

How joyful dialogic reading jumpstarts early learning

The role of family engagement in children's early learning is crucial to their future educational prospects. Alice Letvin and Carolyn Saper, who are based in Chicago, USA, developed the ReadAskChat dialogic reading app for families with babies, toddlers, and prereaders. The ReadAskChat app includes a library of short, content-rich stories and prompts for adult readers to stimulate brain-building "serve-and-return" conversations. Complementing the app are ReadAskChat's programs of adult learning in dialogic reading, a process that has been shown to foster reading and school readiness and social-emotional growth.

The seminal fact that inspired and guided the design of ReadAskChat is that 90 percent of human brain development occurs during the first five years of life—before formal schooling begins. Educators and policymakers increasingly understand the long-term impacts of early education on children's future school and life trajectories. During this critical developmental window, parents must be their child's first teacher. ReadAskChat offers an enjoyable, research-based method and digital tool to empower families to advance their young children's cognitive and social-emotional development.

The ReadAskChat tool is a picture-book quality library app that includes on-demand guidance in dialogic reading practices for parents, caregivers, and teachers of prereading children from six months up to ages 6/7 years. Each story in the library was chosen to sustain brain-building back-and-forth conversations, shared storytelling, and engagement with concepts and ideas. With its particular focus on **reading for meaning**, ReadAskChat aims to cultivate habits of mind that lead to motivated, independent reading. Complementing the library app are the ReadAskChat programs of online adult learning in dialogic reading, suitable for a variety of audiences, including preservice teachers, early childhood teachers and aides, and parents.

Multiple investments by the **U.S. National Science Foundation** enabled Alice Letvin, PhD, and Carolyn

Saper, MST, to develop and launch ReadAskChat.

READASKCHAT – RESEARCH BASE

The ReadAskChat design is based on research from many fields – from brain science to learning theory to human development and the sociology of education. Its core objective is to guide and encourage families to engage children in reading and talking about stories from the earliest age. This process – called **dialogic reading** by the American Academy of Paediatrics – has been shown to foster virtually all school-readiness indicators, including vocabulary and knowledge attainment, concepts about print, executive functioning, and social-emotional learning.

Unlike most other education products for the home, ReadAskChat is **adult-mediated**, and is based on a developmental understanding of how young children learn best, including the fact that very young children only learn language from other humans, not from digital media or recordings. ReadAskChat places the development of early literacy and language on equal footing with creative thinking and open-ended questioning. Research also shows that science learning, which can be promoted through exposure to science topics and dialogic reading, should be cultivated before kindergarten entry, so children begin school with age-appropriate content and conceptual knowledge and the capacity to observe, wonder, experiment, and problem solve. Profound inequities in children's



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educational experiences, achievement, and opportunities persist, even in developed countries like the U.S. and U.K. Too many children start school below grade level norms, and the majority of those children end up staying behind throughout their schooling. But an influential 2018 study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that family language that includes "conversational turns" of the kind fostered by ReadAskChat accounted for significant differences in brain physiology and increases in language skills among children exposed to such conversations. These findings are particularly encouraging because they pertained to children regardless of parental income or education.

AN INNOVATION IN DIALOGIC READING AND PARENT EMPOWERMENT

ReadAskChat conforms to a cutting-edge understanding of family engagement. Given the time pressures experienced by most families today, to think of "engagement" as how often parents attend school meetings is needlessly limited. Rather, ReadAskChat embraces the more expansive definition of engagement as the degree to which parents work with teachers as partners in their children's educational success. The easily accessible digital library, the dialogic reading method—*Read, Read Again, Ask & Chat*—and text-specific conversation starters make such engagement possible. This seamless learning scaffolding for adults is feasible only through a digital medium.

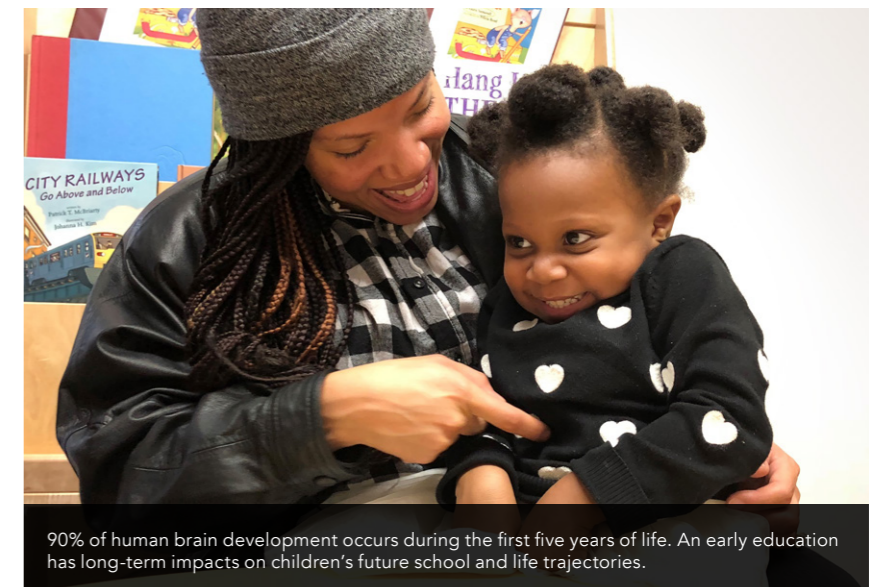
A sequence of on-demand dialogic reading prompts at three developmental levels—Babies, Toddlers, and

Prereaders—are embedded on each page of the library. All prompts are based on this developmental continuum. With babies, adults are guided to *model*. With toddlers, adults are guided to take turns with their child, *naming* who is acting and what is happening in a story. With older, prereading children, prompts suggest ways for child and adult to build ideas and excitement about stories through playful and imaginative back-and-forth conversations. These graduated prompts enable parents to provide a uniquely personalised learning experience. Through talk with a caring

adult, children gradually internalise language and meaning, and more mature thinking develops.

ReadAskChat is not a babysitting app. Unlike most education apps in today's marketplace—which are simply digital versions of worksheets, games, and puzzles—ReadAskChat brings parents and children together to construct meaning collaboratively and bond with each other. Each ReadAskChat story also includes suggestions for extending children's learning beyond the reading experience through related creative

By encouraging reading for meaning, ReadAskChat helps to develop motivated, independent reading, while promoting knowledge and vocabulary building, and family bonding.



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play, drawing, playacting, storytelling, and real-world explorations. The resulting conversations and activities are inherently meaningful and lay a strong foundation for open communication that can last throughout childhood and youth.

For all these reasons, ReadAskChat is a learning tool for adults as much as for children. Conversation starters serve as a personal coach, to be used as needed. The expectation is that over time, adults will internalise the dialogic reading process, while children will apply an active, collaborative learning approach to other educational settings. To further adults' understanding and facility in joyful dialogic reading, ReadAskChat is producing series of 36 brief video tutorials (available late 2020/early 2021) that emphasise listening, responsiveness, and open-ended, nondidactic questioning and conversation.

Research evidence suggests that goal setting and regular "nudges" can increase parent participation in various home-based learning initiatives. Even simple reminders can have an outsized

impact. To help establish a routine of at-home reading, parents set their own family reading goals in the app. Supportive or celebratory notifications based on the progress or completion of the goals each family sets for itself are then sent by ReadAskChat each week.

Organisations integrating ReadAskChat into their initiatives supporting children and families can track engagement data through multiple metrics on the individual level and in aggregate. Metrics include number of stories read; time spent reading; favourite stories; reading goals met; and conversation starters read.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The positive experience of parents using ReadAskChat suggests that it could become a powerful professional development tool for classroom teachers and assistant teachers. It could also be used to advance shared storytelling among young children in group settings. Shared storytelling has been shown to develop vocabulary and language skills and deepen literal and inferential comprehension.

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ReadAskChat has the potential to become a powerful professional development tool for classroom teachers and assistant teachers.



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ReadAskChat may also play a role in Special Education; supporting young mothers who are still in education themselves; and in volunteer tutoring programs. It may also help to address so-called "summer slide," a documented phenomenon in which children who are not actively occupied during the long holiday tend to lose some learning gains made during the previous school year.

There is no doubt that demand for this inexpensive, accessible, and effective learning tool is high and may have the potential to change the educational lives and expectations of many children, especially those from less privileged backgrounds.

Find ReadAskChat on iTunes App Store: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/readaskchat-for-children-0-4/id1223747440?mt=8>
Google Play: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.readaskchat>

For information on ReadAskChat's online adult-learning programs visit www.readaskchat.net

Behind the Research



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ReadAskChat
for Babies, Toddlers, and Prereaders

Research Objectives

ReadAskChat increases family access to high-quality stories and empowers parents and caregivers to foster school readiness by engaging in what paediatricians call dialogic reading—back-and-forth communication about stories they are reading together.

Detail

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Bio

Alice Letvin, PhD, and Carolyn Saper, MST, have been colleagues for 30+ years, uniting their expertise in preschool–postsecondary literary publishing and curricula; early literacy instruction and assessment; teacher professional development; and parent-engagement programming. They cofounded ReadAskChat in 2016.

Funding

ReadAskChat was launched through multiple investments from the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) as part of its initiative to spur development and dissemination of innovative and impactful education products.

Collaborators

ReadAskChat placed as a finalist in the 2016 University of Chicago Booth School of Business Social New Venture Challenge. In 2018, Promise Venture Studio named ReadAskChat as one of the top 50 early childhood social enterprises in the nation.

Personal Response

How does ReadAskChat support children and parents from low-income families?

ReadAskChat levels the playing field for families by making a high-quality children's library easily accessible through smart personal devices, which 81 percent of U.S. households and 79 percent of U.K. households now own. Through its enjoyable and easy-to-use method of dialogic reading, and supported by embedded, developmentally leveled prompts, parents and other caregivers can initiate and extend back-and-forth conversations that literally build children's brains, foster vocabulary and knowledge attainment, and spur social-emotional learning during the period of children's foundational brain development.