



Julie Fowlkes has dedicated her life to making reading more fun. Photo: Dickson Lee

To cut a long story short

US-based childhood literacy expert Julie Fowlkes has been helping Bring Me a Book Hong Kong in workshops that aim to make storytelling a more rewarding activity. She shares her experiences.

How did you become a child literacy worker?

I started my career 46 years ago. I've been teaching for a long time. At first, I was in the classroom for a couple of years, but then it became clear to me that my passion and interest was reading. So I went back to school and got my master's in reading. Since then, my career has been a reading specialist. It has been wonderful because I can work with students, teachers and parents. I can also teach at university, go to conferences and do consulting.

Why is reading important to children's development?

The ability to read is a thread that goes all the way through their education or career. If a child can't read, they can't access knowledge; obviously they can't work on the internet and they can't read directions from brochures, etc. Reading is the key to success in life. If you don't learn at an early age, it's very hard. So reading aloud to children is critical. We want children to have that foundation when they start to read because then they are ready to go when they start school.

Why should parents be involved in teaching children to read?

Most children have a long, challenging path in learning to read because they're learning to cite words, phonics; they're learning how the stories work. They have to pull all those pieces together and read smoothly and fluently. Then they have to remember what they've read – it's very difficult. It's important to support that process by giving your child a background in reading so that they have vocabulary, a love of books and know that reading is important.

How should parents get started?

In the beginning, we hope it's just a fun, happy time with the parent and child sharing a book together. What happens during that time is the child gains a lot of knowledge about stories and vocabulary and how words sound. So the child is getting a

foundation that he's going to use later on when he reads. The challenge comes when peers are stepping in too, when the child is five or six, and he starts really learning how to read at school. We do a whole class on [how to read aloud to children]. The child will say: sing to me, talk to me, ask me questions, answer my questions. Parents who can do all of these things are building in their child a rich love of books, interest in stories and the foundations of basic skills like prediction, visualising and knowing how stories work – the characters and the setting. All of those things come about in a child that's been read to.

How does reading aloud work? Reading aloud is effective because it's a fun way to learn. You're tapping into a child's basic need to learn about the world. Children are curious; they're interested in animals, cars or trains. So they want to know about these things. Also, they love to spend time with their mum or dad, so reading is a good time for bonding.

Reading is a connection – we talk about this idea of engaging conversation. Some parents tell me their children keep asking questions, they keep interrupting and they can't even read the whole book. I tell them that it's not important to read the whole book, it's important to talk about the story. And if they find there is a part of the book that the child is curious about, don't worry about finishing the book. Just have a conversation about that page, idea or character.

What difference can parents make as opposed to a child's teachers?

It's a personal connection that a mum can have with their child and I tell parents that teachers are going to read stories but the teachers can't make the story personal, they can't

go with a child's pace or answer all their questions. The teacher can't relate it in a powerful and personal way. And that's what mums – and dads – can do. In America, and maybe in Hong Kong, very few dads read. Of course, maybe daddy is busy working and he can't read quite as often. But children love it when dad reads. Maybe dad doesn't want to read fairy tales. One parent was talking about a car magazine. We said, fine, it's reading and it's what the dad is interested in.

Some parents find it hard to be animated when they read, but they don't really have to be. Just having a happy spirit about a story is enough. We suggest parents to look into their children's eyes while they're reading because it's about communicating. The story is just kind of a catalyst.

How often should parents read aloud to their child?

We encourage parents to make it a routine. We want [reading aloud] to happen every day, like brushing your teeth, putting on your clothes, eating your vegetables and reading a book. But make it fun. Research says 20 minutes is about right. And it doesn't have to be 20 minutes altogether ... maybe a short story when they go to bed, but also at another time during the day.

Julie Fowlkes talked to Vanessa Yung vanessa.yung@scmp.com

BETWEEN THE LINES

When it's reading aloud time, let your child dictate the pace

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What's great about reading aloud as a family activity is that minimal skill is required. Some parents are engaging storytellers; some are not. The joy that children derive is not from how well their parents read, but the fact that they are cuddling them and spending time with them.

The best tip I got from an expert storyteller was to let my child set the pace of our read-aloud time. If I have chosen a book but my child insists on another, I put my choice down and start with her choice. If my child interrupts with a question, I answer and allow the discussion to flow freely until we're ready to go back to the storybook. If my child wants to skip the middle part and go straight to the end, or return to the same two pages at the beginning of the story, I take notice and accept that a good experience does not mean that I must read from beginning to end.

And if my child decides to play with building blocks halfway through, I continue to read aloud even if I don't have her undivided attention.

Parents who want to read to their children in a language that is not their native tongue need not worry about accents or unfamiliarity with certain vocabulary. I recall a study that showed that babies recollect and respond better to stories read in their parents' voice than to those read by a pre-recorded voice (presumably with perfect inflection). When I read to my children in Chinese and come across a word I don't know, I guess the pronunciation until I learn the correct one (like the word for "cocoon" in the Chinese-language version of Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*). My daughter often mispronounces leopard as "lee-oh-pahrd" following our helper's reading of Michael Roberts' *Snowman in Africa*.

As with many activities, practice makes perfect: the more you read aloud, the more comfortable you are

with adding your own spice to the storytelling.

Nevertheless, parents can always benefit from tips on reading aloud, even those who do so extensively, knowing how to read aloud well can enhance the experience and help children with short attention spans.

A useful guide is *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever* by Mem Fox, a gifted storyteller and prolific children's author. The book is easy to read and contains her list of the 20 best read-aloud stories for very young children.

For those wanting a more comprehensive reference book (complete with endnotes and bibliography), I recommend *The Read-Aloud Handbook* by Jim Trelease. It is a treasury of great read-aloud books described across more than 100 pages, with stories for children up to age 13.

Even before delving into the how-to, it's good to start with the basics: books.

Trelease discusses the connection between book ownership and achievement, but I grew up reading books from the library. Perhaps the key is access to books; so, unless you are at the library as often as I was, buying books will help your child revisit his or her favourite stories.

Books should be placed around your home rather than on the shelf. While it's great to design a children's reading corner or arrange books tidily on shelves, not many children will go to a corner and stay put. It's easier to pick up a book and read aloud in bed, in the bathroom or at the dining table. Reading aloud need not be associated with a particular area, time of day or parent. It's easy for children to be as captivated by books as they would be by an iPad.

Annie Ho is a board governor of Bring Me a Book Hong Kong, a non-profit organisation devoted to improving children's literacy through reading aloud to them and giving easy access to the best books for underserved communities across Hong Kong.



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