

RAR 111 – How to handle interruptions during read-aloud time

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, Sarah Mackenzie here, and you've got episode 111 of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. Today I want to talk about something we hear about kind of frequently. This is a question we get a lot on the Facebook page or through email or in our Premium Member forum and that is how do you handle interruptions during read-aloud time? Because we all are interrupted, right? Sometimes those interruptions come from the door bell, or from the phone ringing, sometimes they come in the form of a 2 year old, sometimes they come in the form of a new baby, or older kids who get up and walk out a whole bunch, or there's any number of interruptions that can happen during your read-aloud time. And, they can make you kind of frustrated unless you know in advance how you're going to handle them. So, today we're going to talk just about that – how to handle interruptions during read-aloud time.

1:24 It doesn't have to look perfect

To get us started today I want to read to you a few pages from my newest book, *The Read-Aloud Family*. This came out earlier in 2018 and I just want to read to you a couple of pages. If you have a copy at home, I'm reading from page 117, that's where I'm starting.

“When I first sought to make reading aloud a regular pillar of our family life, I had visions of sitting on the hearth, reading Robison Crusoe while my children sat on the floor around my feet doing productive, inspiring, creative things. Whittling, maybe. Or knitting a blanket.

But reading aloud doesn't look like that in my home. On our best days, I've got the kids around the dining room table, actively engaged with their hands while I read. Often, the watercolor paint cups spill. Somebody kicks someone else's leg under the table. The three-year-old decides to shout the word poop every three minutes. (What? That doesn't happen at your house?) Solicitors knock on the door, heedless of my NO SOLICITING sign. By the time I send the unwelcome visitors away and return to my seat, I've lost half my audience.

The families I know who read aloud most consistently (and therefore who get the most benefits) tell me that reading aloud doesn't look perfect in their homes either; it rarely (if ever) looks like they originally imagined it would.

Kids fight over couch cushions. Someone complains that the preschooler is making too much noise. The toddler runs off and starts shoving Hot Wheels down the toilet before you even notice he's gone. A kid jumps up every couple of minutes to sharpen one of his colored pencils, or another one wanders away right at the most climactic scene in the book. There are endless interruptions and constant rounds of bickering.

When read-aloud time doesn't look like we originally hoped, we begin to doubt that it's giving us any of those wonderful benefits we discussed in part 1 [of this book].



But here's the thing: it still works. Even when it's noisy, messy, and more chaotic than you'd like it to be, it works. Even when kids are grumbling, complaining, and don't seem to be listening, it works. When we read aloud to our kids in spite of the fact that it looks much different from our initial vision, we're stepping out in faith. If I can tell you one thing in this entire chapter it is this: keep stepping out.

When idealistic visions pop into your head, when you find yourself thinking about that Instagram post by the mom whose kids all appear perfectly content to listen to her read a classic for hours, stop yourself. Shut down the idealistic visions, because when you're reading aloud, even when it looks imperfect, you are going all-in. And you'll never regret it. You won't say, twenty years from now, "Dang, if I could do the parenting thing all over again, I'd read less to my kids."

It's worth it even when it looks nothing like a gorgeous magazine photo op. It's worth it, perhaps, because it looks nothing like a gorgeous magazine photo op. It looks like living and loving and going all-in. After all, that's exactly what it is.

4:20 Wasn't this supposed to be easy?

*[On] an unusually warm spring day, I grabbed Jennifer Trafton's middle-grade novel, *The Rise and Fall of Mount Majestic*, nabbed a box of popsicles from the freezer, and told all the kids to meet me on a picnic blanket in the back yard in approximately three minutes.*

The little ones made a beeline for the door, ready to cash in on an unexpected afternoon treat. I settled myself on the blanket, unwrapped popsicles, and then called inside to the big kids once again, "Come on, guys! Read-aloud time!"

"Coming!"

"Be there in a minute!"

"On my way!"

Clara dropped her popsicle in the grass and erupted in a meltdown. I snatched it up and ran inside to clean it off under the faucet, watching bits of grass and debris float down the drain.

"Kids! Read-aloud blanket! Backyard! Now!" I called.

I heard a ruffling of papers coming from the office, the whir of the electric pencil sharpener.

"We're coming, Mom! Just getting a few things to do!"

I huffed back out to the yard, noticing that the other kids' popsicles were already nearly gone. They had slurped them halfway, sticky syrup sliding down their arms. Emerson held his drippy treat tauntingly over his twin brother's head, watching as the bright red juice made its way slowly into his brother's left ear. A squall erupted from Becket, as he felt the goo make its way down.

The three big kids plunked down on the picnic blanket at last, but not before the twins complained about their sticky fingers.

"Go grab baby wipes, please," I told the oldest. The phone in my back pocket vibrated with a text from my husband: Can you please send the new bank account password? I'm trying to take care of some bills. Then the door bell rang, and all three littles hopped up to see who it was.

I laughed at the absurdity of it all, if only to keep myself from crying. Wasn't this supposed

to be easy? Wasn't this supposed to be enjoyable? How on earth was this read-aloud thing going to help me create lasting, lifelong bonds with my kids?

In the previous chapter [of this book], we dismantled the myth that read-aloud time should look like it does in our imaginations. The reality is that it just doesn't, at least, not most of the time. But it can be more peaceful—or at least less chaotic than the experience I just described—if we set ourselves up for success.”

6:38 You're not doing it wrong

Those selections were right from *The Read-Aloud Family* and we'll put a link to that book in the Show Notes, of course, but you can buy it anywhere books are sold. But we're not going to talk about the book today, we're going to talk about those interruptions, because I don't know if painting that picture of one of my own read-aloud experiences at home helps you realize that your read-aloud experiences aren't that unusual. I think, so often, we want our read-aloud times to look really harmonious and calm, and then kids start interrupting or throwing fits, and things just kind of start unraveling and we wonder what we're doing wrong. So, today on the Show I want to remind you, I want to encourage you that you're not doing anything wrong. Interruptions are part of the deal. Interruptions are part of what it means to be human and to be interacting with other humans, and getting things done. They don't diminish the value of the read aloud. Another thing that's really helpful to remember is that interruptions are not always negative. We tend to have a negative connotation with them, but really they can be great for connecting. If the interruptions that you're struggling with are coming from your young listeners because they

want to ask questions or talk about something in the book, those can be great discussion starters. Or, you can use those to help your child make predictions and, sort of, have some casual commentary in-between the reading. But a lot of times our interruptions aren't coming from kids who are interested in talking about the book. We're going to get into how to handle those. I just want to remind you right here at the top that it's OK to prioritize your humans over your books. Actually, it's important and good and right to prioritize humans ahead of books. This kind of seems obvious but some of us forget this, and I am raising my hand here. We get, kind of, wrapped up in the idea that we are going to read-aloud. And then we get frustrated when our humans don't cooperate. But, here's what we've got to remember. We're reading for our people. The people matter more than the stories. You want your child to leave that read-aloud time feeling valued and respected and loved. When we do that, when we're able to pull that off, it helps our kids see stories as an invitation and not just as another way to fail or another thing for mom to get frustrated with me about or dad to get frustrated with me about. So, remember even when you're getting frustrated with those interruptions that the humans matter more than the book. It actually matters more that you're meeting the heart needs of your children than that you're getting the words of the book into them. It's an easy thing to forget when we're in the thick of things.

9:00 How to set yourself up for success

OK, well, first let's talk about how to set ourselves up for success because I actually think we can prevent some of the frustrations that come from



being interrupted, if we just set ourselves up a little better. So I want to talk to you about a few ways that I think can be helpful as we prevent interruptions or at least minimize them. One is simply to choose a time of day when we're going to be interrupted least of all. If you're interruptions are coming from your ringing phone, or your doorbell dinging when the kids next door get home from school and want to play, or whatever, just choose a time of day when you're less likely to get interrupted. Turn your phone totally off and if the outside interruptions are the things that are making you crazy, minimize those by choosing a better time of day to do your read-aloud. If your interruptions are coming from kids running off to the bathroom (I cannot be the only mom who goes crazy when you're in the middle of read-aloud and someone has to pee – right when you get started), tell them to go potty first, I know this sounds like super, super simple but I am amazed at how often I forget to tell everybody, “Use the bathroom, get your things (which we'll talk about in a second) because we're going to read aloud in 10 minutes.” Pretend like you're going on a road trip. You're not going to get everybody into van until everyone's peed. Same thing for read-aloud, it's a road trip, everybody has to pee before they come to read-aloud time. OK, so when I said, “everyone use the bathroom and get your things,” what things am I talking about?

10:23 Something to do ...

Well, we want to give our kids something to do with their hands and we have talked about this on the Read-Aloud Revival podcast before. On episode 82, Dr. Michael Gurian came to the Read-Aloud Revival podcast and described to us why our children's brains listen better and why

they pay better attention when they're doing something with their hands. And in episode 73 I gave you a whole bunch of ideas for things your kids can do with their hands while you read-aloud. And, in episode 73, if you go to the Show Notes which are at ReadAloudRevival.com/73 you'll see links to all the different kinds of things my kids do while we read-aloud and ideas from kids from 1 all the way through teens – things they can do while they read aloud. However, one of the things that you might want to do is organize a few simple activities like the ones I mentioned in that post, like watercolors, markers, play doh, hand lettering worksheets, or perler beads, or geo boards, or puzzles, or thinking putty—whatever it is that your kids are going to be doing while you're reading aloud—you might want to create a bin, a shelf, a drawer, just one place where you stick things people can do while you're reading aloud. We do this at our house. We also have those paper trays you'd see at a doctor's office or something—they put files on (you know what I'm talking about?), we'll put a link in the Show Notes, and each of my kids has a name on it and they can put works in progress, so sketches they're working on, or drawings, if they want to save a coloring book or something for themselves and not somebody else, they'll stick it in their tray. And when I say, “Hey everybody, in five minutes, or in ten minutes, we're going to have read-aloud time, everyone use the bathroom and get your things,” they know where they can go to grab their things easily for read-aloud time. And then it's not delayed. Our read-aloud time isn't delayed by everybody trying to find something to do and also, after I've started reading aloud they don't get to go back to the bin or go back to the closet or the other room or whatever and start finding something to do. They have to bring it with them



when we start read-aloud time. That will help a lot especially if you have fidgety kids and they need to do something with their hands but you don't want them to interrupt your read-aloud time to get something. We can put a picture in the Show Notes which will be at ReadAloudRevival.com/111 of a couple different ways we've done this, and I know I have a picture of the magazine file holders that we put on the back of our piano—those have my kids' names on them. What we do is put the How to Draw books and coloring books and drawing papers and things like that in those. Those are easy to grab when you want to just sit down and start reading right away. And it also helps your kids get organized so they don't spend a lot of time frustrated trying to think of what on earth am I going to do during read-aloud time today?

13:01 Keep it short and use audiobooks

OK, another preventative or a way to set yourself up for success is to just read aloud for shorter amounts of time. If you find yourself getting interrupted a lot and those interruptions are starting to increase in frequency, the longer you read-aloud, just read-aloud for a shorter amount of time—that could help. Another thing you can do is try to do some of your reading aloud in the car via audio book. Now, for a lot of families this could be a great solution if you have loud toddlers, I have been there, and I know that it is not always possible to do audio books in the car, and is not always possible to keep toddlers from being loud and ruining the audio book in the car for everyone. So, I'm going to throw that out as an option if you think, 'huh, I'm going to try that,' that might be a good fit for you. If you think there is no way that would work in my home, don't get

discouraged—there's a lot of us in the same boat—just pick something else. But, audio books in the car can be a good way to get a lot of extra reading aloud time with a captive audience just kind of depends on the ages of your kids, whether or not that's going to work. If you have kids under 3 or maybe even under 4, might not work as well as it will when they're a little bit older. You can also, of course, use audio books at home. And this can be a really good solution if you have really young ones. If you have kids 2 and under who are needing to be diapers needing to be changed and the baby needs to be nursed or snack needs to be gotten to, or you just need to be able to step out without the baby or the toddler for a few minutes to kiss an owie or just take their noise somewhere else, an audio book is a great way to get a read-aloud in without having to interrupt. So, let's just say you're going to read *Charlotte's Web* for your school day, or for your family read-aloud, and so everybody's in there and we're all listening to you read-aloud *Charlotte's Web* and then the 1 year old falls and gets an owie, or needs a snack, or needs to nurse, and you have to stop reading to go get the snack or go get the band-aid or pick up the toddler/the baby and take them into the other room to comfort them or whatever, that can be really disruptive to your read-aloud time and then feel like this really frustrating interruption. So, if you're in that season try instead turning on the *Charlotte's Web* audio book, for example, because then when you have to step out for second the other kids can still continue listening to the story, when you come back in you won't have missed too much. But it doesn't interrupt the entire read-aloud time for you to step out—so that can be a really, really good solution for when you're getting interrupted by small people a lot, which has happened a lot in our house.



15:33 Tips for older kids

This doesn't work as well with toddlers, of course, and preschool kids, but if your older kids—if they're interrupting a lot (which happens too, they might be asking questions about the book or they might just be bringing up random things that you're like, any other time would be better to talk about this than right now) if your kids know you're going to stop reading if they interrupt a bunch they might be more mindful of their interruptions. So, let's say you're reading aloud before bedtime and you've already asked them to please stop interrupting and to be quiet and they keep doing it, you could just close the book and say, "We're done for tonight," and then they all have to go to bed—it'll only take one or two times of doing that before they figure out that interrupting is not what they want to do. Of course, that only works if they're older kids. OK, so choosing a time that's likely to be successful, making sure they go to the bathroom first, or get a bottle of water or a cup of water or whatever they're going to need that's going to take them into the other room and make you crazy—getting all that first, getting anything they're going to do with their hands first, utilizing audio books either in the car or at home; those are all ways that you can prevent the frustration of interruptions.

16:40 WHY are your kids interrupting?

But, how do you handle interruptions when they're happening? Let's talk about a few different ways to do that. There are a few different ways to handle these interruptions—none of them is the one right way. So, if you're dealing with a lot of interruptions just try some of these and see what sticks and what works for your

family, for their ages, for their sensitivities, for your own sanity. We're all a little bit different so there's no one right way to do this but just see if any of these sound like they might be a good fit. First of all, figure out why they're interrupting. If the interruptions are coming from your kids, find out why they're interrupting. Is it because they're little? Because, if they're 4 and under, they're interrupting because they're little—that's just how it's going to be. You might need to read-aloud at a different time of day. You might offer a treat if they're quiet during read-aloud time. I have done this before where I have given them a sucker. Suckers are awesome for this because if you get those little dum-dum suckers there's not that much sugar, they're little, they're tiny—they're not like a big tootsie pop or something. They're a little sucker but a sucker takes awhile and it keeps their mouths busy. So, I have done this before where I'll give each kid a dum-dum during read-aloud time and it keeps those little kids quiet for five or ten minutes, and ten minutes is all you need to get some good reading in. So, even offering a treat like that can be helpful, or a snack (popcorn, fruit, something to keep their mouths busy) that can be helpful too. If the kids who are listening to the read-aloud are interrupting, like your older kids, maybe they're interrupting because they're confused, because they have a lot of questions about the story, there's a few things to consider. One is just to consider the fact that you might be reading too far above their level. We hear a lot of benefits about reading aloud above our children's comprehension level and that's good, but they have to be able to comprehend it. So what we want them to do, when people say you should read above your child's reading comprehension level, they mean read aloud above what they can read on their own directly from the page. They don't mean



read aloud beyond your child's capacity to understand. So if they're asking a ton of questions about the books you're reading and it's a constant thing, consider maybe reading something a little simpler, staying with picture books for longer, or not moving up to those more complicated novels or middle grade novels or even more complicated picture books that have new words and new names and historical references that they don't understand. Be OK with bringing it back down a notch for a little while, because that could actually be just really frustrating.

19:05 Books with new words or references

If you're constantly being read to and you have no idea what's going on that's a frustrating experience for your child. One thing you can do, especially if you're reading those historical type books, picture books or novels, that have place names and people's names, and maybe words or references that are confusing or they don't know, if you know those are coming you can list those on a whiteboard. You can even have a whiteboard or a sheet of paper next to you during read-aloud time. And every time you come up with a name or a thing, object or a word, that your child's not familiar with you can write it down and pause for a second and either write it down and explain or you can flip through the chapter before you start reading and jot those down so that right before you read you can say, "OK, these are some of the things we're going to encounter today in our read-aloud time." Let me give you an example. This is not a historical book or anything but we were recently reading *Runaway Ralph*. I was reading *Runaway Ralph* by Beverly Cleary to my 6 and 5 year olds and in

Runaway Ralph there is a bugle because their kids are at camp and I wanted my kids to know what a bugle was because I was pretty sure they didn't. So, I knew it was coming because I – I didn't skim or pre-read or anything, I just had flipped through the chapter really fast and saw the word "bugle" and thought they're not going to know what that is – so before we started reading I pulled up a picture of a bugle on my phone and then I went to YouTube and I let them listen to what a bugle sounded like. That helped a lot. So, doing a really quick flip through of a chapter before you read it or picture book before you read it, and clearing up anything that might be a little confusing before you read, that can actually go a long way to keeping your kids from interrupting constantly. You don't have to do this every time you read but if you're reading a book that you find you're constantly getting interrupted because there are confusing new terms or words or names or places, just do yourself a favor and spend two minutes before you start reading, flipping through it and then clearing up those confusing words ahead of time. That can really, really keep your kids from interrupting a lot.

20:57 Interrupting for attention

If you think you have a child who's interrupting a lot during read-aloud time for attention, try to fill up that child's love bucket ahead of time. I can tell you – this is a little different but I can tell you that on school days when we're homeschooling if I don't spend at least five or ten minutes on the floor playing with my youngest kids they will interrupt so much more often than if I just give them a couple of minutes of eye contact, hugging, snuggling, and playing attention beforehand, and I think they just need their love buckets filled up a little bit, and they feel less



needy. So, in the same way if you have a child who's constantly interrupting during read-aloud time and you suspect it's for attention, see if you before read-aloud time you can fill up their love bucket, have a little conversation with them one on one, play a card game, just do something that will make them feel seen and heard before read-aloud time, and see if that doesn't help.

21:57 Connection first!

Remember, remember, remember, remember, the number one thing we want to worry about when we read aloud with our kids is connection. We want them to leave our read-aloud time feeling loved. And so, if read-aloud time you're frustrated because your kids aren't behaving as well as you wanted them to but they're feeling scolded, that's sort of back-firing on us. What we want is connection. So even if it doesn't look perfect, even if our kids miss stuff, even if things don't look exactly idealistic as we'd hoped, it's the fact that you're sitting down and reading a story with your children that will stay with them, and even if they miss a paragraph, a page, a chapter, they'll be able to catch up, they'll be able to figure out what's going on especially if a sibling can really quickly bring them back up to speed. And again, that kind of seems obvious but I think some of us forget that. We get really intent on getting that whole book into our child and we really, really, really forget is for the child's benefit. The child is more important than the read-aloud. Another thing you can do, and you can do this with older kids who can write, is if you have a child, let's say they're 10 or 12 or 14 or something, and they're constantly interrupting you with questions give that child a piece of paper and a pencil and tell them, "Hey, while I'm reading aloud today if you have questions write them down on the paper so

you don't forget them, because that's a stress for them. If you say, "Ask at the end," then they get kind of stressed, holding it in their mind, they might miss more of the read-aloud because they're thinking over and over in their head, 'I don't want to forget that question I had,' so give them a piece of paper and say, "Just write down your question and when we're done reading I promise I'll answer them all." And that can be really, really helpful. That's probably only helpful with a child who can write but if you have an older child who interrupts a lot that can fix the situation right there. I hope that helps. If you have kids who are interrupting and you have some other ideas of ways to solve this we'd love to hear from you in the comments of this podcast which are at ReadAloudRevival.com/111. It's OK if your read-aloud time looks like mine did that I read to you from *The Read-Aloud Family* at the beginning of this episode. If things are a little crazy and chaotic it's still making a difference. It's the process of sitting down with the child, falling into a story, and remember that the most important piece of the whole thing is connection. So, even if it doesn't look exactly like you hoped it was, but it's an opportunity for you and your child to connect, for your kids to connect with each other, and for you all to connect with the ideas and the stories you read, then that is a win.

24:32 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 Reina. I'm from Wisconsin. I like **[**inaudible**]**.



Child2: Hello, my name is Audrey, and I am 9 years old. And I'm from Louisiana. My favorite book is *Green Ember*. My favorite character is Heather. I like her because she's a good big sister and she's big. Bye.

Child3: Hi, my name is Leah, and I live in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. And I am 6 years old and my favorite book is *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. And my favorite part is when they're trapped on the ice cube and Peter sticks his sword in the ice.

Child4: Hi, my name is Mimi. I'm 6 and I live in Washington State. My favorite book is *[**inaudible**]* by James Herriot. Sweet and Jet, their dogs, and it's a great story. Bye bye.

Child5: My name is Eleazar and I'm 5 years old. And my favorite book is *The Balloon Tree*. I like it because there's lots of balloons and a princess. [Mom: and where do you live?] In Germany. I live in Germany.

Child6: Hi, my name is Emma, I'm from Miami, Florida and I'm 7. My favorite book is *The Wizard of Oz*.

Child7: Hi, I'm 8 years old, and my name is Hudson, and my favorite book is *Pilgrim's Progress* because he goes through lots of adventures.

Child8: Hi, my name is Addie, and I'm 5 years old, and I live in Knoxville, Tennessee, and my favorite book is my ballerina book because it has ballerina pictures, and it's my favorite.

Child9: Hi, my name is Haddon. I'm 8 years old. I live in Knoxville, Tennessee, and my favorite book is *[**inaudible**]* because he goes on these adventures.

Sarah: Thank you so much, kids. I always love hearing your book recommendations. We're going to be back next week with episode 112. I'm talking with Lisa Brown about how audio books are made. Lisa Brown is an audio book narrator and she is also the producer of my own audio book when I recorded *The Read-Aloud Family*. So, she's kind of taking us behind the scenes of how it works and how an audio book is made. That's happening next week right here at the Read-Aloud Revival. Remember, you can get the Show Notes for today's episode at ReadAloudRevival.com/111. And, we'll be back next week. I can't wait. Until then, go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.