CAN *FREAKONOMICS* BE RIGHT?
THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY READING

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Abstract

This project explores the multifaceted short- and long-term benefits of reading aloud to pre-school children (ages 0 to 5), expanding the perspective of reading aloud presented in Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner's *New York Times* bestseller, *Freakonomics*. Through a review of secondary sources and personal interviews of scholars, "free" book program directors, a community educator, an elementary school teacher, a librarian, and a parent and grandparent, the paper investigates why reading aloud is crucial for enhancing young children's reading-related abilities, interest in books, and later academic success and should be perceived as a highly valuable parent-child activity. It also examines the value of "free" book programs that promote reading in the home and examines how certain read-aloud strategies help engage children in the world of books.

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Can *Freakonomics* Be Right? The Importance of Early Reading

Introduction

In today's world of graphic-packed computer games, action-filled movies, and captivating television programs, children have plenty of entertainment sources to fill their days and evenings. However, it is not only the kids who enjoy these multimedia outlets; it is their parents as well, for the TV and computer offer convenient babysitters after a stressful day at work. The only input required on the parent's part calls for entering the computer's password, popping in a DVD, or changing the channel. So, are these sources of amusement all bad for kids? Probably not, if watched and played in moderation. But, it is important to regularly step outside the line of technology and recognize the value of visiting the local library or reading books aloud with children.

Literacy expert and author Mem Fox says, "Sad and shocking though it is, the incalculable benefits of reading aloud are not widely recognized or sufficiently promoted. Even when the benefits are known, many parents don't take them seriously enough because they feel that reading aloud is too simple and obvious to be that important" (Fox 119). In 2005, Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner published a *New York Times* bestseller, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, which claims that "regularly reading to a child doesn't affect test scores" (Levitt 172). A sweeping statement like this in a widely circulated book presents a limited perspective of reading aloud and could potentially add to the idea that reading is not a beneficial endeavor with payoffs in many arenas. Thus, the mission of this project is to explore why reading aloud to pre-school children (ages zero to five) enhances their reading-related abilities and interest in books and, therefore, should be perceived as a highly

valuable parent-child activity. Through a review of classic and modern sources and interviews of individuals interested in early reading, this paper evaluates how reading aloud to young children shapes their cognitive and psychosocial development, including their understanding of books, language skills, and passion for reading. The study also examines the value of several "free" book programs that promote reading in the home. Finally, the paper highlights strategies and tips for successfully engaging young children in the world of books though shared read-aloud sessions. With such strong evidence and persuasion on the power of reading to young children, one must question the ideas about early reading set forth in the popular title, *Freakonomics*.

What Does *Freakonomics* Say?

While *Freakonomics* puts a fascinating spin on a wide variety of everyday topics, it features one chapter specifically on the role of parents and how certain parental factors affect children's "school performance" (Levitt 157). The authors use regression analysis to analyze data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) conducted in the late 1990s by the Department of Education. The ECLS includes information on "students' academic performance" and "typical survey information" such as "his race, gender, family structure, socioeconomic status, the level of his parents' education and so on." It also encompasses data such as "how much television the children watched" and "whether the parents spanked their children" (161). By applying regression analysis to this information, the authors evaluate how sixteen specific parental factors correlate with children's test scores. Among the eight factors that show a positive correlation include: "The child has highly educated parents," "The child's parents are involved in the PTA,"

and "The child's mother was thirty or older at the time of her first child's birth" (167) Among those that did not show a positive correlation were: "The child's parents regularly take him to museums," "The child is regularly spanked," and most important to this project, "The child's parents read to him nearly every day" (167-168). From these distinctive lists, the analysis suggests that "it isn't so much a matter of what you do as a parent; it's who you are" (175). The authors conclude,

> Parents who are well educated, successful, and healthy tend to have children who test well in school; but it doesn't seem to much matter whether a child is trotted off to museums or spanked or sent to Head Start or frequently read to or plopped in front of the television." (175)

It is the idea that "frequently read[ing] to children" does not "matter" (Levitt 175) that this project will attempt to debate. In doing so, the project will not evaluate the merits of reading aloud based on test scores alone, but will consider the many benefits—educational and non-educational—of sharing a book with a child. Roger Sutton, editor of *Horn Book Magazine*, furthers the argument that individuals should measure the value of reading aloud by more than numerical data. He says,

> While the advice to read aloud to children has been overcodified with rules, hyped with promises and touched with the ridiculous [...] we don't need statisticians to validate it. Just as dessert tastes good regardless of the consequences of ingesting it, reading aloud is in itself a happy activity. (Sutton 392)

This metaphor suggests an affective or qualitative reason for reading—a move toward pleasure and even passion for reading and being with books.

Methodology

Selection of Topic

My interest in studying the effects of early reading stems from my own enjoyment of reading and language, which I believe began during my pre-school years when my mother read aloud to me. Not only have I benefited from being read to, I have witnessed how reading aloud benefited my brother, who is a special education student. As with myself, I believe his current reading ability is, at least in part, a testament to his early exposure to reading. Also, I have interacted with children who were read to frequently and have observed the positive effects on their language abilities and general knowledge, supporting my idea that reading is a valuable activity and encouraging me to study the reasons for this phenomenon.

Types of Research: Literature Review and Interview Study

Overview of Literature Review. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of reading aloud, I evaluated a broad range of research, ranging in publication date from 1956 to 2006 and representing genres such as books, journal articles, websites, and reports. Some of the works were recommended to me by my faculty advisor, while others I discovered through personal library research or the bibliographies of other literature. The purpose of the research focuses on examining what reading experts consider the academic and non-academic effects of reading aloud. Because I was interested in expanding the perspective of reading aloud presented in *Freakonomics*, not in challenging the authors' specific claim about reading's effect on test scores, I did not focus on standardized test score data. Instead, I studied literacy

experts' vast array of remarks on the benefits and payoffs of early reading and grouped them into the following categories: expanded knowledge, increased awareness of print and language, expanded vocabulary, increased reading comprehension, interest in reading, and school success. In addition, I gathered different perspectives on topics closely related to reading aloud. These included: when parents should begin reading to their child, how television should fit in with reading aloud, and what methods make reading to children most effective. Thus, the literature review not only evaluates the proclaimed benefits of reading aloud, but also seeks to determine what reading-related factors aid in producing these effects.

Overview of Interview Study. In addition, I elected to incorporate an interview study into my project in order to add a personalized segment to my research. Rather than relying solely on the findings of others, I wished to gather insight on early reading through questions of my own and to analyze this primary research in a separate section of my final paper. Therefore, I conducted an interview study to allow individuals to convey their unique experiences related to early reading (whether in the classroom, in their research, or in their own homes).

Approval. In order to gain permission to conduct an interview study with human subjects, I submitted a Form B application to the University of Tennessee Office of Research. This submission included an application, a letter inviting individuals to participate in my research, sample interview questions, an informed consent statement, my resume, and my faculty advisor's resume. My research was approved in January 2006. (See IRB-Appendix.)

Participants. The research participants included a convenience sample of adult volunteers: scholars, directors of "free" book programs, an elementary school teacher, a librarian, and a parent and grandparent interested in early reading. Most of the participants are known in the Knoxville area for their interest in early reading and were recommended to me by my faculty advisor, while the parent and grandparent are acquaintances of mine who have young children/grandchildren. I invited the adults to participate via a mailed letter explaining my research. I sent out thirteen letters, and all thirteen individuals agreed to participate in the study. However, due to scheduling conflicts, I was unable to interview one of these individuals, making the total number of participants twelve. Each participant signed an informed consent statement giving me permission to use quotations from his or her interview in my written project. Participants had the option of having their quotations identified with their actual names or an alias.

Interviews. I conducted the interviews at a mutually convenient time and location with each volunteer research participant. No compensation was given for participation in the interviews. The interview questions were open-ended and focused on the following topics: how the participant believes reading aloud benefits pre-schoolers academically and non-academically, how the participant acquired his or her knowledge/ideas about reading to young children (research, personal experiences, professional experiences), and how the participant thinks reading can be promoted for young children and their parents. (See IRB-Appendix B.) Each interview lasted between approximately 15 and 45 minutes. In order to ensure accuracy, I audio taped the interviews and transcribed them after the meeting. Also, I e-mailed the participants

copies of their interviews, asking them to notify me of any desired additions or incorrect information. I received no recommendations for changes or deletions.

Analysis of Primary Research

Method. I transcribed the interviews into question-and-answer format so that I could easily differentiate between my questions and the participants' responses. I then read the transcripts several times to gain a strong comprehension of the participants' comments, while at the same time noting particularly interesting data. Next, I used *content analysis* to determine common themes within the participants' remarks. I gained a general understanding of *content analysis* through a discussion with my advisor and a comprehensive overview provided by a Colorado State University online "guide" (Busch). This method of analysis involved analyzing the transcripts closely to identify similar ideas throughout the twelve interviews. After the common themes were determined, I assigned each theme a color and then color-coded the transcripts with my established key. I also denoted the participants' outlying but significant ideas that did not fit in the predominant themes with a star. I then evaluated how the outlying perspectives reshaped the body of knowledge as a whole. Next, I wrote my analyses in the primary research section of my paper. I organized this section around the common themes, writing a subsection on each theme. This involved evaluating all of the interview comments that addressed the respective theme and integrating the diverse thoughts of the participants. My final task linked the predominant themes expressed in the interview studies to the data gathered through the secondary research. This analysis appears in the concluding paragraphs of the project.

Biases. Despite my attempts to be objective in my research, my interviews were devised and analyzed based on what I feel are significant issues related to early reading, which, in turn, makes the research findings subjective. Since I acknowledge this inevitable subjectivity, I do not intend to claim that reading aloud undoubtedly will boost children's reading capabilities, language skills, or test skills. I only intend to portray the realm of ways in which reading aloud can benefit children and to encourage parents to engage in this activity based on its potential merits. My research does not delve into bodies of thought that claim reading *is not* essential to children's success, primarily because my project does not seek to prove that reading *is* the key to achievement—only that there is significant evidence on its value.

Interpretation of Research

In the writing of my project, I attempt to present an extensive overview of the benefits of early reading and to support my thesis with documented research and personal accounts of interview participants. Despite the plethora of support for my claims, I remind readers that none of the listed benefits are guaranteed for every child, as many factors play into a child's reading and language abilities. But, without reserve, I encourage all parents to afford their children the opportunity to benefit from shared reading experiences, for books have the potential to enhance many aspects of a child's life.

Literature Review

When Should Reading Begin?

Though children start reading at different ages, the age when they begin to benefit from read-aloud sessions is the same—during infancy: "Babies begin to acquire information about literacy from the moment of birth" and "continue to build on their knowledge of oral language, reading, and writing as they go through early childhood" (Morrow 2). The early introduction of books contributes to the significant growth of the brain during infancy. Fox explains,

> Children's brains are only 25 percent developed at birth. From that moment, whenever a baby is fed, cuddled, played with, talked to, sung to, or read to, the other 75 percent of its brain begins to develop. And the more stimulation the baby has through its senses of touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing, the more rapidly that development will occur. (13)

Thus, even before a child can speak, reading aloud plays a crucial role in his or her intellectual development, emphasizing the value of developing an early interest in books among children.

While the attention a newborn to three-month-old directs toward a book will likely be "erratic," babies who are introduced to reading at birth "begin very early to be attentive in story reading situations" (Morrow 29). As babies grow and advance in all stages of development, their reading awareness also expands. Three- to six-month-olds "begin to focus on pictures and to listen," while six- to nine-month-olds "might try to turn pages [...] might respond to changes in the reader's intonation or make sounds and movements to demonstrate involvement and pleasure" (30). As infants near their first

birthday, they advance even more, for the child "might take a leadership role in turning pages, or babble along tones that sound like reading" (30). Between twelve and fifteen months, infants "who have been read to" can identify the book's cover and back, determine if the book is "right side up or not," and "begin to identify and name characters" (30). Robin Campbell echoes many of these reading milestones in his account of watching his granddaughter, Alice, gain literacy knowledge. Some of her one-year-old accomplishments, which the author considers "typical of many children given similar provision and support" (Campbell 17), include: "holding the book correctly so it was the right way up," "turn[ing] the pages from the front towards the back," and drawing "connections between pictures, objects in real life and the name of these objects" (19). Considering that one-year-olds are often speaking only a few words and just taking their first steps, these tasks are quite complex and demonstrate the educational power of sharing a book with a child.

From evaluating these responses of infants, it is clear that children respond to reading aloud and various types of language even before their first birthday. According to Fox, "By the age of one, children will have [...] learned all the sounds that make up the native languages they are going to speak" (Fox 14), demonstrating the importance of exposing them to literary language at an early age. Morrow emphasizes that infants need to hear regular conversation along with other types of sounds, such as "soft music from a radio, record player, or music box" and "book language," in order to "learn to differentiate among [language's] various conventions and patterns." "Book language," she explains, "differs in intonation, pitch, stress, juncture, and even syntax from normal conversation" (Morrow 53). The advancement infants make through language

underscores the importance of very early reading, for "the foundations of learning to read are set down from the moment a child first hears the sounds of people talking, the tunes of songs, and the rhythms and repetitions of rhymes and stories" (Fox 15). Therefore, parents should not wait for their children to ask to be read to or to be introduced to books at school, they should engage their child in the world of reading and accelerate their exposure to this valuable arena of language.

What Are the Benefits of Reading Aloud to Young Children?

While reading to infants lays strong "foundations" (Fox 15) for literacy, it is equally important to continue reading to children as they progress through their pre-school years, for the benefits of shared parent-child reading are multifaceted, spanning from heightened vocabulary to a general love of reading. In its report, *Becoming A Nation of Readers*, the Commission on Reading for the National Academy of Education characterized reading aloud as "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading" (*Becoming* 23). This section of the paper will explore many of the language-related skills and benefits children gain from early reading and will demonstrate why the experts deem reading so valuable.

Expanded Knowledge. One of the most basic, yet important, benefits of reading aloud is the practical knowledge children gain from books. According to Susan L. Hall and Louisa C. Moats, reading introduces young children to "things, people, and places that he is less likely to acquire from any other source" (Hall 27). Not only do these new subject matters enhance the child's awareness of his surroundings, the new introductions promote reading success: "later, when the child reads a sentence or passage about a topic

he is at least somewhat familiar with, it is so much easier for him to determine unknown words and comprehend what he is reading" (28). Fox also points out that reading provides "a vast amount of general knowledge" (Fox 100). She gives the example of a reference to a "coal chute" in the classic book *Harry the Dirty Dog* by Gene Zion. Because coal chutes are not common in today's society, a child would not typically recognize this terminology. However, after reading the book several times and discussing the pictures, "the idea of a coal chute would quite naturally become part of the child's known world" (101). In *Books Before Five*, Dorothy White discusses this same exploration of unfamiliar items that leads to increased knowledge. She describes one incident where her daughter, Carol, learned wool came from sheep, as a boy in the story they were reading used shears on his lamb (White 112). Children's small worlds can expand. Here literature offers a window to the wider world.

Jim Trelease suggests the background knowledge gained from reading books is essential to the reading process. He gives the example of three newspaper articles, which reference David and Goliath, the Wright Brothers, and the Trojan Horse, saying if individuals are not familiar with the stories these symbols refer to, they will not understand the news articles. Thus, Trelease encourages early reading in order to promote learning on a wide array of topics. He says,

> A little girl in Arizona may not have ever heard the words "Paris," "vines," and "appendix," but after experiencing Ludwig Bemelmans' *Madeline* she will have these as part of her background knowledge. Children who have been read to come to books with a larger inventory of sounds, words, and experiences—and thus hold an advantage. (Trelease 12)

Experiences of reading aloud not only give children a more diverse knowledge of everyday places and objects, but they also to aid children in their comprehension of the world beyond them. Books present knowledge in a fun and engaging way, making reading with an adult an exciting way to learn and discover.

Increased Awareness of Print and Language. As young children become increasingly familiar with the scenes of their storybooks through read-aloud sessions, they also become more familiar with the conventions of books and the practice of reading—understandings which are crucial for learning to read. Catherine Snow and Anat Ninio list a plethora of skills from "studies of book reading" (Snow and Ninio 118) that reveal children learn from the reading process. These include abilities such as "recognizing letters, distinguishing between print and other marks on the page, understanding that print represents spoken words, learning how to hold books, to turn pages, to start at the front, to wait for the ending" (118). Marian Whitehead also emphasizes that familiarity with print is an important precursor of reading, for "children's concepts about print are also strong predictors of the ease with which they will learn to read" (Whitehead 411). She says,

> Before formal instruction is begun, children should possess a broad, general appreciation of the nature of print. They should be aware of how text is formatted; that its basic meaningful units are specific, speakable words; and that its words are comprised of letters [...] All such awarenesses are powerfully fostered by reading aloud to children. (411)

Yet another scholar, Marilyn Adams, supports the value of children gaining a "broad, general appreciation of the nature of print" before being taught to read. She

believes children should understand the vast capabilities of print—"to entertain, inform, communicate, record"—and should recognize the "potential value of each such function to their own selves." These skills, she explains, are "powerfully fostered by reading aloud to children—by engaging them regularly and interactively in the enjoyment and exploration of print" (Adams 411). By sharing a book with an experienced reader, a young child, according to Gordon Wells, is "beginning to gain experience of the sustained meaning-building organization of written language and of its characteristic rhymes and structures" (Wells 134). Additionally, Wells explains a child is "learning to pay attention to the linguistic message as the major source of meaning for, even when the book is illustrated, the story requires no other context than itself for its interpretation" (134).

Hall and Moats further expand on the literary awareness that children gain from being read to, as they explain how children make connections between what is read aloud and what is seen on the page:

> The child begins to form hypotheses about the print on the page corresponding to words that are the same as those the child hears in speaking and listening. This correlation between print and spoken words is an important step in learning about reading. (Hall 30)

Hall and Moats also point to several print "concepts" that a child may learn from interacting with an adult who is reading the story. These concepts, which are also crucial components of learning to read, include: "how the book is turned when it is 'right side up,' the order of reading the print on the page—top to bottom—left to right, and what to do at the end of the page" (31). Morrow affirms that children who are read aloud to gain

awareness of a book's characteristics. She says, "Children with storybook experience learn how to handle a book and are sensitive to its front-to-back progression; a story's beginning, middle, and end; and the concept of authorship" (Morrow 78). In observing the reading behavior of mothers and children, David K. Dickinson and Patton O. Tabors recognize a correlation between the quality of the interaction and the benefit to the child. They say,

> [...] the mother who is doing a quality book reading job to her three-year-old, is also exposing her child to a variety of book experiences which helps the child to develop a familiarity with print and with how books are used and handled. (Dickinson 34-35)

This knowledge of books lays the foundation for children to become skilled readers. The National Research Council's *Starting Out Right* emphasizes the importance of these skills for reading success, stating "Research consistently demonstrates that the more children know about language and literacy before they arrive at school, the better equipped they are to succeed in reading" (*Starting Out Right* 8). Moreover, the book lists "print awareness and letter knowledge" (8) as one of the "main accomplishments" for young children.

Through the research discussed in this section, one can deduce that crucial reading skills come directly from positive read-aloud experiences. Skills such as recognizing the correct orientation of a book and understanding the role of words on a page prepare a child for learning to read and comprehending all kinds of text. Just as having prior experience or background knowledge helps one navigate any subject, reading aloud gives children a heads-up on the nature of books—literacy tools which

immensely enhance many aspects of a child's intelligence. The following sections will outline the additional ways that reading aloud enhances children's knowledge and will explain why reading remains an advantageous activity from youth through adulthood.

Expanded Vocabulary. In addition to gaining a general understanding of books, children also acquire increased vocabulary skills from being read to by adults. These vocabulary skills assist children in learning to read, comprehending reading, and pronouncing unfamiliar words (Hall 29). Hall and Moats state, "Having a big mental dictionary of words facilitates reading comprehension and reading fluency, and young children acquire a big mental dictionary from having books read to them" (29). In his book, *The Power of Reading*, Stephen D. Krashen supports the idea that vocabulary is enhanced through reading aloud. He says, "Short-term studies show that children make significant increases in vocabulary knowledge after just a few hearings of studies containing unfamiliar words" (Krashen 78). This successful retention of previously encountered words is also presented in a study by Senechal and Cornell, which "found that four- and five-year-old children could comprehend new words after a single exposure to a book and that children tended to remember the new words one week after the reading episodes" (Senechal 42). They also determined the "children, on average, learned two new words from a single storybook session" (Senechal 42), which is significant considering researchers estimate children learn "approximately five new words a day" (42). During a later study, Senechal, Thomas, and Monker discovered active participation in book reading, such as "pointing to the illustrations of the novel words" or "answering questions" about the book, enabled a child to "recognize" more unfamiliar words than a child who only "passively listened to the story" (42). This evidence

strongly suggests that through a positive and interactive reading experience, children can increase their familiarity with previously unknown words.

According to Hall and Moats, it is not just any language exposure that enriches one's vocabulary. They state, "It has been proven that children do not typically learn such words from television, from each other, or simply from talking with adults. Reading books is the key to knowing words" (Hall 29). Through a story about her daughter's reading experiences, White supports the idea that children become more aware of vocabulary as a result of reading aloud. She says,

> The questions and answers about odd words [...] are now part of [daughter's] enjoyment of reading. Up till twelve months ago too much explanation took the edge off her pleasure. Now her interest in a given book is whetted, not dulled, when I make an effort to see that the vocabulary of a book is understood. (White 161)

When children enjoy books to this degree, the benefits multiply, even with respect to vocabulary: according to Trelease, "The larger your vocabulary, the easier it is to understand what you are reading. And the more you read, the larger your vocabulary grows" (Trelease 12). Thus, reading aloud enhances children's grasp of the complex English language and increases their overall literacy skills. And, as Hall and Moats argue, not all verbal activities can provide children this level of familiarity with words; it is books and reading that most effectively give children a deep understanding of language.

Increased Reading Comprehension. As a result of their enriched vocabulary and increased familiarity with books and reading, children's reading comprehension

skills are also enhanced. Morrow explains, "Often, children benefit in terms of comprehension skills from their assimilation of and familiarity with vocabulary and syntactic structures in books that have been read to them" (Morrow 77). The vocabulary gained from reading aloud certainly aids in improving comprehension of a story, for Hall and Moats state that "reading comprehension depends more than any other single skill on knowing the meanings of the individual words in the passage" (Hall 28). Thus, by reading aloud to a child, an adult helps expand the child's vocabulary, which, in turn, enhances the child's reading comprehension. Susan B. Neuman, Carol Copple, and Sue Bredekamp explain that the general knowledge gained from reading aloud also adds to a child's ability to comprehend. They say, "To comprehend what they read, children must continually draw on relevant background knowledge. This means that having a solid conceptual and informational base is a vital part of becoming a skilled reader" (Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp 56). Krashen offers additional support for the link between reading aloud and reading comprehension, stating, "In controlled studies, it has been shown that children who are read to regularly, at home or at school, make superior gains in reading comprehension and vocabulary" (Krashen 78). He cites the work of Adriana G. Bus, Marinus H. van Ijzendoorn, and Anthony D. Pellegrini, whose research results "tend to support the hypothesis that book reading particularly affects acquisition of the written language register, a prerequisite for reading comprehension" (Bus 17). This finding demonstrates that one of the keys to increasing comprehension skills is simply to engage in reading itself, adding to the importance of this parent-child activity.

Interest in Reading. While the skills gained from reading aloud are valuable, the development of an interest in reading is another important benefit of reading aloud to

children—one Dorothy Butler argues is essential to the process of learning to read. She says,

> I don't believe reading skills will ever be implanted by techniques, unless a strong interest can be engendered first. 'Motivation,' the experts call it; though too many treat it as a contributing factor rather than the absolutely essential condition it is. (Butler 311-12)

And, through effective reading sessions, adults can establish this interest: They can introduce young children to the captivating world of books and make reading a fun and desired activity.

One of the many factors that contribute to a child's perception of reading is his or her parents' literacy behavior. Paul P. M. Leseman and Peter F. de Jong found that "parents' own literacy practices appeared to determine specifically the opportunities for young children to be involved in literacy-related interactions" (Leseman 313). They say, "Opportunities to observe parents reading and writing, be it a TV schedule or a shopping list, make literacy familiar and may foster positive attitudes toward literacy learning. Opportunities for joint-book reading and similar events are essential to coconstructive learning" (299). A March 2006 article in the *Worcester* (Massachusetts) *Telegram and Gazette* also emphasizes the need for parents to convey reading as a positive activity. It features the ideas of a husband and wife, Monty and Laurie Joy Haas, who produce an "award-winning" television show called "Words That Cook" "to promote family literacy" and have compiled a publication titled "101 Tips to Get Kids Reading and Keep Kids Reading" (Pisinski). The article reads,

> [...] one of the most effective ways of raising a child who loves to read is to be a parent who reads. 'Show the child that reading is important to you. Kids mimic behavior,' Mr. Haas said. You don't necessarily need to dive into a copy of 'War and Peace' – what you read isn't as important as the act of reading. Even picking up the newspaper each day shows a child that reading is an important skill. (Pisinski)

Therefore, Mr. Haas suggests that an adult can promote a child's reading habits not only through reading aloud with the child, but merely by letting a child see him or her engaged in literacy.

In addition to evoking an interest in reading through their own literacy activities, parents can promote literacy through positive reading experiences with their children. Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., explain a passion for reading can be developed

> by parents who read to their children, who share favorite childhood books and poems, who take their children to the local public library and to plays, who read their children's homework with interest, who encourage their children to read and write, who give them books for special occasions, and who find diverse ways to show that they value good literature. (Ravitch 236)

Hall and Moats also emphasize it is crucial for children to perceive reading as "enjoyable," for they say "[i]f the child associates reading with pleasure, the child will have a greater desire to learn to read" (Hall 31). Similarly, Morrow says, "Story readings are almost always pleasurable, which builds a desire and interest in reading" (Morrow 28). The National Education Association emphasizes the benefits of making reading an enjoyable experience. The organization's website reads, "If your child learns early to

associate reading with pleasure, she is more likely to enjoy reading on her own when she is older" ("Tips"). In order to make book reading a desirable activity, one must present a book to a child in a thoughtful manner, for how a book is presented may affect how the child perceives reading as a whole. According to Fox,

> The more expressively we read, the more fantastic the experience will be. The more fantastic the experience, the more our kids will love books, and the more they'll "pretend" to read. And the more they "pretend" read, the quicker they'll learn to read. So reading aloud is not quite enough—we need to read aloud *well*. (Fox 40)

By making book reading a rewarding experience, parents can spark a lifelong enjoyment of reading in their children, as Whitehead explains, "The experience of temporary withdrawal from the world of practical and external demands, coupled with feelings of safety and comfort, may stay with us in our later reading careers" (Whitehead 112). Krashen discusses a study conducted by C.Y. Lao that attests to the idea early reading makes a difference in one's later perception of reading. He states, "Only one of the 12 reluctant readers in Lao's study was read to as a child; all 10 of the enthusiastic early readers were read to" (Krashen 77). Susan Neuman emphasizes that developing this lifelong love of reading in a child is a lengthy process and takes effort on the part of parents. She says,

> Leisure reading is not an activity that is established by simply turning off the television set, or by setting aside a time when reading is required. Instead, the nurturance of leisure reading occurs over time, as teachers and parents make children aware of its pleasures and its functions. (Neuman 155)

Preschoolers see the world primarily through the actions and attitudes of adults, as they rely on adults for all their daily needs and wants. Therefore, parents must introduce reading as an enjoyable and relaxing activity in order to convey the importance of books to children in their formative years and to spark their children's interest in the enriching pastime.

School Success. For children who are read to during their pre-school years, the benefits extend well beyond developing an interest in reading: they aid a child throughout his or her school career. The Reading Is Fundamental website says, "Reading aloud helps your children develop the language skills that they will use in school and throughout their lives" ("Reading"). This claim can be supported by the work of a number of researchers. Kristin Denton and Jerry West evaluated how reading to children at least three times a week "as they entered kindergarten" affected the children's reading and mathematics' performance during the spring of their kindergarten and first grade years. They concluded,

> Children who were read to at least three times a week as they entered kindergarten are more likely to have mastered the letter-sound relationship at the beginning and ending of words before they leave kindergarten than children who are not read to at least three times a week. (Denton 20)

Those children who were read to are also "more likely to understand words when presented in context in both the spring of kindergarten and the spring of first grade" (20). Similar results were discovered with regard to "specific mathematics knowledge and skills" (20). The study also showed "those who are read to at least three times a week are almost twice as likely to score in the top 25 percent in reading than children read to less

than three times a week" (16). Interestingly, these results are based on the same data—from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (v)—used in *Freakonomics*.

While the short-term academic results of early reading are important, it is also essential to evaluate if the reading skills gained at a young age continue to play a beneficial role in later years. Anne E. Cunningham and Keith E. Stanovich's research suggests that they do. Cunningham and Stanovich evaluated how first graders' reading skills (measured through tests) "predicted" the same students' reading comprehension, cognitive ability, vocabulary, general knowledge, and exposure to print in the eleventh grade (Cunningham 936). Their study found "early reading ability largely maintains its ability to predict these 11th-grade cognitive outcomes" (942). The connection between early reading and later abilities does not stop in high school, however, for Cunningham and Stanovich also made an association between early reading and later reading habits. They said, "Early success at reading acquisition is one of the keys that unlocks a lifetime of reading habits. The subsequent exercise of this habit serves to further develop reading comprehension in an interlocking positive feedback logic" (Cunningham 943). Reading at an early age creates educational benefits that richly payoff throughout one's life, making it ever important to spark an early interest in children and continue to develop that interest throughout their youth.

In his *The Power of Reading*, Krashen discusses another long-term benefit of reading—the general comprehension gained from reading print material. Just as preschoolers learn more about their world through books, so do older students, according to Krashen. He points to a study, entitled *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* by Diane

Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., which showed that "those who lived in a print-richer environment did better overall on tests of history and literature, and there was a clear relationship between the amount of reported leisure reading and performance on the literature test" (Krashen 35). Specifically, the study revealed that the number of novels a student had read during the past six months was positively correlated with success on the literature test: "nearly three-quarters of the students whose scores vault them into the top quartile on the literature assessment" said they had "read a novel for pleasure during the past half year" (Ravitch 158). Additionally, the amount of time spent reading in general correlated with higher test scores: "The students who read more tend to do better, the students who read less tend to do worse. The students with the highest scores read daily" (163). Ravitch and Finn claim that parents can begin to enhance their child's literature and history knowledge when the child is young, stating, "One of the most important contributions that parents can make toward their children's growth in knowledge of history and literature is to encourage them to read more, beginning at an early age" (236).

Catherine Snow also discusses how early home experiences affect children's performance in their later school years—beginning around fourth grade, when students "are expected to read from textbooks and write clear paragraphs" (Snow 186). She explains a lack of decontextualized language skills may cause children to struggle with these types of assignments, for she says twelve and thirteen-year-olds who are successful in school understand "skills of literacy and of decontextualization" (186). Interestingly, Snow suggests these necessary skills begin forming before a child reaches school. She says, "[I]t may be that literacy skills are simple enough to be acquired at school, whereas

developing the skill of using language in a decontextualized way relies more heavily on experiences only home can provide" (187).

Krashen discusses additional skills individuals gain from frequent reading. One of these is writing ability, which is undoubtedly beneficial for school success. He says,

> All the ways in which "formal" written language differ from informal conversational language are too complex to be learned one rule at a time [...] It is, therefore, sensible to suppose that writing style is not consciously learned but is largely absorbed, or subconsciously acquired, from reading. (Krashen 133)

Though learning to write in a specific genre will likely require reading that genre, Krashen suggests that any reading will be at least somewhat beneficial:

> Reading novels will not make you a competent essayist; you will have to read lots of essays to develop the essay-type style. But reading novels will provide at least some of the features of essay style; a novel reader will write a much better essay, stylistically, than someone who has read little of anything. (137)

Marie Clay also suggests that reading and writing skills are interconnected. She says, "It is [...] noticed that good readers have both writing and reading vocabularies but that poor readers have little or no writing vocabulary" (Clay 214). This body of research on writing skills, comprehension, and academic success reveals that the exposure to language and general knowledge provided by books continue to aid children in their elementary and secondary school years, reinforcing the idea that early reading results in lifelong academic payoffs.

How Does TV Fit In?

Given the plethora of short- and long-term benefits of reading aloud to children, individuals may wonder if watching television could produce many of the same results as books, or if in fact, TV counteracts the skills gained from reading. While TV does not seem to counteract these skills, it certainly does not offer the same level of language either. Krashen outlines the work of a researcher who demonstrates a clear difference between TV and book language: "Fasick reported that the language used in children's books was significantly more complicated than the language used in children's television shows. For example, 64 percent of the sentences in books [...] were 'complex,' compared to 34 percent for television" (Krashen 143). Also Krashen's book points to the work of other researchers, Hayes and Ahrens, who

> found that the language of TV and ordinary conversation [...] was similar in terms of vocabulary [...] about 95 percent of the words used were from the most frequent 5,000 words in English. Printed texts, including comic books, children's books, and magazines, contained far more uncommon words. (143)

Not only is the narrow scope of vocabulary a limitation of TV, but the way the television interacts with children is also limited. According to Fox,

> [...] the worrisome aspect of television is that it doesn't develop children's ability to speak, even when it's an educational program—in spite of all the words that pour out of it. Television doesn't talk to children—it talks at them and they can't talk back, and *talking back* is what learning language is all about. (Fox 18)

Despite the limitations of TV, Krashen acknowledges it does little harm in moderation. He says,

> Although the language of many TV shows is not impressive, there is no clear evidence that TV displaces reading, and there is only a weak negative relationship between TV watching and performance on school-related tests [...] It is only when television watching is excessive that a clear negative effect appears. (Krashen 146)

A research study conducted by Johannes W. J. Beentjes and Tom H.A. Van der Voort affirms that the amount of TV watching is the key to its effect on reading. Their results show the relationship between the amount of time spent watching TV and reading skills "is not negative until the amount of television viewing reaches a certain threshold." They also conclude the time spent watching TV typically affects children's reading time only if they are "heavy viewers" (Beentjes 407). Even though moderate TV watching may not be harmful, adults should continue to promote reading as a pastime for children. Jeanne Chall recognizes this need to actively encourage reading, as she says, "[...] for today's children who spend so much time on TV, books must be readable, interesting, and above all, available" (Chall 109). Therefore, parents must ensure that their children engage in a healthy balance of leisure activities by making reading books as pleasurable as watching a TV show. In short, rather than perceiving reading as a dutiful activity, child should perceive being with a book as one of many forms of entertainment.

Does the Way You Read Matter?

Television watching is certainly an attractive entertainment option for children; however, read-aloud sessions can be just as entertaining and valuable if conducted properly. While there may not be a "wrong" way to read a book, certain methods create a

more intellectually and socially rewarding experience for the adult and child. *Becoming a Nation of Readers* calls parents "a child's first tutor in unraveling the fascinating puzzle of written language" (*Becoming* 28); therefore, the manner in which adults present books to children is crucial.

Conversations about the Books. David K. Dickinson and Miriam W. Smith studied the reading styles of preschool teachers in their classrooms and determined the reading style had an effect on the children's reading experience. They state that "variation in how teachers in typical early childhood classrooms [...] discuss books with 4 year olds in full-group settings is strongly related to long-term growth in vocabulary development and story comprehension skills" (Dickinson 15). Thus, it is evident that how a child is read to affects what he or she takes away from the read-aloud session with an adult. Wells also discusses the idea that the skills a child gains depends on the quality of his or her reading experience. He says, "Reading stories to children may help them to develop these sorts of control over language, but a great deal will depend on the sort of stories that are read and on the talk that accompanies or follows their reading" (Wells 135). According to Wells, a good book reading session features "conversation" that "requires light touch, a willingness to listen and to follow the child's lead, helping him to develop and clarify his own interpretation, rather than imposing one that is 'correct' – from an adult point of view" (139). Senechal and Wells also advise adults to encourage children to interact in the reading process. They explain that by naming the pictures in a book, a child increases his or her capacity to employ these words in another setting (Senechal 45). In addition, their research indicates that "children at risk for delayed language development are likely to greatly benefit from active reading" (45).

Multiple Readings. Along with the conversation one has with a child, Snow and Ninio explain the number of times a book is read can be an important factor in a rich reading experience. They say,

> Reading a book for the sixth or tenth or twentieth time provides a child with exposure to more complex, more elaborate and more decontextualized language than almost any other kind of interaction, and the ability to understand and to produce decontextualied language may be the most difficult and most crucial prerequisite to literacy. (Snow and Ninio 119)

Trelease suggests repetitive reading is an important "part of that immersion process," which enhances a child's language skills through recurring exposure to books. Also, he says that multiple readings enhance a child's self-esteem, for the repetitiveness enables the child to become "an expert" on the story. Not only does the child experience heightened positive feelings, but as Trelease explains, he or she "associates that good feeling with reading" (Trelease 71). Monique Senechal and Jo-Anne LeFevre's research also supports the merit of reading books more than once, for multiple readings may "increase the likelihood that children will learn new words" (Senechal 45). The knowledge a child gains from repetitively reading a book—or the same *type* of book, in this case—is illustrated in a scenario presented by Snow. She explains how a young child at age 32 months, 4 days interacted with his "first ABC book much like any other book;" however, only 16 days later, he had discovered the "'X is for X-word' format" (Snow 177). Progress such as this, which was made in less than a month, emphasizes the value of reading books over and over again to young children.

Time and Place. While there are certain strategies for effective read-aloud sessions, the time and place reading occurs in the home also affect the overall experience. Hall and Moats emphasize the importance of the circumstances in which one reads through a quote from Trelease's *The Read-Aloud Handbook*: "Every time we read to a child, we're sending a 'pleasure' message to the child's brain. You could even call it a commercial, conditioning the child to associate books and print with pleasure" (Hall 31). Hall and Moats provide several suggestions for creating a positive reading experience within the home:

> Choose a location in the home that your children especially enjoy [...] Choose a time when you can read for an uninterrupted period [...] Get involved and be dramatic: Make the story more fun for you and your children by accentuating the animation of your voice for key lines. (31)

Starting Out Right also suggests creating "a warm atmosphere around storytime;" some of its suggestions are occasionally asking other people to join in the reading session and "mak[ing] literacy activities fun and a part of play" (*Starting Out Right* 37).

Routine in Reading. Fox points out that along with reading in a welcoming atmosphere, establishing a routine leads to good reading habits. She says,

> Although a read-aloud session can happen anytime, it's important also to have a ritual about reading aloud every night, in the same place, at the same time, with the same cushions or pillows, the same stuffed animals, and the same books. (Fox 35)

If book reading is not made a routine bedtime habit, Fox suggests it could become easy to replace reading with other tasks that fill up our busy schedules (Fox 36-37). Thus, she

urges families to make it a routine, for "the price of not reading aloud is too high" (37).

Discussing books during read-aloud sessions, reading stories over and over, creating a comfortable setting, and establishing a routine only represent some of the ways in which parents can enhance the quality of early reading. However, these strategies provide a solid framework for good reading habits and increase the likelihood that children will benefit from the reading activity. As Ravitch and Finn point out, "In countless ways, families powerfully influence children's attitude toward learning" (Ravitch 235); therefore, it is extremely important that parents consider these techniques and present book reading as a positive experience that children will want to enjoy many times over.

What are the Roles and Benefits of "Free" Book Programs?

As the many benefits of reading aloud to children have become evident, community and national book programs have risen to the forefront, making books accessible to children across the nation. Funded by individuals, private organizations, national, state, and local governments, or sometimes a combination of several sources, these programs vary widely in their functioning, but all work for a common mission: to promote reading in the young population. This paper will discuss in detail two programs that provide books to children across the nation: Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and First Book.

Imagination Library. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library began in 1996 in Sevier County, Tennessee, with the goal of helping "children achieve success in education and in life" ("Fact Sheet") and has continued to grow successfully over the past

decade. According to the Imagination Library's Fact Sheet, the program aims to "eliminate one of the reasons why parents do not read to their child—the availability of quality books in the home," for "[b]ooks are delivered not just once, but 60 times in the child's critical years of development" ("Fact Sheet"). The program provides one free book per month to children from the time of their birth to their fifth birthday. Parents can register their children through a form often provided at the hospital where the child is born ("Fact Sheet"). They can also pick up forms at "libraries, grocery stores, doctors' offices and other public places" (Milliot 26). At first, only children in Sevier County were eligible to receive the collection of books; however, beginning in December 1999, participation in the Imagination Library became an opportunity for children in other communities as well. Currently, "600 communities" in "41 states" participate in the "free" book program, and the program will "mail four million books in 2006" (Dotson). Funding for each program comes from several sources. Parton herself contributes around $350,000 each year, which helps finance the Dollywood Foundation's administrative costs for the program, while organizations in the involved communities contribute $27 per enrolled child (Milliot 26).

In order to select suitable books for each age level, the Imagination Library engages the help of a committee of "individuals from education, child development, academia, and early childhood literacy" ("Fact Sheet"). The first book given to every child is *The Little Engine That Could*, while the committee chooses twelve to fifteen new titles each year for distribution (Milliot 26). According to David Dotson, Dollywood Foundation's executive director, this annual revision of the book titles occurs "so

younger siblings receive different books and also because as the volume of orders grows, the economies of scale permit the Library to buy better books" (26).

First Book. First Book, a nonprofit organization, began in 1992 and provides free books to children in communities across the nation ("First Book's Story"). While Imagination Library offers books to children of all socio-economic statuses, First Book focuses its efforts on disadvantaged children, for the program's mission is "to give children from low-income families the opportunity to read and own their first new books" ("First Book's Story"). The organization partners with established literacy programs that serve low-income children and uses these avenues to distribute books to children. Since its beginning over a decade ago, First Book has distributed over 40 million new books to children in over 1300 communities throughout the nation ("First Book's Story"). Advisory Boards, composed "of local volunteers from all sectors (nonprofit, business, and government) of the community as well as independent individuals," oversee the workings of First Book in each participating community ("Frequently Asked Questions"). These board members choose which programs to award a book grant, facilitate fundraising, recruit new board members, and participate in nationwide marketing endeavors ("Frequently Asked Questions"). Financial support for the wide-scale program comes in large part from First Book's partnership with corporations and organizations, as they work together to create "cause-based marketing campaigns" that raise "more than 90% of [First Book's] funding." The program also accepts monetary donations—with each $2.50 donated purchasing one new book ("Frequently Asked Questions").

According to a study conducted by pollster Louis Harris and funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the success of the First Book program is tremendous from all vantage points. The poll collected data over fourteen months from 2,564 individuals, including children, Advisory Board members, and individuals involved with First Book in a variety of capacities ("Our Impact"). It found that

> more than half of the children—55%—reported having an increased interest in reading [...] 78% of the mentors, administrators and professionals running community-based tutoring and mentoring programs estimated that the "impact of First Book books on a child's desire to read" was "very important" [...] and 98% of Advisory Board members said their community was "better off" because of First Book's work. ("Our Impact")

These "free" book programs successfully promote literacy and help spread the benefits of reading to children across the nation.

Interview Study

What Do Interview Participants Say About Reading Aloud?

While the literature review provides an excellent overview of the benefits of reading aloud to children, the effects of television on literacy, and the role of "free" book programs, interviews with twelve individuals interested in early reading offer even greater insight into the importance of this activity. Content analysis of the interview transcripts revealed eight common themes related to children's literacy. The following sections will detail these themes: it matters how you read; early reading enhances literacy-related skills; reading aloud develops unique parent-child relationships; there is

value in beginning reading early; children benefit from seeing adults engaged in literacy; technology can be beneficial and detrimental to literacy; and reading will not ensure success, remains valuable activity.

It Matters How You Read. One of the recurrent themes in the interviews involves the way books are read and presented to children—with many participants suggesting that the quality of the parent-child interaction and the circumstances surrounding the read-aloud sessions largely determine reading's effectiveness. University of Tennessee (UT) professor Amos Hatch says, "Reading with kids leads to early reading. If parents are just putting in the time, going through the motions, the effects probably aren't the same at all." UT professor and International Reading Association president Richard Allington furthers this idea, saying

> You can read to your children and you can "read" to your children. We've got pretty good evidence that some parents can read to children in ways that turn out not to be very productive in terms of developing concepts about print, developing their language, vocabulary, world knowledge, and so on [...] It isn't just reading; it's how you read to your kids.

He describes the beneficial style of reading as one that "involve[s] the child." For example, he says the following type of interaction should occur after reading the word "munchie" with a child: "Say munchie. Let's say munchie together. Starts like Michael doesn't it? Let's look at the first letter. It's got the same first letter as your name. That's an M right? Do you remember what an M looks like? It goes up and down." The following discourse, he says, would be appropriate after reading *Where the Wild Things Are*. A parent would ask "What do you think Max did that made his mother send him to

bed without supper? Would I ever send you to bed without supper? What other book did we read where a boy got sent to bed without supper?" According to Dr. Allington, it is "these sort of higher level connections that do these text-to-text and text-to-self connections that pulls the child in."

Other interview participants also recognize the need to extend reading beyond just turning pages and reading words. Community educator Charlene Ellis offers the following advice on promoting reading as a fun activity. She says, "Make it a game or an adventure. Make a tent and get a flashlight. Put books on tape. Use funny voices. You have to read things children like. Reading can be anything." Kindergarten teacher Carolyn Boswell also emphasizes the need for interaction during reading. In order to spark this interaction, she has sent home "story sacks" with children that include "a book and a list of activities to do related to the book and the materials to do it with." In addition to doing reading-related activities, Ms. Boswell encourages parents and children to "spend a little more time" with books by doing things such as "tak[ing] them into the bathtub occasionally."

In addition to having fun with books, the atmosphere of the book reading can be important to the success of the activity. University of Tennessee professor Sandra Twardosz suggests the value of developing a routine for book reading—"a time when not too much else is going on, when the child is very relaxed, perhaps, tired"—as she explains a child may be more responsive to reading during these times. In addition, she points out the value of "choosing books that might be real favorites for the child" in order to encourage reading. UT professor Susan Benner emphasizes that reading "needs to be a positive experience for little kids" and that "your purpose is not to get through the book."

She says, "Your purpose is to enjoy the reading together." This enjoyment comes from interacting with the book, according to Dr. Benner, as she emphasizes, "[...] it is wonderful to stop and explore the pictures on those pages and discuss what you see on those pages and anticipate what might be on the next page." She also acknowledges that young children should "be allowed to ask questions, be allowed to interrupt" during a fulfilling read-aloud.

The interview participants view book reading as an activity that centers on parent-child interaction and one that is enhanced by warm, inviting surroundings. Based on the accounts of the participants, effective read-aloud sessions expose children to what seasoned readers do: bathtub reading, discussions about books they have read, reading for relaxation and entertainment, and routine reading before bed. Just as these aspects of reading appeal to adults, they make reading a satisfying experience for children; thus, adults should make a conscious effort to create this sense of comfort when reading with preschoolers.

This emphasis on presenting books to children in a positive manner closely mirrors that discussed in the literature review. Both the secondary sources and the interview participants suggest the need to establish a routine, engage in interactive reading, and create an inviting reading environment. Based on these comments, it seems that how and when one reads are as important as any other factors in the reading process. Therefore, in order to maximize the potential of sharing stories with their children, parents should thoughtfully consider how they present books to preschoolers and read aloud with enthusiasm and interest.

Early Reading Enhances Literacy-Related Skills. When children regularly engage in these positive reading experiences, the expansion of their literacy-related skills, such as vocabulary, general knowledge, reading comprehension, and an understanding of the nature of books, is evident, according to the accounts of many interview participants. Children's librarian and Knox County (Tennessee) Imagination Library coordinator Marilyn Jones recognizes that reading aloud develops young children's appreciation for books. She says, "[...] whether it's the parent reading, the librarian, preschool teacher, whatever, [the children] are learning early on how to handle a book—that it goes up and down, left to right, how you turn a page." Former educator Doris Wallace, who read to her two daughters and now reads to her six-year-old grandchild, observed her grandson learning to grasp these book-related concepts. She said, "He turned the pages faster than I could read them to him, but he knew you were supposed to turn the pages." Skills such as these are important for preschoolers, and the importance transcends into the school years. Dr. Benner explains,

> [...] we know that if you bring a kid to school that has not been read to, they are not going to be familiar with text, the left-to-right pattern of text, the turning of pages, and [are not going to be] starting to make the connection of words and sounds that go together, so they are going to be starting so far behind the eight ball of kids who have had three or four years to develop painlessly this knowledge.

Kindergarten teacher Ms. Boswell knows first-hand the initial academic benefits of reading aloud to young children, as she has observed the effects of early reading in her years of classroom experiences. This veteran teacher claims reading aloud teaches

children "to learn from others in a focused way"—a skill that is extremely important in the school setting. She says, "I wouldn't want to attempt to do that without a story and the people who do that for their children before they come to school are equipping them; they are giving them the opportunity to learn to learn in almost always a joyous kind of way." Being with a book introduces learning in a different manner—one that is relaxing and entertaining rather than requiring students to respond with a correct answer. This characteristic of reading aloud likely explains why it represents such an effective teaching tool.

In addition to teaching children to learn and expanding their general knowledge, reading aloud can help children grasp the more difficult aspects of reading, such as "vocabulary," "the structure of [language]," "how written language differs from oral," "how the story is told," and "how information is given in print," according to Ms. Boswell. She says, "The child who had had that at home knows, understands, has that background: it's there already," giving the child a head start in the school setting. University of Tennessee professor Dr. Sharon Judge furthers this argument that early exposure to language aids in developing literacy skills. She explains, "[...] language is such an important factor in development, and most children learn literacy before they come to school—even if they haven't been to preschool. Math is more academically taught." Therefore, exposure to books and language clearly increase children's literacy awareness, while also preparing them for the school setting.

It is not just literacy skills that children can gain from reading aloud, however. John Sibley, director of the Literacy Imperative in Knoxville (which is affiliated with the national First Book program), emphasizes another important aspect of literacy—the

development of one's general knowledge. He describes reading activities as "unlocking a lot of the knowledge and mysteries of the world in which you live—be it fiction or non-fiction." Similarly, UT professor Sandra Twardosz acknowledges this important aspect of reading, explaining that once children learn the basic skills of decoding, the general knowledge accumulated during early reading experiences is crucial. She states, "[...] the background knowledge that you gained and all the vocabulary that you gained during very early years, that really becomes very important. Because you might know how to decode, but if you don't have the slightest idea of what the word is and if you don't have any associations connected with that word, then your reading experience is going to be pretty low-level." In addition to enhancing a child's reading experience, Dr. Allington suggests that reading provides children with general knowledge that benefits their life as a whole. He says, "For lots of kids, the only real insights they are going to get into other people, other religions, ethnic groups, [and] social classes is that vicarious experience provided by reading a book."

The capability of books to expand children's world view is also observed by parents and grandparents. Ms. Wallace emphasizes the personal growth made possible through books, saying, "As [children] start to get a little older and understand more of the words, it sort of helps them create a visual imagery of things." She explains how a child may see a toy in the illustration above the sentence, "This is a red ball," and she says, "When you don't even expect it, the little finger goes out and something that sounds like 'ball' comes out of their mouth [...] you can tell they are learning so fast." Reading aloud introduces children to new words, places, objects, and ideas, making it important to ensure that children are exposed to a wide assortment of books. Children's worlds

expand through the pages of books, as the stories provide children an opportunity to see something from a new perspective and to use their imaginations to explore new ideas.

Availability of Books Is Crucial. Just as children are more likely to want to play outside if they have friends to play with and toys to entertain them, they will likely enjoy reading more if they have an adult to read with and a variety of books to choose from. David Dotson, executive director of Imagination Library, explains that making books available to children is one of primary thrusts behind the program. He said, "[...] schools have books; they have resources, but a lot of parents have no resources. We could guarantee that every child in Sevier County had books in the home and that was the goal." The program receives lots of feedback on the "sense of ownership" given to children who receive the books in the mail, according to Mr. Dotson. He says parents claim that even when the family receives duplicate books (because multiple children are enrolled in the program) it "makes no difference because they know which ones belong to which kid."

This excitement about personal possession of books reveals that children hold books in high esteem and value their presence in the household. Evidence on the importance of making books available to children is also apparent in the High Scope study commissioned by the Imagination Library in 2003. Mr. Dotson said the study was conducted in three communities and found that "about 70% of all families who receive the books said they read more than they did before they received the books." The study also discovered that not just parents, but "grandparents, siblings, uncles, neighbors, [and] visitors" were reading the books to the children. Mr. Dotson said these findings "again

kind of affirmed our belief that if books are laying around, somebody is going to pick it up; you can be assured if the book is not laying there, nobody is going to pick it up."

Mr. Sibley of the Literacy Imperative in Knoxville also recognizes the importance of making books available in the home, as one of his program's goals is "to provide residents of underserved communities with books." He said, "[...] from what I have seen in the underserved communities and what I believe as a person who has come out of one of the underserved communities and one who serves in a church and reaches out is that books in the homes to me is extremely important." As to why it is important, Mr. Sibley explains that books in the home may "encourage the children to read to their parents" who are not literate and will provide individuals with a positive way to spend their free time at home. Mr. Sibley said, "I believe that we have a responsibility to encourage people to read." The Literacy Imperative provides books to underserved families in conjunction with First Book and through the organization's own efforts. Mr. Sibley said, "Through our affiliation with First Book, we provided over 3,900 books to children in grants last year. We are looking to duplicate that this year. We think we will [...] Here at the Center, I know in 2004, we provided over 1,000 books to nineteen different organizations. In 2005, I believe we doubled that."

While "free" book programs certainly work to boost the availability of books in homes, parents can play a large role in increasing children's access to reading material. Ms. Boswell encourages parents who want to help their preschoolers develop reading skills before reaching kindergarten to get their child a library card and take "lots of trips" to the library. Also, she encourages book stores and used book stores, if they are financially feasible for a family, and "lending libraries among friends." Christine

Marston, a mother of two pre-schoolers, uses the local library with her children and finds it to be a positive experience. She says, "We come home with ten books—enough to keep us busy for a week. That's fun for me and fun for the kids to have new things to read." Once reading material is in the home, Dr. Twardosz emphasizes the importance of keeping books where children can look at them at their leisure. She says, "[...] there is the idea of kind of the independent exploration books, which is if people have books out among the child's toys, they are for exploration and the child can kind of recreate the experience of reading and look at the books him or herself." In an effort to encourage reading, Ms. Marston does keep books in easily accessible spots in the home. She says, "I kind of keep them down low, like in that [basket by fireplace] so they can get to them and look at them." And, apparently, this easy access is successful in encouraging reading, as Ms. Marston says her two-year-old daughter will "often bring books throughout the day" to be read aloud. Ms. Wallace echoes the same sentiments with regard to her grandson, who picked books out of a closet to be read aloud when he was younger. She said, "[...] He'd go straight to the closet and come running in here. They'd be falling out of his arms he would be trying to carry so many."

Not only is it important to make reading material available to children, but it is equally, if not more, important to provide children with *interesting* reading material. Dr. Allington offered a useful way to think about creating an inviting reading environment. He explained that he asks his intern teachers to decide where his sixth grade granddaughter, his youngest son who is a director of information technology, and his father who is a retired UAW worker would most likely find something appealing to read: in the principal's office at the school, the teacher's classroom, or the dentist office. And,

he said "[...] everybody agreed it was the dentist's office. So my question was: 'Did dentists take a course on creating interesting, engaging literacy environments—that principals ought to take, teachers ought to take?" Through his hypothetical situation, Dr. Allington is accentuating the need for adults to consider what types of reading material they offer children, as their choices could greatly affect children's perception of literacy.

Reading Aloud Develops Unique Parent-Child Relationships. The importance of promoting literacy as a fun activity lies in academics as well as in forming strong parent-child relationships, for according to many interview participants, the bonds created around literacy are incredible. Dr. Hatch succinctly summarizes the emotional power of reading. He says, "I'm sure that the connections that are made between adults and children around text are special. I can feel that. I have taught kids to read. I was a teacher for fifteen years myself, and it is a great joy to share books with kids." As an elementary school teacher, Ms. Boswell too knows the value of this time shared between a parent and child. She says, "Even when you read things that are about issues you're dealing with perhaps on opposite sides like *Where the Wild Things Are*, it gives you a common perspective that's almost investment-free...that you can relate over the same story as a team. And, I wouldn't pass up opportunities like that as a parent or as a friend of a child." Community educator Charlene Ellis also finds reading books to be incredibly important in relationship-building, listing "interaction," "attachment," "bonding with a parent," and "shared enjoyment of a book" as some of the greatest benefits of reading aloud to children.

In addition, Ms. Ellis suggests that reading promotes interaction that everyday life would likely not evoke between a parent and child. She says, "Some families would

come much closer to reading to their children than having conversation with the children." Dr. Twardosz refers to this same increased interaction developed through books. She says, "[...] you have the opportunity to have conversations with people who will then remember a lot of other things to talk about that they may not have remembered to talk about if they weren't reading the book with you." To illustrate this special connection around books, Ms. Boswell referred to an individual (who she interviewed for a research study) who felt reading "gave [her and her child] the separate space together. It gave then an opportunity to think together, to feel together, to respond." In that same vein, Ms. Marston says reading continues to be an enjoyable activity for her children—even in a world filled with TV and computers—because of the personal interaction time it provides. She explains, "They like to do anything with their parents or with a grown-up...have that one-on-one time." Likewise, Ms. Wallace describes the bonding time during reading as an exceptional experience. She says, "The mother-daughter connection for me was wonderful because that's when they are in my lap; it's that personal thing that happens." While the parent or grandparent obviously benefits from this relationship, Ms. Wallace emphasizes the child does as well. She says, "[...] pulling a child close to you and reading to them... I can just see them calm. I see [my grandson] calm whenever I read to him and my children as well. So emotionally it is good for them in addition to the knowledge." As exemplified through these accounts, the benefits of reading extend far beyond school test scores and offer a unique way for parents and children to interact and explore new ideas. This interaction enables children to see their parents' love for them and their parents' desire to share special time together, for reading a book focuses an adult's attention completely on the child, draws the parent and child close, and centers

around a delightful activity. Few pastimes provide the opportunity for parents and children to bond in such a special way.

There Is Value in Beginning Reading Early. In order to reap the greatest benefits of reading aloud, interview participants suggest that parents begin reading to their children very early in their lives. Dr. Twardosz sees reading to young children as an opportunity to introduce them early on to the value of books. She says, "I think that's the way in which children get the idea that books/stories are part of life. They can connect with life; they can be part of the family; they can be part of the way in which people relate with one another in the family [...] and basically set the stage so that some sort of relationship with literature continues on throughout life." As to exactly when children should be exposed to books, Dr. Twardosz says, "[...] by the time the child is crawling around and exploring toys, books should be among them, and certainly, adults should be reading as soon as there is enough focusing and appreciation on the part of the child." Also a proponent of early reading, Dr. Benner says, "I don't think you can start too young." She compares deciding when to begin reading to deciding when to begin counting with a child. She says infants are not learning to count when people count the snaps on their diapers, but they are still being exposed to numbers that will eventually "show up in their speaking vocabulary." Dr. Benner says, "If all we did with infants was what we knew they could already understand, we would do nothing with them. And then, they would never come to understand anything, so we carry on and talk to infants." Dr. Judge also finds this early interaction with books crucial, as it allows children to hear language. She explains that one can talk to an infant to accomplish this goal, but it is limited because there is no "two-way interaction." She says, "If you share a book with

them, they are still hearing words and that's what I think the importance is." While infants' reactions to hearing words likely varies, Ms. Jones says that as a children's librarian she could tell babies "were actually listening" at the toddler story times, indicating the beginning stages of literacy development. She also emphasized the biological merit of starting to read early, as she said, "Brain research right now is pointing out that really the brain is only partially developed when the child is born. Synapses have to have stimulation to actually connect." Therefore, reading aloud becomes an ideal mode for stimulating a child's intellect. As a mother of two pre-schoolers, Ms. Marston has observed firsthand how infants respond to such stimulation. She said, "Any time you are talking, even at six months, they are kind of interested, especially if it is that soothing, kind of rhythmic verses of a story." Ms. Wallace also believes reading begins to benefit children at a very young age. She says, "[...] I truly believe that [...] the need for this stimulation is just vital and makes a big difference. [Grandson] is just reading so well now in kindergarten and sounding out everything and a lot of it is because he has been read to."

While parents and grandparents and scholars recognize the benefits of beginning early, the Imagination Library also recognizes the need to introduce literacy early. Mr. Dotson explains that his program targets the pre-school age group in order to help combat problems before they begin. He says, "By the time kids are deep into school, a lot has already been decided about their future." Therefore, the Imagination Library strived to find a way to "help better prepare [children] before they walk in the door [of school]." The program concluded it could best help by giving children a key resource needed "to learn how to read or have a good foundation to learn to read"— books. By focusing its

book distribution efforts on this young age group, the Imagination Library shows its commitment to the idea that promoting early reading is an important factor for reading success. And, while there may not be an exact age when reading aloud should begin, one can deduce that children's literacy awareness appears when they are very young, meaning that reading aloud with infants and preschoolers makes for a highly worthwhile activity.

Children Benefit from Seeing Adults Engaged in Literacy. In addition to sharing books with children during their preschool years, it is valuable for adults to convey the importance of literacy through their own actions and attitudes. Whether by reading books and newspapers, flipping through magazines, or just talking positively about books, adults can significantly influence preschoolers' perception of reading. Dr. Hatch encourages his education students to read to their classes several times per day, as he believes this activity portrays reading in a positive light. He says, "When you do that, then you are signaling the kids there is something important in these books, something interesting here; [you are signaling] 'I care about it, hopefully you care about what I care about." Like Dr. Hatch, Dr. Allington recognizes the role teachers can have in promoting reading as a desirable pastime. He explains,

> [...] there are just some teachers who do such a good job at selling books to kids; we call it blessing of the books. They are just constantly talking about books and showing kids new books and helping kids find just the right book—that "I think you should read this; the boy in here reminds me a lot of you"—these little techniques they use to personalize it and make the kid think this is just for him.

Along with encouraging teachers to promote books to their students, Dr. Allington urges them to allot more reading time during the school day. He says, "I tell teachers if reading isn't a good way to spend your time in the school day, why would it be a good way to spend your time after school?" Therefore, he emphasizes the need to make reading an important part of the learning environment rather than "fill[ing] up kids' days with low-level worksheets sorts of activity."

While teachers certainly play a significant role in encouraging reading, parents play an important part as well. Dr. Hatch says "modeling" is the best way for parents to spark their children's interest in reading, though he acknowledges it will not work for all children. Along with creating an interest, "modeling" is a good way for parents to develop their children's reading skills before they reach kindergarten, according to Ms. Boswell. She encourages parents "reading in their child's company on their own [...] reading to them even from your professional literature from time-to-time." She said, "Show them what you're engaged with." When asked about how to promote reading as a fun activity, Dr. Allington gave a similar response. He explained, "Ideally, they would see their parents reading [...] If you have never seen your parents read [...] why would you think reading was [fun]?" However, it is not only through the act of reading that parents can encourage reading. They can also show reading is important in their attitude toward literacy. Ms. Wallace discussed the way her daughter enthusiastically approaches reading with her young son. She said, "When the school sends home a list of suggested reading before kindergarten, they read every book that was on the list. [My daughter] got them from the library, and if the library didn't have them, she went online and got them. The suggested reading list became: 'We will do it all before you start school.'" The child

was not observing his mother read books in this setting, but he was observing her excited attitude about delving into the suggested reading. It is this type of upbeat approach that the interview participants are suggesting is so valuable, for adults serve as such strong role models that their approach to reading could dramatically affect a child's outlook on the activity.

Technology Can Be Beneficial and Detrimental to Literacy. While the benefits of modeling reading seem clear cut, the effects of television watching and other electronic forms of entertainment are less certain—with some individuals believing they can encourage literacy, others finding them detrimental, and yet others having mixed feelings. Two participants explained that television shows and movies can be effectively intertwined with literacy by featuring characters that also appear in books. For example, Ms. Jones listed the *Arthur* and *Madeline* series as an example of this success. And, Ms. Boswell gave the *Curious George* books and movie as a similar example of this encouragement of literacy through media; however, she continues to have reservations about the benefits of these technological pastimes. She said, "My kindergartners went to the library today to check out books. There was a big run on the *Curious George* shelf. There's a movie out now, so the librarian had beefed up the supply [...] a lot of times the mass media can guide children toward books and you capitalize on that as you can. On the whole, I think it still gets in the way."

Several other participants also expressed their feelings that these multimedia activities clearly have harmed typical book reading, but many acknowledge that the effects may not be all bad. Dr. Hatch said, "Interactive media, television, video games, all those sort of technological places for reading, have hurt traditional reading of text. So,

for me, that's a big loss, but it is possible to think about sort of a post-modern world in which our notions of literacy could be really different." This technology-based literacy can be beneficial, as Dr. Judge points out about the internet and computer games. While she acknowledges the problems with "video games and violence," Dr. Judge explains that interaction with language, whatever the media form, is what is important. She explained, "If [children] are looking at web pages or interacting with a program and it's either talking to them or they have to read what's on the screen, then that's being exposed to it." Therefore, she sees value in "something that's going to capture their attention to read and to engage in language"—whether that be interactive computer games or a "comic book." Dr. Twardosz also sees the negative and positive sides of technology and reading, suggesting that the effects of technology depend on their usage. She said, "I think that it's always the case that if something is engaged in to excess, and if the content is really inappropriate, you have the possibility for bad effects. But on the other hand, you have story extenders with the computer; you can have children getting interested in books because they might match a movie or something they saw in a video or something." Varying feelings about technology, particularly television and movies, are also apparent in Dr. Benner's comments. She said, "One is not of no value and the other is all saints [...] The books experience does offer the relationship and the interaction with another human being [...] but if you are watching a powerful movie, you can have an equally powerful experience in your self-development [...] Certainly, we need both." Yet Dr. Benner also acknowledges that there are certain aspects of reading that TV and movies cannot fulfill. She said,

> [...] it's sort of a cuddly personal time that really can't be replaced by sitting on the sofa watching a TV show together or watching a video tape. I think it can be a little more intimate. It can be messy. If you're watching a TV show, you can only talk when it's not talking or it's on commercial or you'll miss something. You can stop the reading and talk about the story and talk about anything out of the blue. [You] don't necessarily even have to talk about the story.

With regard to TV and reading, Dr. Allington believes it is important to make a conscious effort to balance the two, for explains how a family's emphasis on TV can be detrimental to reading. He said, "If the family ritual is to have TV on during dinner, and everybody, as soon as dinner's done, goes downstairs and drops down in front of the TV and watches it until 10:00 at night, then I think it's hard to say to kids: 'You should be reading or doing something useful—other than just watching TV." Therefore, he seems to be suggesting that television watching must be limited in order to prevent it from overshadowing reading as a free-time activity. Ms. Wallace confirms that "it's hard in this day in time to compete with all this audio and visual activity," but she does not believe electronics will suppress her grandson's love of reading because "he was so interested for so long." Thus, from these comments, it seems evident that multimedia entertainment has the potential to interfere with reading, but ultimately causes little harm and even offers potential benefits if engaged in moderately. These interviews and the literature review both suggest that reading and technology can be balanced successfully in children's lives. And, perhaps a healthy mixture of TV and video games with books creates an even larger appreciation for reading and its unique benefits, for by

experiencing both activities, children may learn that reading offers a type of relaxation and stimulation that is different but equally as enjoyable as technological diversions.

Reading Will Not Ensure Success, Remains Valuable Activity. While this paper has been dedicated to examining the benefits of reading aloud, it is important to acknowledge that the positive results are only possible, not certain. For example, reading aloud to a preschooler does not ensure that he or she will retain a lifelong interest in reading. Ms. Wallace explains that she read to both of her daughters, yet one never found it an enjoyable activity. She said, "I never got her to the point where she was interested in reading. I don't know why." Dr. Twardosz shares a similar viewpoint on the uncertainty of the lifelong effects of reading to children. She said, "[...] certainly there is no guarantee that just because parents read to their children, children are going to necessarily take well to it, carry it on throughout their lives and so on. It's also the case that children who have never had that experience may get into it later." Not only do the differences in effects of early reading arise later in life, but also during the children's school years. Dr. Allington explains how each of his kids "grew up in the same environment with the same gene pool" and were all read to, yet "one learned to read before school started, one learned to read in kindergarten, one in first grade, one of the boys in second grade, and one in fourth grade." Thus, reading aloud cannot ensure exactly the same results for each child. Dr. Hatch's account of the benefits of reading aloud includes many of the same ideas as the other participants, yet he effectively points out that the inability to determine the exact effects of early reading takes nothing away from the activity's value. He said,

> I think there is evidence there that it does have an effect on later reading, but I understand the notion that we don't really know cause and effect. It could be that people who are inclined to spend time with their kids and read to them are also the same kind of parents that pass along genetic characteristics like intelligence or inquisitiveness that factor in to kids being successful readers too. It could be there are certain socio-economic factors at play, so that parents who have time to read with their kids and have books in the home are the same kind of parents who are going to give their kids opportunities beyond reading—that are going to lead them to be successful readers and successful in school. So, the links aren't direct; they don't have to be for me to believe it is important to do that with kids.

Like Dr. Hatch makes clear, the "links" between early reading and later reading skills are not absolute and certain. However, the scope of this project reveals the wide realm of possible benefits of introducing literacy at an early age, portraying reading as an activity that has great potential to affect young children in a positive way.

Conclusion

With such a diverse array of benefits related to reading aloud to young children, parents must recognize the value of sharing books with their children and establish a reading routine in their homes. As discussed throughout the paper, numerous methods exist for making reading an enjoyable experience: these include engaging in interactive reading sessions, selecting material that interests a child, effectively balancing multimedia activities and reading, and utilizing the resources provided by "free" book programs. In addition to being a potentially fun endeavor, reading aloud holds deeper

importance for households, according to Dorothy S. Strickland and Denny Taylor. They explain,

> In many ways, sharing storybooks with young children is a celebration of family life. As parents and children listen, talk, read, and play together, they learn about themselves, one another, and the social world in which they live. It is an intimate occasion that cannot be staged. Family storybook reading grows quietly in the home until it becomes a part of everyday life, with rituals and routines that seem to fit the needs and interests of individual family members. (Strickland 31)

By beginning to read with children early in their lives, providing children access to good books, and promoting reading in a positive manner, adults give preschoolers one protocol for celebrating their family life. Additionally, they offer numerous opportunities for intellectual and social enrichment such as expanded vocabulary and strong parent-child relationships. Benefits such as these highlight the merit of evaluating reading aloud on more than test scores alone, as the authors of *Freakonomics* do.

While Levitt and Dubner may question the degree to which reading aloud is effective (Levitt 172), the scope of benefits outlined in this project leaves little room for doubt that shared story times harbor great rewards. During reading sessions, infants begin to learn the sights and sounds of language, and preschoolers increase their language skills and come to associate books with fun and pleasure. This gained knowledge and appreciation for books can last beyond children's early years and continue to play a significant role in their relationship with literacy for many years to come. All preschoolers can benefit in some way from engaging in reading with a parent; therefore,

while thought-provoking and intriguing, *Freakonomics*' argument does not do justice to an activity that will likely expand children's worlds in countless ways.

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APPENDIX

The appendix contains the following documents which were submitted to the University of Tennessee Office of Research to gain approval for this project:

- **Form B Application**
- **Interview Study Letter**
- **Sample Interview Questions**
- **Informed Consent Statement**

FORM B

IRB # _____

Date Received in OR _____

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

Application for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects

I. IDENTIFICATION OF PROJECT

1. **Principal Investigator or Co-Principal Investigator:**

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Department: School of Information Sciences

2. **Project Classification:** Research Project

3. **Title of Project:** Can *Freakonomics* Be Right? The Importance of Early Reading

4. **Starting Date:** Upon IRB Approval

5. **Estimated Completion Date:** May 2006

6. **External Funding** *(if any):* N/A

   - **Grant/Contract Submission Deadline:**
   - **Funding Agency:**
   - **Sponsor ID Number *(if known)*:**
   - **UT Proposal Number *(if known):***

II. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

- To explore through secondary research* and interviews of adults why reading aloud to pre-school children (ages 0 to 5) is crucial for enhancing their reading-related skills and interest in books and should be perceived as a highly valuable parent-child activity.
- To evaluate through secondary research* and interviews of adults how reading aloud shapes children's cognitive and psychosocial development, including their understanding of the power of books, language skills, and passion for reading.
- To examine through secondary research* and interviews of adults the value of "free" book programs that promote reading in the home for children ages 0 to 5.
- To discuss strategies and tips for successfully engaging young children in the world of books through shared read aloud sessions—based on information gathered through secondary research* and interviews of adults.

*The secondary research focuses on when reading aloud to children should begin, what the benefits of reading aloud are, how television affects children's language skills, how the way a book is read aloud influences its effectiveness, and how "free" book programs promote early reading. The sources of the secondary research are primarily classic and modern books and journal articles.

III. DESCRIPTION AND SOURCE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Research participants will include a convenience sample of adult volunteers: scholars, directors of "free" book programs, elementary school teachers, librarians, and parents interested in early reading. Research participants will be adults who are known in the area for their interest in early reading and who are recommended to me by my faculty advisor. I will invite them to participate via a mailed letter (See Appendix A) explaining my research. I anticipate interviewing between 12 and 15 research participants—all of whom will be adults.

IV. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

I will conduct an interview at a mutually convenient time and location with each volunteer research participant. The questions I will ask will be open-ended and will focus on the following topics: how the participant believes reading aloud benefits pre-schoolers academically and non-academically, how the participant acquired his or her knowledge/ideas about reading to young children (research, personal

experiences, professional experiences), and how the participant thinks reading can be promoted for young children and their parents (See Appendix B).

Each interview should last no more than 30 minutes.

The interviews will be audio taped and transcribed by me, the principal investigator. The audio tape will enable me to review the interview responses as I write my project. Research participants will be invited to review the interview transcripts to ensure that their ideas are accurately represented.

The tapes will be erased after the interviews are transcribed.

I will incorporate quotations from the interviews throughout my written document. Individuals may request to have their quotations identified with an alias if they do not wish for their name to be used in the written project. The consent form enables participants to indicate whether they wish for their quotations to be identified with their actual name or an alias.

V. SPECIFIC RISKS AND PROTECTION MEASURES

Because my research involves interviews from which I hope to extract quotations for my written document, everyone will be invited to use an alias to protect their identity.

I will require participants (who agree to participate in the research) to sign a consent form (See Appendix C) that gives me permission to include their alias names and positions/titles with their quotations.

VI. BENEFITS

This research project will contribute to the body of literature on early reading.

VII. METHODS FOR OBTAINING "INFORMED CONSENT" FROM PARTICIPANTS

I will provide each potential research participant with two copies of the consent form in a letter I send inviting him/her to participate in the research study. I will set a return deadline (approximately two weeks) that allows the individual adequate time to consider whether or not he or she wants to participate in the research. I will instruct the research participant to sign and return one copy of the form and keep one copy for his or her records. See Appendix C for the consent form I will distribute to research participants.

VIII. QUALIFICATIONS OF THE INVESTIGATOR(S) TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I gained interviewing skills working as a staff writer at *The Tullahoma News and Guardian* in Tullahoma, TN, where I covered news, lifestyles, sports, and business. I believe this experience will aid me in conducting productive interviews.

See my attached resume and my faculty advisor's attached resume (Appendix D).

IX. FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT TO BE USED IN THE RESEARCH

A digital tape recorder, owned by Dr. Jinx Watson (faculty advisor) will be used to record the interviews.

X. RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PRINCIPAL/CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(S)

By compliance with the policies established by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Tennessee the principal investigator(s) subscribe to the principles stated in "The Belmont Report" and standards of professional ethics in all research, development, and related activities involving human subjects under the auspices of The University of Tennessee. The principal investigator(s) further agree that:

1. **Approval will be obtained from the Institutional Review Board prior to instituting any change in this research project.**

2. **Development of any unexpected risks will be immediately reported to Research Compliance Services.**

3. **An annual review and progress report (Form R) will be completed and submitted when requested by the Institutional Review Board.**

4. **Signed informed consent documents will be kept for the duration of the project and for at least three years thereafter at a location approved by the Institutional Review Board.**

XI. SIGNATURES

Principal Investigator: Susan Folk

Signature: _____ **Date: January 12, 2006**

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jinx Watson

Signature: _____ **Date: January 12, 2006**

XII. DEPARTMENT REVIEW AND APPROVAL

The application described above has been reviewed by the IRB departmental review committee and has been approved. The DRC further recommends that this application be reviewed as:

[ ] Expedited Review -- Category(s): _____

OR

[ ] Full IRB Review

Chair, DRC: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Department Head: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Protocol sent to Research Compliance Services for final approval on (Date) :
_____

Approved:
Research Compliance Services
Office of Research
1534 White Avenue

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix A

446 Communications Building
1345 Circle Park Drive
Knoxville, TN 37996-0341
Date

Name
Organization
Address
City, State ZIP Code

Dear _____:

I would like to invite you to participate in an interview study on the benefits of reading aloud to pre-school children (ages 0 to 5). I am a senior at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and am working on my senior project for the University Honors Program. One of the overall objectives of the project is to explore why reading aloud to pre-school children is crucial for enhancing their reading-related skills and interest in books and should be perceived as a highly valuable parent-child activity. Dr. Jinx Watson, associate professor and director of Youth Services in the School of Information Sciences, is serving as my faculty mentor.

My interest in this topic stems from my own enjoyment of reading and language, which I believe began during my pre-school years when my mother read aloud to me. Not only have I benefited from being read to, I have witnessed how reading aloud benefited my brother, who is a special education student. As with myself, I believe his reading ability is, at least in part, a testament to his early exposure to reading.

I have chosen to shape my project around an idea presented in the *New York Times* bestseller *Freakonomics*, which I read at the beginning of the school year. In a chapter titled "What Makes a Perfect Parent?" the authors conclude (based on their analysis of the Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study) regularly reading to a child does not correlate with school test scores. Because I believe this claim presents a limited perspective of reading aloud, I plan to argue in my paper that reading is a beneficial endeavor with payoffs in many arenas.

Along with supporting my thesis through secondary sources, I will include primary research, which I will gather by interviewing individuals, like you, who are interested in early reading. The interview will inquire into the following arenas: how you believe reading aloud benefits children academically and non-academically, how you acquired your knowledge/ideas about reading to children (research, personal experiences, professional experiences), and how you think reading can be promoted for young children and their parents. The interview will be conducted at a mutually convenient time and location and will last no more than 30 minutes. If you are willing to participate, please read and sign the enclosed consent form. Please keep one copy of the form and return a signed copy to me by _____. Also, please provide your contact information on an attached sheet, so that I may contact you to schedule an interview.

If you have any questions about participating in the interview, feel free to contact me at sfolk@utk.edu or Dr. Watson at 865.974.8612 or jinx-watson@utk.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Susan Folk

Appendix B

Interview Questions

The following is a list of questions indicative of the type of questions I will ask in my interviews:

1. To everyone:
    - What do you believe are the most significant academic benefits of reading aloud to pre-schoolers? Non-academic benefits?
    - What shapes your knowledge/ideas about reading aloud to young children (research, personal experiences, professional experiences)?
    - How do you think reading can be promoted for young children and their parents? In school? In the community? In the media?

2. To teachers:
    - Have you observed any connection between your students' reading skills and reading in the home?
    - What do you believe is the most difficult aspect of reading for young children to grasp? Do you believe being read aloud to would help them grasp this aspect more quickly? Why or why not?
    - Do you regularly read books aloud to your class? Why or why not?
    - What advice would you offer to parents of pre-schoolers who want to help develop their child's reading skills before he/she attends school?

3. To librarians:
    - Do you find that most children enjoy being read aloud to? If so, what types of books do children in the early grades (K-1) enjoy most?
    - What types of books should parents look for when selecting reading material for their pre-schoolers?
    - How would you advise a parent whose pre-schooler does not enjoy reading to encourage his or her child to read?

4. To parents:
    - How old was your child when you started reading aloud to him or her? At what age did your child seem to become "interested" in reading?
    - How often do you read to your child? For how long?
    - Do you or your child select the books to be read aloud?
    - Do you believe reading aloud has increased your child's early reading skills (awareness of how to handle a book properly, vocabulary skills, reading comprehension)? Examples?
    - Does your child enjoy being read aloud to? If so, how do you promote reading as a desirable activity (certain setting, type of book, time of day)?
    - How does your child view reading as opposed to TV or video games?

5. To "free" book program directors:
    - What is the mission of your program?

- How do you believe a owning a book affects a child's reading experience versus borrowing a book from the library?
- Why are young children (versus elementary-school age) the recipients of your program's books?
- Do you believe the books provided by your program have increased the amount of reading done in the recipients' homes?
- How does your program select the books that are provided to the young recipients?
- How does your program measure its success in promoting reading? What feedback have you received on your program's success?

6. To early reading scholars:
    - When would you encourage parents to begin reading to their children?
    - What advice would you offer parents who want to promote reading as a fun, rather than a required, activity with their children?
    - How do you believe being read to as a pre-schooler affects a child's future language skills? Interest in reading? What knowledge/research supports your ideas?
    - How do you respond to research that suggests reading aloud to pre-schoolers is not a crucial parent-child activity?
    - How do the skills gained from being read to differ from the knowledge gained from watching a television program? Can the two be effectively balanced?

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT
Can *Freakonomics* Be Right? The Importance of Early Reading

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in an interview study of local individuals (scholars, directors of "free" book programs, elementary school teachers, librarians, and parents) interested in early reading. The interviews are designed to gather outside opinions of how reading aloud is beneficial to children, not only in the classroom, but also within their homes and their everyday lives.

The overall objectives of the project are: 1) to explore why reading aloud to pre-school children (ages 0 to 5) is crucial for enhancing their reading-related skills and interest in books and should be perceived as a highly valuable parent-child activity; 2) to evaluate how reading aloud shapes children's cognitive and psychosocial development, including their understanding of the power of books, language skills, and passion for reading; 3) to examine the value of "free" book programs that promote reading in the home for children ages 0 to 5; and 4) to discuss strategies and tips for successfully engaging young children in the world of books through shared read aloud sessions.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

Your involvement in the study will require participation in one interview conducted at a mutually convenient time and location. The interview should last no more than 30 minutes.

The interviews will be audio taped and transcribed by the principal investigator. The tapes will be erased after the interviews are transcribed.

RISKS

Because my research involves interviews from which I hope to extract quotations for my written document, you will be invited to use an alias to protect your identity.

Also, you will be invited to review the interview transcripts to ensure that your ideas are accurately represented.

BENEFITS

This research project will contribute to the body of literature on early reading.

CONFIDENTIALITY

If you do not want your name to be used in the written project, your quotations will be identified only with your chosen alias.

_____ Participant's initials

COMPENSATION

You will receive no compensation for participating in the interview.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact Susan Folk at sfolk@utk.edu or Dr. Jinx Watson at 865.974.8612 or jinx-watson@utk.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

I agree to have my quotations from the interview used in the written project and identified:

____ With an alias ____ With my actual name

I understand that I may withdraw this permission to identify my quotations with an alias or my actual name at anytime prior to the completion of the project without penalty.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____