



RAR 96 – The Lowdown on Reading Aloud to 8 to 12 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.

Hello, hello. This is episode 96 of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. I'm your host, Sarah Mackenzie, and today's episode's a good one. We're going to talk about the low-down on reading aloud with kids age 8 to 12, and I have to tell you, this is my favorite age to read-aloud with. Well, I will say that books that are written for 8 to 12 year olds—they're called Middle Grade novels and they're my favorite books ever—I mean, if you told me I was going to be on a deserted island by myself even without any children and I could choose five books or something, I would choose all middle grade, I'm pretty sure. So, I love middle grade novels. I think they're some of the absolute best books I've ever read, and they are really fun to read-aloud. And, this age child is really fun to read-aloud with, and to have good conversations with about books. So, we're going to have some fun with this today.

1:28 'A mom to mom heart connection'

Before we dive in I wanted to answer a question I've gotten about the new book that I wrote, *The Read-Aloud Family* as it relates to Jim Trelease's *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. And, if you've read *The Read-Aloud Handbook* you know what a wonderful book it is. I tell the story in chapter one of *The Read-Aloud Family* about my first encounter with Jim Trelease's work and how I first

stumbled across *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. It's definitely been an inspiring book and his work has been very formative to my own parenting and learning how important reading aloud is. *The Read-Aloud Family* is a little different and I can, I said this on the last two episodes, but it bears repeating that it's really hard for authors to be objective about their own work because we are so close to our books and we spend so much time working on them, so I went to some readers who I knew had read *The Read-Aloud Handbook* and asked them how is *The Read-Aloud Family* different from *The Read-Aloud Handbook*? And, one of the ladies I asked said, "It has different information and a different feel. His book has lots of information about reading and why it's beneficial, but there's more of a mom-to-mom heart connection with *The Read-Aloud Family*." And Jessica told me, "Jim Trelease's book has a lot more statistics than *The Read-Aloud Family*. *The Read-Aloud Family* is written by a busy mom for busy moms and that difference is apparent." And, then Calissa told me, "*The Read-Aloud Family* is warmer." And, she said, "I don't mean that as a slam to *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, a book that has brought so many to reading aloud with their kids, but Sarah Mackenzie has the ability to make parenting decisions seem so simple and more focused and less complicated than they seem at first. Jim Trelease's book is great if you want a lot of research and a little inspiration; Sarah Mackenzie's book is wonderful if you need someone who's done the research, to hold your hand and look you in the eye, and say, "You can do this and it's going to be so worth it. It's like reading a book your best friend wrote." And, I have to say that made my day when I read it. So, you can grab *The Read-Aloud Family* now wherever books are sold; online, in a bookshop, ask your library to purchase it for you. It is



available everywhere. You'll find all kinds of book recommendations for different age ranges, you'll even hear my story of stumbling across *The Read-Aloud Handbook* at my friend, Christina's house when my oldest daughter was just a little tiny thing, so, kind of fun.

3:54 Reading aloud to 8 to 12 year olds

So, let's talk about reading aloud with 8 year olds to 12 year olds. And, the very most important thing for us to remember about this age is that it's absolutely critical that we continue to read-aloud. This is the danger zone. This is the zone, the age range, where we're most likely to drop reading aloud because our kids probably during this age chunk they become really good readers on their own. If they really like reading they may just read a lot faster on their own so they would prefer to read to themselves. If they're not super strong readers it's a struggle and books have a negative connotation. But, either way we have this tendency to value and prioritize reading on their own over reading aloud and that is a huge mistake. I go into why that is in the book, *The Read-Aloud Family*, so get your hands on that if you want to find out more about why it's so critically important to continue reading aloud to kids who can read to themselves. The increased exposure to vocabulary and the academic benefits of reading aloud, they continue to hold true even as our kids read on their own. Remember that kids have a higher listening comprehension than a reading comprehension. You would actually know this to be true even though if you've never quite thought about it like that before. For example, a child who's just learning how to read might only be able to sound out simple one syllable words but they can listen

to *The Chronicles of Narnia* or they can listen to *The Paddington Bear* books, right? But, they can't read them on their own yet. This continues to be true as they get older where they can listen to books like *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit* even when they can't quite comfortably read those books yet on their own. So, because our kids have a higher listening comprehension than reading comprehension we can read to them above their own reading level and they're exposed to sophisticated and correct language patterns, really rich and beautiful vocabulary, and of course, we get all the benefits of making those connections with our kids, developing warm memories, and having a good time with them, as well as opening up opportunities to have conversations at a time in their life when it's really important to have some good conversations. So, we want them to continue to love reading and this is the time in life when a lot of kids are in danger of not loving reading anymore, when it literally gets schooled out of them. This age, I believe, is critical to maintaining that delight and that love for stories.

6:19 Potential Pitfalls

So, let's talk about a few things that might trip us up when it comes to reading aloud with 8 year olds to 12 year olds. One, I've already mentioned, and that is prioritizing independent reading over reading aloud. And, that's a huge mistake because there are a lot of benefits to that good language coming in through the ear that they simply don't get when they read with their eyes. In fact, really good readers oftentimes skip lots of words, hard words but also small connector words when they're reading from the page, and that doesn't happen when they're hearing language read out loud, so they're getting that



really good grammar, the pattern of language—the way it should sound, they’re getting it through their ear. You know how when your child’s writing and they write like, kind of, a wonky sentence and you want to say, “That just doesn’t sound right. That’s not a complete sentence,” and they look at you like, ‘What do you mean that’s not a complete sentence?’ Well, if they’ve heard a lot of correct language through their ear they’ll have a much better likelihood of understanding, or intrinsically knowing, when a sentence works and when it doesn’t. And so, that’s one reason, just one small reason why it’s really important to continue to reading aloud, and what we can do is, unfortunately, forget that it’s so important. Another thing that might trip us up at this age is giving up picture books. We, sort of, feel like our kids are beyond them and they may feel like they’re beyond them, but that would be a big mistake. There are some really wonderful picture books that meet kids in this age group right where they’re at. This is an age where a lot of times we’re starting to have a little bit harder conversations with our kids about tough stuff in the real world, and picture books can be a really good way to start tackling some of that. Just a simple example is something like, if you’re telling your child about the events of 9/11 using a picture book to do that is a really good way to do that. But, also just picture books that are delightful or are funny or have gorgeous illustrations will inspire kids in this age group. So, I have some recommendations in *The Read-Aloud Family* for picture books for this age group that I think are particularly good, but don’t set aside picture books thinking that your child is beyond them. We never want to, all the way through their teens, we never want to completely replace picture books. Picture books are not something you outgrow. They’re like a different

genre, basically. They have a place at the table. You don’t want to feel like we’re moving up beyond picture books—what you want to do is feel like you’re moving out to expand more. So, now we read picture books, now we read picture books and we read middle grade novels, right? And, when we get to the teens, we’ll say, “Now, we read picture books and we read middle grade novels and we read YA novels or adult books,” (and we’ll talk about that next week in next week’s episode, “Reading Aloud with Teens”) but, just think of it as expanding concentric circles, instead of moving up like steps on a ladder. Does that help?

9:14 Feel silly reading to ‘big kids?’

Alright, so, another thing is that sometimes parents tell me they feel silly. They tell me they feel silly reading to their kids who are capable of reading, but your children will benefit really a ton from you reading aloud to them long past when they begin to read independently. And, if nothing else, besides the academic benefits and the emotional benefits and helping our kids be inspired to live with heroic virtue and to be compassionate and see things from another person’s point of view, and all that good stuff they get from reading aloud, you get to share a memory that they will remember. They will have a fondness for books that they simply won’t have if you stop reading aloud to them. It will be a different kind of fondness. So, that alone is worth continuing to read-aloud to your 8 to 12’s. And so, don’t feel silly—there are a ton of us, millions of us all over the world reading aloud to our kids who can read to themselves. You are not alone, even if you don’t see it, even if you don’t see us doing it in our homes, too.



10:15 Introducing the classics

There is a temptation, I think, at this age to introduce kids to the classics a little too early. Now, let me adjust that, because this is not too early to introduce your kids to the classics—there are a lot of wonderful classics that you can read to kids this age, however, I would just be careful when you're reading classics with your kids to remember that first and foremost they're stories. So, they're stories that have stood the test of time but just enjoying them for what they were meant to be, which are good stories, takes a lot of pressure off. I often recommend that instead of handing your kids classics to read at this age, you read them aloud with them, and that will go a long way to helping them understand the nuances and the pacing and the harder to understand language, is if you do some of that heavy lifting by reading them aloud. So, I would say one of the things that trips us up at this stage is expecting our kids to understand classics before they're ready or just pushing them to read classics or enjoy classics when they're still needing to read, kind of, a lot of easy stuff, and reading a classic can be a lot of hard work. So, reading them to your child is a really good way to expose your kids to classics and still preserve their love of stories and respect where they are in their own ability to read and comprehend.

11:30 Choosing books

So, when we're choosing books for 8 to 12 year olds we're looking for, I would say, when you're choosing books to read-aloud with 8 to 12 year olds try to read from a wide variety of genres. At this stage you'll find your kids really hooking on to a genre—so you may have a kid who just reads fantasy and that seems to be all that

they're interested in or just historical fiction or just graphic novels—that's not bad, that's them developing their own reading taste and kind of like we all do when you find a good Netflix series and you want to binge on the whole thing, where you find a new favorite author and you want to read everything by that author, it's natural to want to get more of what you already know you're going to love, right? But, it can be helpful in your read-aloud time to read a wide variety of genres so they get exposed to other genres that they might not realize appeal to them as well. So, you might want to read something from fantasy and then switch over to something historical fiction and then maybe some poetry and then maybe something contemporary and then maybe something set in a country that's different than your own or in a household that's different than your own, and just, sort of, give them this wide variety of literary experiences so they can see that the world of books is large and expansive and full of things they don't even know about yet that they will love, and that can oftentimes spark a really excited reader, because they'll realize there's so much out there and they can't wait to read more and find out what else they'll love.

13:08 Funny books, heroic books and more

Funny books are a great hit at this age, 8 to 12. One that comes to mind just right off the bat is *I'm Just No Good at Rhyming* by Chris Harris and illustrated by Lane Smith. This is poetry, kind of, in the spirit of Shel Silverstein. I mean, I've heard people say anyway that's he's like our modern day Shel Silverstein (I think he's actually better). They're so funny—the book is so funny. And kids in this 8 to 12 year old range they're perfect for it—so, funny books—looking for funny books.



Looking for books that have characters who are living heroic lives. That's really important at this stage. Kids want very often like to see books that require dire circumstances and big stakes and life feels big at this stage, and so it's good for our books to mirror that back to our children and they love to see characters who are living heroic lives in those books, or having to find out they're a hero by living through really hard things. And, then themes that are, books that are about friendship and loyalty, or the need for courage to face their fears—these are all things that a lot of middle grade books, which is what we call books geared for 8 to 12 year olds—we call them middle grade novels, and those are the kinds of things you'll find in a lot of middle grade novels. So, here are a couple of favorites that I'll share with you today. One, is fairly new. It's called *Cilla Lee-Jenkins: Future Author Extraordinaire*, written by Susan Tan. I think Cilla Lee-Jenkins has got to be one of the most delightful characters in children's lit. She's kind of like our own Ramona, a new generation's Ramona. She's different personality, but she's got a big personality which makes her really fun to read. She's also got a very tight deadline because she has a baby sister who's about to be born and everyone in her life seems to be preoccupied by that, so she's trying to write a best-seller so that her family realizes and remembers how amazing she is. It's funny. She's a really funny character. And, she's navigating life as a biracial child in a world that just does not always understand that, and understand her. So, really, really good book—*Cilla Lee-Jenkins: Future Author Extraordinaire*.

16:22 Heavier content & talking things out

Another book I recommend for 8 to 12's is *Stella by Starlight* and this is a more serious book than *Cilla Lee-Jenkins*. It was good. I really loved reading this one when I read it last year. Stella is a pretty ordinary African-American girl living in Bumblebee, North Carolina during the Great Depression. And, the story *Stella by Starlight* begins the night that Stella and her little brother, Jojo, witness the Ku Klux Klan burning a cross, and that puts Stella's life on a different trajectory. Her town, her life, her view of the world—it's never quite the same. There's nothing graphic in this book so it's appropriate for 8 to 12's but you do want to make sure that your child is ready to hear about the Klan and all of the evils surrounding it before they read this book. Like I said, there's nothing graphic but the subject matter is obviously naturally heavy. So, this brings up a really good point—8 to 12 year olds are oftentimes and they're going to be reading in their books about heavier topics and so this is a great age to really make, if you haven't been yet, make time to talk with your kids about what they're reading and what you're reading together. And, if you feel like you're a little bit lost and don't know how to have conversations with your kids about the books they're reading on their own, or that you're reading together, look at chapters ten and eleven in *The Read-Aloud Family* because chapter ten is all about the art of conversation, the importance of discussion, and the absolutely critical role it plays in connecting with our kids, and the importance of having a casual friendly demeanor (which is, frankly, not most of our default when it comes to interacting with our kids—I'm raising my hand here), and then chapter eleven are ten questions you can ask about any



book to have conversations. And, I kind of walk you through what that looks like: how to have a conversation with your kids about books without having all the answers, without having read all the books, so, if you're feeling like 'Ah, I don't know that piece' then get your hands on the new book, *The Read-Aloud Family* and look at chapters ten and eleven, and you'll be set. OK, another book recommendation for this age is a classic, *The Trumpet of the Swan* and this one's written by E. B. White, and you know him from *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, and I love those books but my favorite book he wrote is *The Trumpet of the Swan*. I think the characters in this book are priceless, especially Lewis' father—he's just so funny. And, basically, this is the story of the misadventures of Sam and this lovable swan, Lewis, as well as a trumpet that has potential in the story to change everything. It's a story, I think, about facing obstacles and overcoming struggles and freedom and friendship, and E. B. White has just got to be one of the best children's writers of all time. It is a delight to read this book aloud. There are a lot more recommendations for what to read with your 8 to 12 year olds in *The Read-Aloud Family* so if you need more recommendations get a copy of *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids* so that you have a list of books to read.

18:45 More resources

If you're looking for more resources on reading aloud with kids who are 8 to 12 I would recommend episode 64 of the Read-Aloud Revival (we'll put links to all these in the Show Notes, by the way—the Show Notes for this episode are at ReadAloudRevival.com/96). We did an episode with Laura Martin who's the

author of *The Edge of Extinction* books called, "Helping Resistant Readers Fall in Love with Books," and if you have a child between 8 and 12 who's not a voracious reader I implore you to go and listen to episode 64 with Laura Martin because you'll get some great ideas from her there. You also may enjoy episode 83 of the Read-Aloud Revival where we talked about why reading picture books with older kids matters; the role it plays, and some great picture books for older kids—that's a not-to-miss episode. Above all, remember at this stage: delight, delight, delight. Don't let the skill of reading or whatever school assignments your child has related to reading, or any need or desire you have for your child to read at a certain level, get in the way of their love of stories.

20:02 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: My name is Ray. I'm 11 years old. I live in Washington D.C., and my favorite book is *The Rise and Fall of Mount Majestic*. My favorite part is when Persimmony pretends to be a leaf eater and makes everyone laugh by tickling them.

Child2: My name is Adry. I'm 9 years old and I live in Virginia, and my favorite book is *The Penderwicks*. *The Penderwicks* is a book about when a family stays at Arundel for the summer and meets a boy named Jeffery. They have many fun adventures together. My favorite part is when Batty almost gets run over by a bull, and Jeffery saves her.

Child3: Hi, my name is Abbie and I'm 3½ and I live in Virginia, and I like the book *Shane*, and my



favorite part is when a bird knows how to sing and flies when she shares another person's seed.

Child4: My name is Milly and I am 7 years old, and my favorite book is *More Milly Molly Mandy*. Why I like the book is because she has the same name as I do. Milly Molly Mandy and her friends found a train cart in the forest. They wanted to play with it but realized it belonged to a different family. The dad was a tinker who fixed pots. Milly Molly and her friends brought pots for him to fix.

Child5: My name is Folton. I am 7 years old. I am from Michigan. My favorite books are *The Narnia Series* because they have funny parts in the stories.

Child6: [mom: what is your name?] ****inaudible**** [mom: how old are you?] 5. [mom: where are you from?] Michigan. [mom: what are your favorite books?] *Little Bear*. [mom: why are *Little Bear* your favorite books?] ****inaudible**** [mom: oh, you're a lot like *Little Bear*.]

Child7: [mom: what is your name?] Maria. [mom: Maria, how old are you? Where are you from?] Michigan. [mom: what is your favorite book?] *Jamberry*. [mom: why do you like *Jamberry*?] Because I like all the berries. [mom: you like all the berries?] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Child8: Hi, my name is Trinity, and I'm 5 years old, and I live at Greenbay, Wisconsin. And, my favorite book *Bedtime Songs* and the thing that I like about it is that there's music, and it makes me go to sleep, and I like *All the Pretty Little Horses*. "Don't you cry, all the go to sit on the pretty horses. Don't you cry, all the pretty little horses. ... all the pretty little horses."

Child9: My name's ****inaudible**** and I am 7 years old, and I like *Rosie Revere, Engineer* and what I like about it is because she builds a

helicopter for her great-aunt, and I live in Oklahoma.

Sarah: Hey, thanks kids. I love hearing your recommendations and those were really good ones today. That's it for today. Next week we're wrapping up this series—this has been our series of talking about the what's, how's, and what titles to read for each age group. And, next week here on the podcast we're going to tackle the low-down on reading aloud with teens. Very important episode, I can't wait to share it with you. You know, do you know who Andrea Davis Pinkney is? She's written some award-winning books including *Martin Rising*, a book of poems about Martin Luther King, Jr., *Sit-In*, and my favorite is *A Poem for Peter*, which is about the life and work of Ezra Jack Keats and the making of the picture book, *The Snowy Day*. She is actually Vice-President over at Scholastic and she's an editor over there, and I love her, and she read an early copy of *The Read-Aloud Family* and wrote this about it, she said, "If you're looking for the true meaning of quality time, here it is. This practical resource is for anyone who cares deeply about literacy and raising children to become lifelong readers." I love that she focused on quality time because I, kind of, feel that's what it's about. You know, this kind of a manifesto of reading aloud, but that's only secondary to the point of the book, which is really about connecting with our kids. We just, sort of, happen to be doing it through books because that's the best way that I know how, and the simplest method, I think, to really driving at the heart of connecting with our kids in today's really busy, busy times. If you haven't grabbed a copy of *The Read-Aloud Family* I encourage you to do that. Next week, we'll be back with a conversation about reading aloud with teens. Until then, go make meaningful



and lasting connections with your kids through books.