

Audiobooks for Children

Is This Really Reading?

Ruth Cox Clark

Children of all ages can be seen walking, riding their bikes, or sitting on the bus with earphones clearly visible—from the Fisher-Price Kid-Tough FP3 player for the youngest listeners to the colorful iPod Shuffle for tweens.

“Today, twenty percent of Americans over the age of twelve own at least one iPod or other MP3 player, compared to only eight percent in 2002.”¹ We don’t know if these audio technology-savvy children are listening to music or an audiobook, but with the steady increase in audiobook sales, some may very well be interacting with Harry Potter or Junie B. Jones.

A consumer survey conducted in May 2006 on trends in audiobook listening indicates that “approximately half of audiobook listeners with children between the ages of four and seventeen indicated their children have listened to an audiobook in the last twelve months.”² And, it isn’t just sales. A *Library Journal* survey indicates that circulation of children’s audiobooks in libraries has increased by 10.7 percent and library budgets for children’s audiobooks have risen 4.8 percent during 2004.³

Value of Audiobooks

Some librarians and teachers have suggested that listening to books is cheating—real reading can only take place with a print book. Yet, reading can be broadly defined as the ability to intellectually process the text while understanding the literary or informational content, or from a narrower perspective, a reader’s ability to decode letter sequences, along with understanding the grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary employed in the text.⁴

Reading has also been referred to as the mechanical prelude to engaging the content; what really matters is what the reader’s mind and imagination does with that content.⁵ If the goal for children is to become readers who can understand the message, think critically about the content, use their imagination, and make connections with the book, then listening to audiobooks can help them do all this while developing their listening skills.⁶

Children may choose to listen to a book they have previously read. Elements only found in the audiobook, including music, a skilled narrator’s use of voices and dialects, and supplemental materials such as an interview with the author add to their enjoyment of the book.

“It is fine to savor, even to prefer, the voice we hear in our own heads as we read, but confining ourselves to our own voices means a more narrow experience of literature.”⁷ And, as Eileen Hutton reminds us, “the spoken word has been around a lot longer than Gutenberg’s offspring.”⁸ According to a lengthy body of research, experiencing a book in both formats increases a child’s comprehension and vocabulary.

Audiobooks can also be considered a bridge to reading, a way for young readers to enjoy literature at their *listening* comprehension level, which is significantly above their *reading*

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level.⁹ Consider the English as a Second Language or dyslexic student who wants to join classmates in reading the class novel but finds an inability to read the book frustrating. Offering the audiobook allows the student to comprehend the story as well as join in the class interaction and discussion of the book. For those children who may skip over the print text, skimming rather than reading, audiobooks hold them to the text, not skipping a word.

A Family Affair

Audiobooks can bring families together. We often hear of librarians and teachers who listen to audiobooks as they commute to work, but children are also commuters, spending many hours in the backseat of the family car while on vacation, on the way to soccer practice, and waiting in rush-hour traffic. Families can experience “communal listening,” choosing a book that will offer something of interest to all age ranges within the family. The littlest one in the car seat may not know what all the words mean, but just the experience of listening to a well-narrated story is beneficial.¹⁰

What We Should Keep in Mind

Before assuming the audiobook experience is going to be welcomed with open ears by all children, understand that audiobooks are not an initial hit with every child, especially visual learners. These children are very comfortable in the multimedia world of television and surfing the Web but often have had very little practice in “pure listening” and may find their first audiobook experience challenging.¹¹ Although listening comprehension is not a skill that receives a great deal of attention in the classroom, it is, nevertheless, a much-needed skill throughout life.¹² The U.S. Department

of Education report *Becoming a Nation of Readers* states, “In a study involving a nationwide sample of thousands of students, listening comprehension in the fifth grade was the best predictor of performance on a range of aptitude and achievement tests in high school.”¹³ Experiencing audiobooks allows children to hone their listening skills.

What We Can Do About It

The increased availability of quality audiobooks for children, often released at the same time as the print version, allows young readers and listeners to reflect on how their listening and reading experiences with a book differ. A child may prefer a particular form of interaction based on the genre or subject of the book. Pamela Varley says, “Audiobooks will give some kids a fresh chance to find their way to books, and other kids, a new way to hold onto them.”¹⁴

Keep this in mind when a child or parent visits the library asking for a good book. Don't assume the book has to be in print format. Offer audiobook versions as well. Suggest to parents who say their child does not like to read that they check out both formats and let their child decide which format he or she wants to experience. And, join our technologically savvy children by experiencing audiobooks yourself so you can discuss and recommend them based on knowledge of both the content and the format. ☺

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