

Nurturing Literacy Skills
for Children in Military Families
through the
Read-Aloud Experience





Introduction

For military children — especially between the ages of birth and 10 — the read-aloud experience provided by United Through Reading encourages literacy and language development, and enhances the relationship between children and parents. For children in the late elementary school years — even up to age 14, who can comfortably read to themselves — being read aloud to has academic benefits, is connected to a love of reading, and encourages children to become frequent readers on their own.¹ Studies have found that developing a love for reading can be even more important for children than building specific literacy skills.²

Children and Illiteracy

Illiteracy in America continues to be a shocking problem. One in four American children grows up without learning how to read.³ According to a study conducted in late April by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy, 32 million adults in the U.S. can't read.⁴ That's 14 percent of the population. Additionally, 21 percent of adults in the U.S. read below a 5th grade level, and 19 percent of high school graduates can't read.⁵ An alarming study by the U.S. Department of Education in 2000 found that 34 percent of American children are entering kindergarten without being able to identify letters of the alphabet by name, and are not yet at the first level of reading readiness. This means that 34 percent of American children are entering kindergarten unprepared to learn, and are therefore at a disadvantage relative to 66 percent of their peers. These troubling reports are counterbalanced by many reputable studies that advocate a simple family response, one that forms the foundation of United Through Reading's mission: *the single most important activity for building early emergent reading skills is reading aloud to children.*⁶

“ One in four American children grows up without learning how to read. ”

¹ The New York Times, “Study Finds Reading to Children of All Ages Grooms Them to Read More on Their Own” & KQED News, “Why Reading Aloud to Older Children Is Valuable”

² Reach out and Read, “Reading aloud to children: the evidence”

³ Do Something, “11 Facts About Literacy in America”

⁴ Huffington Post, “The U.S. Illiteracy Rate Hasn't Changed in 10 Years”

⁵ Huffington Post, “The U.S. Illiteracy Rate Hasn't Changed in 10 Years”

⁶ Bredekamp, Copple, & Neuman, 2000, “Learning To Read And Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices For Young Children”

Military Children Experience Unique Challenges

“ Military families relocate 10 times more often than civilian families — on average, every 2 or 3 years. ”

Military families and their children experience several challenges that could potentially impact their children's early education. Life for military families is characterized by unique demands such as risk of injury or death of the service member, long work hours, frequent relocation, and family separations due to military deployments, unaccompanied assignments, field exercises, and training.⁷ Military families relocate 10 times more often than civilian families — on average, every 2 or 3 years.⁸ The frequent separations that military families endure is the specific challenge that gave birth to the nonprofit United Through Reading nearly 30 years ago.

Since 2001, more than 2 million American children have had a parent deployed at least once and more than 900,000 children have experienced the deployment of one or both parents multiple times.⁹ These long separations are linked to difficulties in children's social and emotional functioning which affect their ability to learn. A RAND Corporation study even found a strong association between children who have endured separations from a parent due to deployment and lower achievement in reading and math.¹⁰ It's clear that military children face unique challenges in literacy achievement due to the separation aspect of military lifestyle.

The Read-Aloud Experience Provides an Important Literacy Tool for Military Children

United Through Reading provides military children who face frequent separations, re-locations, and deployment with the ability to regularly experience reading aloud with their absent parent or another important service member in their life. Through shared book reading the oral language skills of military children are stimulated and the act of reading encourages the development of language and other emergent literacy skills,¹¹ which in turn help these military children to prepare for school.¹² The role models for reading are none other than the adults from whom these children are eager to hear.

⁷ Military One Source, “Report on the Impact of Deployment of Members of the Armed Forces on Their Dependent Children”

⁸ DoSomething.org, “11 Facts About Military Families”

⁹ DoSomething.org, “11 Facts About Military Families”

¹⁰ Rand Corporation, “Effects of Soldiers' Deployment on Children's Academic Performance and Behavioral Health”

¹¹ The term emergent literacy refers to the origin of reading and writing in the youngest children. Emergent literacy comprises the skills, understandings, and attitudes that young children demonstrate before they are able to control conventional forms of reading and writing. Emergent literacy is based on the understanding that young children acquire literacy not only through direct instruction, but also as the result of exposure and encouragement. - Reach out and Read, “Reading aloud to children: the evidence”

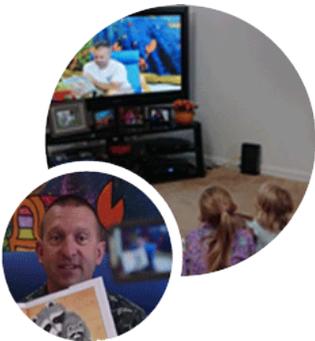
¹² Reach out and Read



“ Reading aloud to older children — even up to age 14, who can comfortably read to themselves — has benefits both academic and emotional. ”

The read-aloud experience assists military children specifically in the area of vocabulary development and growth. Reading aloud familiarizes young children with the language found in books and stimulates vocabulary growth, especially in regard to the more sophisticated word choices that children are unlikely to encounter in every day conversation. For example, children’s books contain 50 percent more rare words than prime-time television.¹³

Reading aloud to older children — even up to age 14, who can already comfortably read to themselves — has both academic and emotional benefits.¹⁴ Literacy experts say when parents or teachers read aloud to children who can already read on their own, the children can hear more complex words or stories than they might choose to tackle themselves.¹⁵ Part of the real value of reading aloud to a child of any age is an exposure to sophisticated language, the idea of “marinating children in higher-level vocabulary.”¹⁶ A 1984 study performed by Dr. Thomas G. Sticht showed that kids can understand books that are beyond their decoding ability when those books are read aloud to them. An important reason to read aloud to older kids is to consider the fact that a child’s reading level doesn’t catch up to his listening level until about the eighth grade. They have to hear words before they can speak words, and they have to hear them spoken before they can read them. Reading at their level happens through the ear.¹⁷ Additionally, reading stories to older children at a higher reading level than their own will motivate them to continue reading on their own.¹⁸



An added dimension of reading aloud is that the experience provides a positive and affirming adult-child interaction. Early parent-child relationships influence children’s engagement in literacy activities.¹⁹ Through reading aloud and shared book reading, children not only acquire knowledge about narratives but also learn about their own personal narrative when sharing a book with an adult, something that is important for their self-esteem. Reading can also play an important role in wake and sleep patterns by making it part of the bedtime routine,²⁰ something that United Through Reading encourages.

¹³ Reach out and Read

¹⁴ KQED News

¹⁵ The New York Times

¹⁶ The New York Times

¹⁷ KQED News

¹⁸ KQED News

¹⁹ Reach out and Read

²⁰ Reach out and Read

United Through Reading Creates a Unique Read-Aloud Opportunity for Military Children



“With United Through Reading, families are guaranteed special and uninterrupted time with their service member that can be viewed over and over again.”

The United Through Reading program provides regular availability of the read-aloud experience to military children who otherwise may find this experience harder to come by with one deployed parent and one busy parent at home taking on the full weight of running the household.

While new technologies like Skype, FaceTime, and others are sometimes available for families during separation, they may not be reliable enough to provide regular time together. Due to poor internet connection, insufficient bandwidth, or an inability to sync family schedules with a service member’s schedule during assignments, families and their service members are often left feeling disappointed and frustrated by attempts to stay connected. With UTR, families are guaranteed special and uninterrupted time with their service member that can be viewed over and over again. And, more than a conversation and connection with their service member, UTR also provides important reading exposure and encouragement in the life of a military child, which leads to the acquiring of literacy and language skills.²¹

According to the Executive Director of Reach Out and Read, Brian Gallagher, the brain develops faster than any other time between the ages of 0 and 3. Because of this, it’s important to foster literacy during the earliest stages of life.²² Scientists are now discovering how after-birth experiences determine the wiring of the human brain. Research indicates that experiences during early-childhood greatly impact this neural development, physically affecting how the intricate circuits of the brain are wired. The signals that a baby receives from the world, or their various experiences, are believed to strengthen neural synapses. A memory that is not accessed regularly will fade, and synapses that are not used will disappear. This process is known as “pruning” and the best way to prevent pruning, or the loss of these synapses, is to ensure that the child is stimulated.²³ There is real opportunity in providing parents with books and encouragement to read to their children regularly, sing with their children, and engage their children in conversation—all of which stimulates children and prepares our next generation to be incredibly successful in school. United Through Reading’s mission is to facilitate this interaction in the lives of military families with young children facing physical separation. Through the more than 200 UTR recording sites worldwide, UTR-trained volunteers guide service members in selecting age-appropriate, stimulating

²¹ Scholastic, “Early Literacy”

²² Reach out and Read

²³ Begley, Sharon. “How to Build a Baby’s Brain,” *Newsweek*



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books to send home along with a video-recording of them reading the book. Parents are encouraged to ask questions and engage the children with funny voices so that the children will play the UTR videos over and over again. A recent UK study affirmed that listening to one book read multiple times positively impacts language development, especially while asking children questions and engaging them, just as parents are encouraged to do in their UTR stories. While we know the ages of birth to 3-years-of-age are extremely important in literacy development, it’s less about a critical period and more about windows of opportunity that extend across early childhood, culminating perhaps around the age of 10.²⁴ The availability of the UTR program for military families provides this window of opportunity for military children, who may otherwise have less of an opportunity than a civilian child.²⁵ After nearly 30 years of working toward this mission, UTR has seen success with their beneficiary families. Through participant surveys, UTR found that 88 percent of participants report an increase in connectedness with deployed service members and 80 percent of participants report increases in their child’s interest in reading and books. And, nearly 80 percent of United Through Reading recordings are enjoyed every day or even several times a day. It’s not unusual for children to watch a recorded story hundreds of times during a ten-month deployment.



United Through Reading Contributes to Emergent Literacy and Language Development in Military Children

United Through Reading helps military families maintain the important tradition of family reading time in challenging circumstances so military children will enter kindergarten with reading readiness and prepared to learn. The benefits to military children are many. Using United Through Reading while facing separation from a parent allows military children of all ages to benefit from the read-aloud experience, which has academic and emotional benefits; promotes emergent literacy and language development; encourages the child to become a frequent reader; builds the relationship between parent and child; and ignites a life-long love for reading.

To learn more about or contact United Through Reading, please visit unitedthroughreading.com or email info@utr.org.

²⁴ Scholastic, “Early Literacy”

²⁵ Do Something, “11 Facts About Military Families”

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