

Children and young people need help to join the reading community!

Children from just one year of age can start learning to read. Then this skill really takes off in the preschool years. The rich variety of picture books available for children of different ages is a valuable resource for preschool teachers, teachers and parents when reading aloud to children. As things stand at present, many Swedish preschools and schools lack access to libraries and librarians who are able to support and guide adults and children to find books that are fun and interesting to read. Reading aloud must be encouraged at all levels, as this marks the important point at which children start to become part of the reading community. Besides being pleasant and sociable, reading aloud opens the door to:

- Passion and curiosity for the world of books
- Knowledge of the world around us
- Discovering letters, words and sentences
- Cracking the reading code
- Language development
- Vocabulary

Discussing the things you have read

As an adult, reading to a young child initially involves you pointing at pictures and telling the child what you see in the pictures: “dog”, “cow”, “car”. You should read the text as the child grows; but do not just read. Talk about what the book is about, what the pictures show. This arouses the child’s curiosity and passion for the exciting world of books. “What do you think this book is about?” you may ask as you look at the front and back of the book. While you read, you can ask questions about things that happen in the book, why they happen and whether anything like that has ever happened to the child. When you have finished reading, you can sit together and sum up what happened in the book and why it happened, or touch on other issues raised. You will also come across words that you will need to explain, that you will both need to think about. The

Three Billy-Goats Gruff wanted to go to the field and eat tasty grass. The child might ask what a field is, and then you can talk about that and look at the pictures in the book. Is there a field near here? – We could go and have a look at it in the summer. Expanding vocabulary and language skills development lays the foundation for reading comprehension.

Helping with cracking the reading code

What else can reading aloud do? – Well, it could help your child learn all about cracking the reading code. Use your finger to point when you read, and draw the child's attention to letters, words and sentences and the direction in which you read. Show the child that sentences start with a capital letter and end with a full stop. Sound out the words in the text and explore the text and pictures together with the child. Point to the child's "own" letter. "Here's an 'M' for 'Molly', can you see any more Ms?" This is how easy it is to help your child enjoy their exciting adventure as they work towards cracking the reading code. Also, ask open questions that encourage the child to think. Asking questions like "Why do we skate on ice?" and "How do you think mummy bunnies talk to their babies?" help children to think and develop their understanding of the world around them. This strengthens future reading skills.

Teaching reading as part of all school subjects

The most important job of any school is to help all their students develop good reading skills. This requires a rich vocabulary. Teachers stimulate their students' thinking and learning when teaching subject content and words and terms relating to art, English, physical education, mathematics, science, social studies, crafts, Swedish, etc. (Beck et al., 2013). Children's language develops and their vocabulary grows. Every school subject must teach reading in order to enhance reading development among students. Teachers can teach students how they should be reading texts in the various subjects. When is the best time to start reading headings and picture captions? When is the best time to start studying pictures, diagrams and other visuals? What is the best way to summarise the content of a text? What strategies should students be taught to help them understand textual content, and how can teachers help students to apply these strategies in all their reading activities? Such issues are relevant to all subjects in schools. Children are familiar with story structure, with a beginning, a middle and an end, from their preschool days. In school, teaching must help students to summarise, interpret and retell stories in order to enhance their reading comprehension.

Plenty of reading

Teaching reading is not enough. Students also need to *read* in all their school subjects so that they can practise decoding words and reading fluently while learning the content of the subjects. Good reading skills require a *lot* of reading;

reading of simple books initially, and gradually switching to more difficult texts on different subjects. Students can read aloud or silently, on their own or in groups. Silent reading of a book, perhaps something chosen by the student, followed by an in-depth discussion of the text, is also important and needs to be adapted to the student's circumstances. Students attend school for many years, and their teaching is expected to follow a progression that helps every student to develop into a proficient reader.

Reading on the timetable every day

At present, Swedish students read very little at school (Vinterek et al., 2022). Students have said that they are happy to read if their teacher tells them to read, if interesting texts are available to read and if they are sometimes allowed to choose a text to read (Tegmark et al., 2022). To *enter* the community of readers, students need to crack the code and practise their reading skills (Lundberg, 2010). Understanding what is read requires a large vocabulary and the ability to understand and use language. *Remaining* part of the community of readers requires reading lessons and plenty of reading of longer texts in different subject areas. That is why reading instruction and daily reading must be included in the school timetable for the various subjects. Students need access to interesting texts and books to read. They also need to be allowed to choose what they read occasionally. It can be that simple.

Sparking interest in the world of books

Homes, preschools and schools have to share responsibility for helping children discover the world of books and build up an interest in reading. Regular visits to the library with bags of borrowed books can lay the foundation for a child's future reading skills. Children learn to love books and to listen to reading if they are only given the opportunity to do so. Research shows that children who listen to someone reading aloud at home also want their preschool teachers to read to them. That is why it is not surprising that children who hear others reading aloud from early childhood enter the community of readers earlier than children who do not (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Swedish libraries and the wealth of books for children and young people that are available to borrow in several languages are a treasure trove for children's reading development both at home and in preschool/school.

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