

## Podcast 496: Become a Read-Aloud Parent

### Episode Transcript

**Andrew Pudewa:** A picture book requires you to listen and then reach into the picture and make connections between the language and the image, and that is so very, very important.

**Julie Walker:** Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

**Julie Walker:** So Andrew, every now and then I will get an email from someone on our team that says, Hey, this would be an interesting topic to discuss on a podcast. And in this case it was Danielle who sent me this article that is a little disconcerting and the name of the article is, “New Research Reveals That Parents Are Losing the Love of Reading Aloud.”

**Andrew Pudewa:** I think I also received that link from a number of people since it is kind of one of the things we've talked about a lot. It's not surprising, but it is sad.

**Julie Walker:** Yes. This of course comes from Harper Collins UK.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Harper Collins UK, which is a book publisher, a big one, international, and of course they have an interest in keeping people wanting to read books, so it is appropriate that they would put out this research where, what are some of the details?

**Julie Walker:** Right. It's talking about these different generations, and specifically this article talks about the Gen Z parents think that reading is more of a subject to learn than a fun activity to do with your children.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So Gen Z parents would be parents of Gen Z kids or parents who are in, okay, so what's the timeframe? Like how old do you have to be to be a Gen Z parent?

**Julie Walker:** Oh, come on Andrew. You don't know this off the top of your head. No, I don't either.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, I think I have one, but...

**Julie Walker:** Well, I'm laughing at that because I actually had to do a little bit looking up like what generation am I in? What are we in? Because we were born within a year or so of each other. We are boomers we're actually Boomer two, so there they,

**Andrew Pudewa:** were two waves of

**Julie Walker:** There were two ways of boomers.

The first boomers are, were born in 1946 to 1954, so our parents were whatever was.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So all those memes that are like, okay, boomer, that's about them, not me.

**Julie Walker:** Right. Because we're Boomer two,

**Andrew Pudewa:** Okay.

**Julie Walker:** Which is (19)55 to 64, and then we get into Gen X.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Right.

**Julie Walker:** I don't know what happened to Gen Y, but after Gen X came millennials and those were our kids.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Oh, okay.

**Julie Walker:** Yeah. And they were born between 1981 and 1996.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Okay.

**Julie Walker:** And then we have the Gen Z-ers, and they are currently aged 13 to 28, and they were born between 1997 and 2012.

And that's the generation we're talking about.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So they're the ones that would have children at the oldest, probably 10 years old, and then all the way down to little kids. And so they're the ones who are saying it's not fun reading to children.

**Julie Walker:** Right.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So I don't know. I'm guessing it's because their parents didn't read to them all that much.

**Julie Walker:** I don't know that's true.

**Andrew Pudewa:** or, or they've just grown up with screens

**Julie Walker:** Digital natives.

**Andrew Pudewa:** It's their primary everything.

I was listening to a little Instagram video of someone who said, "the first thing I do in the morning is I look at a small screen. Then I get ready and go to work where I look at a medium-sized screen all day, but I take breaks every now and then so that I can look at my small screen, and then I go home and look at a large screen so I can relax from the stress of looking at screens all day, and then I check my small screen before I go to sleep, and this is my life."

I thought, well, that is true for a large number of people and there's a sadness to it. But I don't see any way out of this trap, except when people realize screens are not good for kids. Therefore, they will take the time to pull a picture book off the shelf and read it. But that does take more effort, and maybe that's the key, is understanding that doing a harder thing is actually better than the easier thing.

**Julie Walker:** Yes. I used to say to my kids, hard work is immensely satisfying, so there is satisfaction, but when I think of hard work, I don't think of reading a book out loud to my children. I think of that being a joyful activity, where we can have conversations, we can laugh at the same thing. We've got a frame of reference. There's that thing. And when I think of my kids who are millennials who are reading out loud to their children, I think of my youngest grandson who's about a year and a half year old, he has so many books, Andrew and. A lot of those books are from the library. His mom will just bring home ten new books from the library, and this is on top of all the books they have little board books in every room, and he's constantly pulling books off and handing them to me saying, book books. Sit. Sit. He's very bossy.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, I was speaking this past year many times on the subject of cultivating attentiveness and comparing the difference between a beautiful picture book and a screen. A screen is constantly moving, and it's coming at you. It requires little effort and very little attention. Attention is from the word *tenuo* in Latin, meaning I reach for, I grasp I hold, so we get *attention* to reach out, *intention* to reach in.

And so a screen requires none of that, right? Especially for kids. That's why they prefer it. It's a low, low effort way to be amused and entertained. A picture book, on the other hand, requires you to listen. And then reach into the picture and make connections between the language and the image, and that is so very, very important.

I wonder if we could convince all of these young parents that reading the books to their children would be better for their attentiveness, better for their overall intellectual growth, and better for their health, and certainly helping them be better prepared for school, whatever that looks like.

**Julie Walker:** Sure. Yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Would they be willing to make the effort to do something that they, I guess the report was they don't find it fun? And of course you're always supposed to have fun with children. Like if you're not having fun with children, something's wrong. That's a really foreign concept to us old parents.

**Julie Walker:** Yes, yes. I'm gonna read you a statistic here. The number of parents reading to their children is at an all time low with fewer than half, 41% of kids four years old and younger being read to frequently. And then there's also disparity between the number of boys who are being read to versus the number of girls.

And I could see that because boys are busy.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Right.

**Julie Walker:** They don't sit still. But you talk about in your talk *Nurturing Competent Communicators*, you had ways of helping your son pay attention because you let him do other things while you were reading aloud to

**Andrew Pudewa:** The fact is boys will stay in one place if you give them things to do, like. Legos, for example. So yeah, do Legos blocks, playing with your hands, doing something that allows them to have a direction for that kind of constant flow of physical energy, but stay in one place and listen to a book. I remember, gosh, probably over two decades ago, there was a study done by the American Library Association, and it claimed that the number one predictor of adults who like to read for enrichment enjoyment. Spare time was being read to as a child. And so now that was 20 years ago and now we're in the next generation. And so I'm just wondering if the Gen Zs parents kind of started that. Well, there's other things to do, things to watch that are more enjoyable.

Than a book, which takes energy on everybody's part

**Julie Walker:** I think of the term amusement, right? A-musement.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, yeah. I mean, we could go talk about how Mnemosyne was the mother of the Muses, and the muses were those things that would inspire humanity to artistic endeavor, whether it was poetry or music, art, whatever. And therefore, Memory being the mother of creativity. Then the muses, that was serious business. So we would, a-muse ourselves. We would get away from the hard work of creativity and relax and have amusement. So the irony of course, is now we use music as amusement, but I fear that we've gotten to a point where everybody is kind of exhausted by their life. Part of that we know is just the drain that screens put on your nervous system. And you hear all these stories of people who send their teenagers off to a zero tech recovery camp where they've got no phones, no screens, nothing.

**Julie Walker:** Because they're addicted to screens.

**Andrew Pudewa:** For a week or two weeks or, or longer. And then they come back just so much healthier and happier and normalized and emotionally stable.

But sadly, it seems like it takes kind of a crisis level before parents will do something like that. And of course very few parents would do something like that. I listened to a fascinating little clip of a high school teacher and he said, our school has said no phones. Was it really this easy? Because now the kids are there, they listen, they take notes, they talk to each other, they ask good questions, they're alive. And he said, was it always this simple? Just take away the phones. How come we didn't know this 10 years ago?

And for me, it's kind of odd to think that high school kids have had phones for ten years because, well, time passes too fast. But I think that the addiction to technology is really probably at the core of this problem of parents saying it's not fun to read to kids. And it's partly, it's the adult's addiction to technology, and then that just filters down to the kids. So I don't know what to say about this other than I think most of our listeners probably are not in that category. Most of our listeners still believe that it is not just important, but can be very enjoyable to read aloud to their children.

**Julie Walker:** And of course by doing that, you unfairly advantage your students.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Oh, yes, that, I think his name was Adam Swift from...

**Julie Walker:** And we talked about this idea in episode 486, this idea of how can you help your kids become better functioning adults? Well read out loud to them, and that was the whole Read Aloud Revival where Sarah Mackenzie got on this bandwagon. Of course, we've been friends and fans of hers for years.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, when I, when I first saw this research article from Harper Collins, I immediately sent it to her and said, grist for your mill. But she's done such good work in reaching out, like, way beyond just the homeschool world. She's met parents out in the more general population and really inspired them to do this.

There's something about reading a book together with people that creates a shared experience and a shared context. It's—I've used the analogy when you read a book with your family aloud and everybody's hearing the same book. It's a bit like going on a trip together. You're meeting new people, you're seeing new places, you're able to imagine new experiences and you're doing it together.

And that's a very bonding thing to do. And you know your kids growing up and they'll get together and say, "oh, remember when we..." and they'll pull out some memory from the trip to Mount Rushmore that you got a flat tire or whatever. Books can be the same way. So we can only take so many family trips in a child's life, but we can read more and more books. And yes, you start with young children and picture books and then hopefully you move on into chapter books. And it's interesting how kids go through a really sensitive period for this as well. One of my granddaughters who is just turned 10 right now, she clearly is in this very, very sensitive period for being read to because she will just constantly say, Grandpa, can you read? And then there'll be a book and then we'll have to put it down because there'll be a different conversation and she'll pick the book up and put it back in my hands and, and whisper, can you read now? Can you read now? Can you read now? Can you read now? And what I've noticed is that for her, it's an imagination development thing, but there's also a really important aspect of language development because she'll stop and say, what does that mean? What does that mean? What does that mean? And these are all words that you would just never encounter in daily life. I would never use these words talking to anyone in daily life,

and you wouldn't likely hear them, even in a movie or in a video, they're words that exist in books.

**Julie Walker:** You have a story that you're telling right now, but you also are reading. Our listeners are wondering what book did you read aloud to her that she had all these questions about these words that you wouldn't use in daily life? Do you recall?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, gosh, there've been a lot of them. One of them where this really came very clear in my experience with the kids was Charlie in the Chocolate Factory Roald Dahl. And there's a brilliance to his writing where he will use words that are unfamiliar and then kind of define them in the prose. The book I'm reading right now was actually recommended to me by Sarah Mackenzie, and it's Peter Nimble and His Amazing [Fantastic] Eyes, I think is the title.

We can double check that.

**Julie Walker:** Link in the show notes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** It's definitely a wild, fantastical Narnia-kind of alternative universe book. But the author just incorporates vocabulary. I think good children's writers know that part of their job is to build the vocabulary of children to use words they're not gonna encounter in just living, the conversations that happen in families and homes and between kids and parents. And so they work these words in, and oftentimes the kids will, the listeners or readers of these books can make an assumption or a kind of an inference. What does that mean? Just by the context? But what kids like to do is check their idea about what the word means with someone who knows. That's why they'll say, what does that mean? And sometimes they'll say, I thought so. Or sometimes they'll say, oh, or I might ask them, do you know what that word means? And they'll give it a guess. And they'll be very, it'll be very different guess. Then you can explain because I love words and sometimes make connections.

Especially 'cause I'm teaching her Latin, so I'm like, well it's from the Latin, which means blah, blah blah. But this is just such an, it's a heritage of language and culture and intellectual stimulation and imagination that screen-based information will just simply never make up for if we lose this, if we lose this. So I think all of us should be not just excited about reading to our kids, taking the time to do it, and sometimes it's a little hard.

**Julie Walker:** Okay. I want you to tell your story. It's in the *Nurturing Competent Communicators* talk, but many of our listeners may not have heard that. Talk about you reading the *Fellowship of the Ring* to your family and how you gathered everybody altogether and you had a rule.

**Andrew Pudewa:** well, yeah. The rule was everyone had to be in the room, so it was going to be non-optional. The leverage was the movies coming out and anyone's, if we're going to see the movie, we all have to listen to Dad read the book. And that I discovered some things about my children, which I had not noticed before.

One of the things—I had always read to the kids, but it was more like bedtime story for you and a different book for you—And this idea of reading one book to everybody, which is a long book and would take months to finish.

**Julie Walker:** Especially with your traveling schedule.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So. I said I discovered many things about my children. Number one, teenagers have a harder time sitting still than other kids because they're busy and they want to do things and they don't know why. Why do I have to sit here and listen to you read this book? I could read this book on my own. In fact, I already have read this book on my own. And so yeah, I just said, no, you have to. But then getting her to start crocheting actually solved the problem of that feeling of like, I'm sitting here not doing anything. So this crocheting or drawing or doodling or playing with the Legos.

I also noticed that you can't judge attentiveness by behavior because my son, who was not even six at the time—so you wouldn't necessarily expect him to be really engaged with this kind of higher level language and lots of long descriptive passages with many unfamiliar words—so he's playing with Legos, and I'm trying to keep him quiet because he wanted to make all the sound effects. So he talked to the Legos and all that. But when I asked who remembers what was going on, who remembers the last thing we heard, he was usually the one who would pop up and explain. He'd narrate the whole last scene and I realized. his behavior is not at all reflecting his attentiveness to the language.

And then sometimes you, you get a chance to have a little classroom management because I had one child who would interrupt just continuously: What's going on? Why did you do that? What does that mean? What's gonna happen? And so I had to kind of set up a system for her. Look, when you have a question, raise one finger. I'm going to keep going. When I get to a convenient spot, then you can ask a question. You won't remember the question you had when you raised the finger, but you'll have some other question in your mind. But if we answer every question you're gonna have, we will never finish this book ever.

So just that really. It really changed the home culture in a big way, and my wife said to me many times, don't stop. Keep reading. This is the best thing. Of course, to do that requires a little bit of sacrifice. It may require, in my case, sacrifice on getting back to work and doing my business stuff, or maybe it requires, to not watch some sports game or TV show, or maybe it requires, we're going to let the chores wait a little bit here. Or it's a motivator to get the chores done. And I remember any number of times I wanted to read, and it's taking the kids forever to do the dishes.

So, okay, I'll just go over and help them do the dishes and then they love me more. And then, we've got extra time to read together. So now though, with the grandchildren, they assume that whenever I'm over there for dinner, I am going to do all the dishes for them so that we have time to read books.

So I have to temper that with No, these are actually your chores and I might help you.

But I think we need to recruit all parents, especially the older ones, like the millennials, to encourage the younger parents. Make the time. Read to your kids, turn off the screens. Read books like *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haight, that talk about the inherent problems of the fractured attention span that most things are creating. He said if you're going to watch a screen, watch a long movie, hopefully an older one that requires some attentiveness. Don't just get five minute cute little squirrel videos or whatever, which are, they're not inherently evil or it's not a moral problem per se, but there is, you always want to be asking the question, is this cultivating attentiveness, higher level of language, and a love for story and the imagination rather than this being something you can laugh at.

And I think that's the difference. Laughing at something is fun, but reading to children is a deeper level of intellectual enjoyment and appreciation. That, I think, is all of our mission. So all you millennial moms and dads out there help all those younger parents that you know, that you work with, go to church with whatever, help recruit them into the world of the reading parent.

**Julie Walker:** And that is a really good way to end this podcast. Thank you, Andrew.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Thank you, Julie.

**Julie Walker:** Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at [IEW.com/podcast](http://IEW.com/podcast). Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.