and then older, you're not having to look up a bunch of words in the dictionary every time they learn a new one, they learn it in context, right? That's what happens with reading as well. And if you're reading and listening to really good literature, which it sounds like you are, then that's going to be plenty of vocabulary.

And probably there's still going to be words that your child encounters that they don't understand the definition of. They don't know what it is and that's okay too, because they don't have to know every single one. You don't have to look up every single word. A lot of it's going to be understood in context. At some point or another, they might be interested enough to look up a word to find out what it means, but I haven't found formal vocabulary study to be necessary at all since we're such avid readers and

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listeners of books in my home. And in fact, my older kids continually test really well in the vocabulary section of our standardized tests that my state requires that homeschoolers take. So that's a thing. So you don't necessarily need to fret or worry that they're not going to test well in the vocabulary section. If that does happen and you're worried about it, you could add some vocabulary, but I'm not sure that it's necessary.

So I hope that helps. Thank you so much for your question. Listeners, if you have a question you'd like me to possibly answer on the show, leave me a voicemail you can do that at readaloudrevival.com if you just scroll down a bit when you get to that website page, you'll see the button to leave me a voicemail question. You can also ask for a book recommendation there so that's got to be my favorite thing to do in the world. So if you want that, you can just tell me there how old your kids are that you're needing a recommendation for, a book or two that they really loved and then I will air your request and my personalized recommendation for you hopefully on an upcoming show. So that's, again, readaloudrevival.com, scroll down and find the voice message button down there. I'm hoping that in 2021, I'll be able to give you guys some personal book recommendations that way right here on the show.

9:29

All right, let's talk wordless books. So let's start with the most obvious question here, which is, can you actually read a wordless book? In a word, yes. Let's take this all the way back to the steads and talk about what it means to "read". The definition of the verb to read is this: to look at and comprehend the meaning of written or printed matter by mentally interpreting the characters or symbols of which it is composed. I'm going to read that again, to look at and comprehend the meaning of written or printed matter by mentally interpreting the characters or symbols of which it is composed. When we realize that words themselves are just a collection of symbols when they're on the page, right? They're made of letters, letters are symbols, they look different in different languages, depending on which one you're reading or speaking, right? These symbols, when placed in a certain order, they create mental images in our mind. It's a little bit magic if you actually think about it.

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If we can remember that printed words are a collection of symbols that help us create mental images in our mind, then we realize that a wordless book is just asking the reader to interpret not letters as symbols, but illustrations that are indeed symbolic, right? To interpret pictures or illustrations and interpret those in their mind. So yes, you can read a wordless book and by so doing, you are requiring the reader to mentally interpret what they're looking at in that printed source. They're not a collection of letters which are just symbols, they are a collection of illustrations or pictures. So yes, absolutely, you can read a wordless book.

11:32

But why would we want to? Well, first consider that a wordless book really teaches our kids to see the narrative arc of a story using only illustrations. A wordless book has to have the same components of a complete story as a story told in words. So it needs to follow a storyline, we encounter cause and effect, conflict and resolution, character development. We learn how a story works basically, we understand the bones of a story. All of those components of a story that I would tell you either orally, like if I sat here and told you a story right now, or that you might read in a book are the same structure, they have the same bones as a wordless book. So it helps us see that narrative arc with just illustrations, which is a unique skill.

What that does is it requires our kids to be careful observers. It requires us as readers to evaluate and interpret what we see in those illustrations, right? So we're looking at a book that has no words, but just pictures and we're having to predict what might happen next. We're making connections, we're interpreting, we're evaluating what we see. We have to do all of that without the aid of those little symbols called letters that collect and are ordered in a certain way to make mental images come into our mind, right?

There are some elements that I think we actually see better when there are no words. So how an illustrator uses their color palette to do some storytelling, for example, becomes a lot more evident when there are no words to help out. An example of this is one of the books I'm going to mention at the end of the show as one of my new favorites, it just came out in 2020, it's called *One Little Bag: An Amazing Journey*, it's by Henry Cole. And the

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book is done in black and white sketches, except for one little bag. The very first page is a tree in the forest. And again, these are all black and white sketches. You can see deer and you can see foliage on the ground and some pheasants or turkeys walking by and all of these trees in this thick forest. And one of those trees is in color. One of those trees is watercolored, I think it looks like watercolor, it might be colored pencil, everything's black and white, except for that tree.

And then you turn the page and the one single tree is being logged. Actually there's a whole bunch of trees being logged, but still that one tree is colored. You're actually able to trace the path of that single tree because it's the only thing that's in color. Flip the page again and we see that truck that is hauling away the logs is going to a paper mill. And again, that one tree is colored. We see that tree go all the way through the paper milling process and eventually become a paper bag that actually has its own journey too, I'm not going to spoil the rest of the book. But through the entire story, that single tree is the only thing that has color.

Now, I think this is far more effective as a storytelling device because there are no words. It forces us to ask ourselves, what is the illustrator trying to tell me through their composition, through how they're ordering the pictures through their color palette, through their choices, right? How is the warmth or the coolness of these colors impacting the story, impacting the way I feel at this part of this story? How are these illustrations causing me to feel a certain way or expect a certain thing? We'll see it better with the option to take the easy route through words is taken away.

15:22

I also think wordless books make us slow down. This is something I struggle with, but are you ever tempted when you sit down with your kids to read a picture book, especially at bedtime, right? Especially at the end of the day, to just read the words on the page and then immediately flip the page. It's like, sometimes I'll read a picture book and realize I'm not even looking at the pictures as carefully as I thought, because I'm just reading the words and flipping the page. Almost like you think that you get the whole story that way, but I got a secret for you, you're missing a lot of the story that way.

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The best picture books, the best, best picture books today, fully half of that story is only in the illustrations. So if you are just reading the words, you're missing half of it, you're missing a lot if you don't linger over those pictures. And a wordless book invites us to linger because there's nothing else to do. You just look at the pictures, that's the only thing to do with it. And so it's an invitation to linger with our kids over some beautiful illustrations.

16:26

I've also noticed that kids who are not able to read easily and quickly, they can gain a lot of confidence with wordless books. Just imagine if you've got a little one or a younger child who's struggling a bit with their reading, how accomplished they're going to feel to finish this wonderful book and to have understood the whole thing without any intervention whatsoever, how grown up does that feel to be able to take a whole book, to look at the whole thing, to read it without any words and not need an adult or someone to read it to you, but you understood, you got everything from that book that an adult would get. That's powerful, right?

And this helps our kids develop an identity as readers from a very young age, which is something I talk about in my book, *The Read Aloud Family*, the importance of developing this identity as readers. If we want our kids to be readers as they grow older, to develop a sense of, "I am a reader," to see themselves as people who read every day, then we want them to develop an identity of somebody who reads. I pretty much don't go through my day without reading, right? And that can start younger and give them more confidence if they don't have words in them that are keeping them from feeling like they're maybe missing out on part of the story, which is how I think some kids who are struggling with reading feel when they are not able to read the words for themselves. If there aren't any words, we just took that off the table and now they get to experience that book fully just as a reader of words could do.

Wordless books could also be really wonderful for kids who speak different languages, for English language learners, or kids who have developmental or learning difficulties that are associated with reading words, because they give story through beauty and delight and well-told story, like that beautiful story structure I was

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mentioning earlier, without any stumbling blocks, without anything that says, "Well, you are almost getting the full package, but not quite. Maybe when you're a little older, you'll be able to completely enjoy this story." No, a child who can't read is going to get every bit as much from a wordless book as a child who reads words, because it's the same experience for both. There are no words to hold them back. That's why they are deserving of a place on our bookshelves and why they deserve some attention.

18:57

I think some of the very best children's books today that are coming out today are wordless and I'm going to tell you a couple of them here at the end. But first let's talk about how to read wordless books. How do you do it? So you think, okay, I'm sold, I've got it. I'm going to do this, but then you get the wordless book and you pull your child next to you and you're like, "I don't know what to do." So first of all, let me give you a couple of strategies.

The first one is very complicated. Just look at it. It can be that simple. You don't have to say anything at all, right? You can just let your child have the full experience with the book and you can have a full and rich experience with the book silently sitting next to each other, just looking at it. You'll probably find at some point or another, the natural impulse to point at something or to say, or to say, "Oh," and those are moments that are right for connection. But just looking at it in silence, that's enough. We don't have to overcomplicate this.

Now, if you want to talk about it, if you want to dig a little deeper or have an experience that's a little more of an interchange between the two of you, you can do a few things. There's a few things you can do. One is that you can simply ask some questions. And the question that I often ask with wordless books is, "What do you see here?" You flip the page and we're reading, maybe we're silent for a few minutes and then we flip the page and then I'll just say, "What do you see here?" There's no wrong way to answer that question, they're just pointing at what they see.

You can also ask them to predict, "What do you think might happen next? What do you notice about the art on this page?" Especially with older kids especially with a book like the one I was just telling you about by Henry Cole,

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One Little Bag: An Amazing Journey, you don't even need to point out that the one tree is colored and everything else is black and white, they're going to notice it. So once you get to the third or fourth page, you could say, "What do you notice about the art?" And they very well may say that same tree is the only thing that is colored and they're going to watch it transform into something else.

You could also, instead of asking questions, you can use some, "I wonder," statements. For example, we're flipping through the book, silently enjoying it and then I might say, "Huh, I wonder why the illustrator chose to make that tree colored and the rest not." Now, your child may respond with an idea that they have for why the illustrator might've done that or they might not, it doesn't really matter. You planted a seed, right? You demonstrated and modeled for your child that as you are reading, you're also wondering, you're also asking questions and things are coming up for you. That is the essence of good reading is when we're reading, we're wondering, and we're asking questions and we're engaging with the story. And so you're just modeling that. So we're flipping through the book, "I wonder why the illustrator did this," or, "I wonder why the illustrator chose these colors."

Another wordless book that I really love is called Red Sled by Lita Judge. And it's not a hundred percent wordless, it's 95% wordless so it's counting. I really love this book, Red Sled. And this book has a limited color palette. And so there's a definite temperature that you're noticing the book feels cold, which works because it's snowy. And so maybe when you're reading red sled, you could say, "Huh, I wonder why the illustrator chose these colors?" And your child may then just notice, "Oh, huh? That is interesting, there are only a few colors here." And how do those colors then affect whether the scene that you're looking at feels warm or cold, feels like you're on a hot tropical island or in this case, you're on a mountain in the snow by a cabin. You don't have to outline all of that exactly, all you need to say is, "I wonder why the illustrator chose those colors," or, "I wonder what will happen next."

Again with an I wonder question, don't feel the need to answer it yourself or for your child to answer it, just wonder, because when you were wondering aloud, you're modeling good reading. So you can ask questions you

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can ask them I wonder, or you could say some I wonder statements and you could also just model the act of answering questions without asking any at all. So let's go back to that first question I had suggested, "What do you see here?" Instead of asking that I could flip to that page and instead of saying, "What do you see here?" I could just answer it, right? "Oh, I see this. I see the sled. I see a bear poking around the cabin with a face that looks like he might have just gotten an idea."

You could answer that question, "What do you think might happen next?" Without even asking it so now we flip another page and, "I bet that bear wants to ride that sled." Just leave it there. Your child will probably naturally engage with you in that conversation that you just started by making a simple statement or they might not and that's okay too, because they're fully experiencing the story with their eyes or even just a simple, "Look at this," and point at something you notice, anything, remember there's no right or wrong thing to notice.

With older kids or kids who are game for it, you could play sort of a game with it if you'd like. Maybe on the third or fourth rereading of a favorite wordless book, you could challenge yourselves to each try and come up with one single word that that page reminds you of, or to tell the story in a single word. Like, "If you were going to add words to this wordless book, and you could only use one word or three words or something like that each page, what would they be?" That's a fun game to play, right? Or, you could simply take turns making up the story and saying it aloud. You say a page and they say a page and you say a page and they say a page, right? And you just make this words for the story yourself.

All of these are right ways to read wordless books because there's no right or wrong way. If you just look at it in silence, that is a rich experience. If you want to talk about it and you engage with questions or I wonder statements, or you just model what it's like to engage with the book, that's a rich experience. It can be that simple. And it is that rich.

25:36

Hopefully you understand why wordless books can be so valuable and you know how simple it can be to read them. So let's talk about some favorites. This is the fun part, the

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extra fun part, right? Again, the whole list is at readaloudrevival.com/wordless or you can just text the word wordless, text the word wordless, that's kind of a crazy mouthful, text wordless to 33777 and either way, when you do that, I'm going to send you the book list of my favorite wordless books, as well as a tip sheet. That tip sheet is going to remind you of the benefits of wordless books and it's also going to remind you of what those I wonder questions are and some other sort of conversation starter questions can be that you can use as prompts when you're looking at a wordless book, if you want to do that. Okay. So that's all on that tip sheet. So you want to grab that, those are both free.

So I'm going to tell you just about a couple, but it's a fairly long list because like I said, there are some really amazing wordless books. I mean it when I say I think some of today's absolute best books coming off the market are wordless picture books. And so I'm just going to you about a few. I already mentioned one, which is *One Little Bag* by Henry Cole. Another one I love I told you about is *Red Sled* by Lita Judge, another one of my favorites and perfect for wintertime.

26:56

Another 2020 book that I am really enjoying that's wordless is called *Hike* by Pete Oswald. This one got me with the cover and if you see the cover of it, you can see it in the show notes of his episode, you'll know why, it's such a great cover. And the book is just as enchanting and it's really just talking or telling the story of a father and child going on a hike out in the wilderness and it's like a love letter to nature, but it's a whole story. It's got the whole story in there without any words at all. And if your family are nature lovers, you're really going to love this book. So *Hike* by Pete Oswald.

A longtime favorite for me is Jerry Pinkney, he is an absolutely astonishingly good illustrator. We just love his work and his wordless book, *The Lion and the Mouse* is his wordless retelling of Aesop's fable about the lion and the mouse and it is an absolutely exquisite book. These are really lush illustrations, really detailed landscapes of the African Serengeti, very expressive characters, I'm getting so excited I hit my mic, sorry. Really, really a delight to read aloud. And pictures that will not just invite

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you to linger, but demands that you linger because you won't be able to turn the page without doing so.

28:25 And then I'll just tell you one more, because I've got to wrap this up and go help my husband make dinner, there are some great books by Barbara Lehman, Lehman, Barbara, I don't know how to say her last name and I'm sorry. It's L-E-H-M-A-N, she's got several wordless books that are all a delight everyone that I've seen has been a delight. The Red Book is especially wonderful, it won a Caldecott Honor, and it's really a wordless book about the power of stories. And so basically what happens at the beginning is there's this red book lying in the snow in the city and when you open it you find this new adventure and you're taken to new places and then you flip the page and something happens. So I'm not going to give away too much, but I really enjoyed this. It's called The Red Book by Barbara Lehman. Okay. I want to tell you about more, but I really do have to go help my husband make dinner and I did make you a list. So you can just use the list, readaloudrevival.com/wordless or just text wordless to 33777.

Now, it's time for let the kids speak. I love this part of the podcast because kids share the books that they've been loving lately.

- Wesley: [29:53](#) My name is Wesley and I'm seven years old and I live in Nebraska. My favorite book is Nathan Hale's Hazardous Tales One Dead Spy. Why? Because it brings history to life.
- Julia: [30:10](#) Hi, I'm Julia and I am seven years old and I live in Texas and my favorite book is the Bible because it tells two stories and it doesn't really have chapters, but different stories inside the chapters. I really like it because Jesus died for our sins and it tells that.
- Matt: [30:36](#) Hello, my name's Matt, and I'm five years old and I live in Florida. My favorite book is Wink: The Ninja Who Wanted to be Noticed by JC Philips, because it's about ninjas and I love ninjas.
- Stormy: [30:53](#) Hi, my name is Stormy. I am five and a half years old, I live in Idaho. My favorite story is Piggie and the Elephant Hide Behind a Wall because they get really frightened because they scared each other.

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| Bowie: | 31:06 | I'm three and a half. |
| Mom: | 31:08 | And what's your name? |
| Bowie: | 31:10 | Bowie and I live in Idaho. |
| Mom: | 31:17 | And what's your favorite book? |
| Bowie: | 31:19 | Little Blue Truck. |
| Mom: | 31:21 | Why do you like Little Blue Truck? |
| Bowie: | 31:23 | Because it goes, beep beep. |
| Daphne: | 31:27 | My name is Daphne and I'm five. |
| Mom: | 31:32 | And where do you live? |
| Daphne: | 31:37 | I live in Kansas and my favorite book is The Story of Easter. |
| Mom: | 31:44 | And why do you like it? |
| Daphne: | 31:49 | Because it's my favorite and I like the kids loving God and the kids loving nature. |
| Paisley: | 31:59 | Hi, my name is Paisley. I'm 11 years old and I live in North Carolina. One of my favorite books that I've read this year is Out of my Mind by Sharon Draper. I like this book because it is about a special needs girl that reminds me of my sister who doesn't speak and has special needs also. It helped me to see things from my sister's perspective and it also made me laugh out loud at several parts. I like this book a lot and I like how it portrayed Melody, the special needs girl, as not so different than me. |
| Mom: | 32:32 | What is your name? |
| Sadie: | 32:36 | Sadie Cate. |
| Mom: | 32:37 | Sadie Cate, how old are you? |
| Sadie: | 32:38 | I am five years old. |
| Mom: | 32:42 | And where do you live? |
| Sadie: | 32:46 | In the United States. |

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Mom: [32:48](#) What state do you live in? North...

Sadie: [32:51](#) Carolina.

Mom: [32:53](#) Great. And what is your favorite book right now?

Sadie: [32:58](#) The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.

Mom: [33:00](#) And why is The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe your favorite?

Sadie: [33:03](#) Because there's a page about trees.

Mom: [33:03](#) And why do you like that page about trees?

Sadie: [33:13](#) Because I like climbing trees.

Mom: [33:15](#) Awesome. Is there any other part of that book that is your favorite?

Sadie: [33:19](#) Yes, when Aslan rises from the dead.

Mom: [33:28](#) Ah, who else do you know who has risen from the dead?

Sadie: [33:30](#) Jesus.

Mom: [33:31](#) Awesome.

Emma: [33:33](#) Hi Sarah, my name is Emma and I'm seven years old. I live in Columbia, Tennessee, and my favorite is Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix. I like it because they sing, "Weasley is our King."

Mom: [33:49](#) What's your name?

Annie: [33:51](#) Annie.

Mom: [33:52](#) How old are you?

Annie: [33:53](#) Four.

Mom: [33:53](#) And what's your favorite book?

Annie: [33:56](#) Tigger, Tigger One, Two, Three.

Mom: [33:58](#) And what do you like about it?

Annie: [34:00](#) Because he was hiding behind the three.

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Sarah:

[34:06](#)

So good. Thank you for your recommendations kids. I know you especially have all been waiting a really long time to hear your voices aired on the podcast, I appreciate your patience. It was worth the wait.

Don't forget you are not too late to join us for the Read-Aloud Challenge. In fact, the way that we organized the Read-Aloud Challenge and made the printables for you this year means that you can start the challenge at any time. So it doesn't have to be January 1st - thank goodness because by the time you're hearing this January 1st is behind us, right? It doesn't have to be the beginning of a month even, you can start it at absolutely any time and give your kids the gift of 25 days of reading aloud to each other. This is the best way we know to help your kids fall in love with books and fall in love with each other.

And our challenge is a little unique than others because we don't really incentivize reading by giving our kids other stuff. The gift for reading more with the Read-Aloud Challenge is more time reading and it's also time with each other, which is what our kids really want and what we value ourselves is time to connect with our kids and to make those meaningful and lasting connections with them.

Again, you can grab that free challenge packet by texting the word challenge to the number 33777, or you can just go to readaloudrevival.com/challenge, and that will do the trick as well. You'll get that challenge packet right away and again, you get started with that at any time you'd like. Thanks so much for listening. I'll be back in a couple of weeks with another episode. In the meantime, you know what to do, go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.