

# Listen! It's Good for Kids

by Susie Wilde  
with additional reporting  
by Jeanette Larson  
illustration by Melissa Sweet

Why children learn with audiobooks,  
what educators and parents know

**Parents steel themselves for the nightly bedtime** ritual, knowing they've had an exhausting day and there's still story time ahead. Teachers have pupils who are dying to read but can't quite crack the code. Grandparents know grandchildren who used to love to read but haven't picked up a book in more than a year.

Each age of development seems to raise quandaries for parents and teachers who want to encourage the love of reading and know that it is essential for school success. Fortunately, a body of research now supports what adult audiobook addicts have known for years: Listening is good for you. It provides pleasure and enhances learning. Whatever the child's age, whatever the concerns or problems, audiobooks can provide solutions.

## Setting the stage for reading

Dr. Teri Lesesne is a member of the American Library Association's newly formed Odyssey Award committee. Beginning in 2008, this award will credit the best audiobooks for children and young adults. Lesesne, a professor of young adult and children's literature at Sam Houston State University, has all the right credentials. Lesesne, who tells interested parties her name "rhymes with insane," has read and written widely about children's books and reading. Besides being the author of articles on literacy and *Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time: Grades 4-12* (Stenhouse), Lesesne offers dynamic pre-

sentations for teachers and librarians and keeps up an insightful, humorous daily blog called the "Goddess of YA" at [www.professornana.com](http://www.professornana.com).

Now raising her grandchildren, Lesesne is a committed audio listener with plenty of practical experience. She says she and the children often listen to audiobooks during drive time. "Frequently," Lesesne says, "it is the only time they have on a given day to sit and 'read.'" Wherever listening takes place, audiobooks can be highly effective mood changers, transforming boredom into high entertainment. They also provide relief for overtired or time-challenged parents and teachers. Pop in an audiobook, and you can persuade the fussiest child out of a temper tantrum or calm a class on a stormy day. Listening together encourages a secret literacy code in families and classrooms. A remembered phrase may lighten spirits, and characters can be invoked to remind children of traits and behaviors.

When beginning readers hear books read aloud, the experience stretches their comprehension. They can grasp ideas and words too complicated for them when found on the page. New and expressive words sparkle and tease children into falling in love with language. New words and ideas stimulate conversations. For children from 4 to 8, try dramatic listens such as those from Rabbit Ears. Older beginning readers may appreciate audiobooks that have celebrities to enhance the excitement of classic stories.

## Early introduction to audio boosts imagination, independence

At the early reading stages, children need a variety of literary experiences. A child learning to read can listen and follow along with a printed version of the story, matching the sounds of oral language to the written words. Involve young children in series such as Norman Bridwell's *Clifford*, which they can continue reading without audiobook pairing when

they feel more accomplished. *Clifford, the Small Red Puppy* traces Emily Elizabeth's early days with her soon-to-be best canine friend and has cues for page changes and sound effects and music that add dimension to the story.

Children today are bombarded with visual images and may not have many opportunities to stimulate their auditory imagination. During Lesesne's 2006 presentation on audiobooks for the American Library Association, she noted

# Why Listen? What audiobooks teach readers

| Type of Reader  | Benefits of Listening   | Suggested Titles  |
|---|---|---|
| Beginning Readers<br>Ages 4-7                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening comprehension precedes reading comprehension</li> <li>• Exposure to a variety of speech patterns increases oral fluency</li> <li>• Audio paired with text develops reading skills</li> <li>• Increases "read-aloud" time for tired parent or overworked teacher</li> </ul> | <p><b>Arnie the Doughnut</b> Laurie Keller, read by Michael McKean, Diana Canova, David de Vries, et al.</p> <p><b>I Stink</b> Kate &amp; Jim McMullan, read by Andy Richter</p> <p><b>Rabbit Ears Treasuries</b> Various authors, read by various readers</p> <p><b>Rotten Ralph series</b> Jack Gantos, read by the author</p> <p><b>The Train They Call the City of New Orleans</b> Steve Goodman, read by Tom Chapin</p> <p><b>What Charlie Heard</b> Mordicai Gerstein, read by the author</p> |
| Independent Readers<br>Ages 8-12                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps busy kids find more time to read</li> <li>• Adding audiobooks increases number of books children read</li> <li>• Dialects are made easier &amp; contextual</li> <li>• Improves reading test scores</li> <li>• Exposure to multicultural stories</li> </ul>                     | <p><b>Airborn</b> Kenneth Oppel, read by a Full Cast</p> <p><b>Bridge to Terabithia</b> Katherine Paterson, read by Robert Sean Leonard</p> <p><b>Esperanza Rising</b> Pam Muñoz Ryan, read by Trini Alvarado</p> <p><b>Harry Potter series</b> J.K. Rowling, read by Jim Dale</p> <p><b>Room One</b> Andrew Clements, read by Keith Nobbs</p> <p><b>The Snow Spider</b> Jenny Nimmo, read by John Keating</p>  |
| Young Adult Readers<br>Ages 12 and Up                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MP3 players make reading "cool"</li> <li>• Stimulates imagination</li> <li>• Improves oral expression and writing skills</li> <li>• Opportunity to complete reading assignments and keep up with special interests</li> </ul>  | <p><b>The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing</b> M.T. Anderson, read by Peter Francis James</p> <p><b>Blood Red Horse</b> K.M. Grant, read by Maggie Mash</p> <p><b>Elsewhere</b> Gabrielle Zevin, read by Cassandra Morris</p> <p><b>I Am the Messenger</b> Markus Zusak, read by Marc Aden Gray</p> <p><b>Looking for Alaska</b> John Green, read by Jeff Woodman</p> <p><b>Twilight</b> Stephenie Meyer, read by Ilyana Kadushin</p>   |
| Challenged Readers<br>ESL, Learning Disabled, Reluctant Readers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps with vocabulary, comprehension, pronunciation</li> <li>• Draws in reluctant readers</li> <li>• A boon for auditory learners</li> <li>• Increases intergenerational literacy</li> </ul>   | <p><b>Artemis Fowl</b> Eoin Colfer, read by Nathaniel Parker</p> <p><b>Charlotte's Web</b> E.B. White, read by E.B. White</p> <p><b>Hoot</b> Carl Hiassen, read by Chad Lowe</p> <p><b>The Invention of Hugo Cabret</b> Brian Selznick, read by Jeff Woodman</p> <p><b>The Tale of Despereaux</b> Kate DiCamillo, read by Graeme Malcolm</p>  |

For more titles: Audiobooks on the Go, [www.audiofilemagazine.com](http://www.audiofilemagazine.com), ALA Notable Recordings & Selected Audiobooks for Young Adults, [www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org)

several benefits audiobooks offer such young listeners. Audiobooks can help “start the ‘movie’ in the head,” she says, and allow children to form their own visual images.

They also serve as models for oral fluency, building both vocabulary and comprehension. “Kids often lack verbal endurance because they don’t read enough. Listening to audio helps develop verbal endurance,” says Lesesne.

Series are a wise way to start for children listening to their first novels, because exposure to one often leaves a newly minted reader asking for more. Choose series that have stood the test of time, such as Beverly Cleary’s Henry books or Jeff Brown’s Flat Stanley series. Familiarity with a series often gives readers courage to branch out to new stories and unfamiliar characters.

In classrooms across America, teachers worry about ways to develop cultural literacy. Audiobooks help bridge cultural gaps and educate children about their own history. Parents and teachers can use them as a departure for discussion. A great example is *Blues Journey* by Walter Dean and Christopher Myers, a father and son who share a love of blues that they express in pictures and words. Live Oak Media has paired the book with a CD read by Richard Allen that accents the rhythms and allows plenty of room to introduce blues recordings or to talk about how poverty, chain gangs, and persecution gave voice to some of the greatest blues music.

### Help struggling readers with audiobooks

Students who are struggling to master reading skills can be overwhelmed by the pressures of demanding curriculums and high-stakes testing. Professor P. David Pearson, dean of the Graduate School of Education, University of California, Berkeley, put the issue succinctly in an *NEA Today* article: “People are so desperate to raise test scores that we could well end up with a nation of kids who can pass tests but can neither read critically nor enjoy the act of reading itself.”

Audiobooks can be the solution because they keep students actively learning. Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that listening to audiobooks helps reading fluency, expands vocabulary, and increases comprehension. According to research done by teachers in Boston and San Diego public schools, those students who used audiobooks to support their reading over four to six weeks did better than control groups who used text alone: The audiobook-supported students not only read more, their test scores showed greater improvements in reading fluency and comprehension.

Those teaching ESL find that audio helps students pick up cues about phrasing, pronunciation, and intonation. Listening also improves concentration in ADD and ADHD children and can be of significant help to any learner who processes information more easily through listening than reading print. Students with learning disabilities benefit from the support of a multi-sensory experience that provides auditory cues to aid in decoding written words.

Struggling readers often feel left out of the learning loop and therefore miss opportunities to voice their opinions and demonstrate their thinking skills. Audiobook listening gives them direct connection to content that can increase their confidence in class and in conversation and makes it easier for a reluctant

reader to finish a book. To set them up for success, choose a plot-strong short book, preferably by an author admired by peers. Audio versions of mysteries emphasize the capacity of the genre to absorb readers. One to try: Andrew Clements’s *Room One*, which features a mystery-loving sixth-grade hero.

### Feeding the desires of older children

Recent research demonstrates that the numbers of children who read for entertainment drops significantly after the age of 8. Study subjects cite lack of time and inability to find good books. Fortunately, adult ingenuity can help with both. Point out to children that listening to an audiobook can lighten their study load. Many assigned books are available for listening, and a good performance can make all the difference to a print-weary student. For instance, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as read by Sissy Spacek, gets right to the heart of this Southern classic.

Students need downtime as much as adults, and you can encourage possibilities for pure entertainment. For children who’ve loved Ann Brashares’s bestselling series about four best friends who share a pair of jeans, *Forever in Blue: The Fourth Summer of the Sisterhood* will be a hit. Capitalize on the current craze for graphic novels with Brian Selznick’s cutting-edge release, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (see page 62).

By adolescence, many children have fixed on their favorite genres. Stay attuned to what grabs them and feed their habit. Many Potter-raised teens have become fantasy fans, and you might suggest Linda Buckley-Archer’s *Gideon the Cutpurse*. Begun as a radio drama, the time-traveling novel makes an easy translation to audio, and narrator Gerald Doyle skillfully differentiates both times and characters.

And don’t forget the automobile. Cars are often our best vehicles for communication, so use this intimate space to discover a new book with your child. Taking a long trip? Pick a title that has high appeal for both of you, put stress aside, and, as Teri Lesesne suggests, return to “the pleasure we recall when our parents read to us every day,” and, for a time, “become once more lost in a book.”







