



Subtitles on for the Disney Im classic Moana.

Turn on the Subtitles to boost kids' literacy

A local expert weighs in on a national movement

BY **CHERYL MURFIN**
PUBLISHED **MARCH 2024**
UPDATED **MARCH 22, 2024**

There's a move afoot to encourage parents to use subtitles when watching television with kids. And it's a movement that has found support from some very likely people: Actors.

Jack Black, Stephen Fry, Sandy Toksvig, and others who appear in shows and films popular with kids and families have been using YouTube to spread the word about keeping words up on the screen.



Actor and musician Jack Black calls on parents to turn on the subtitles to improve kids' literacy. [CLICK TO WATCH.](#)

[Numerous studies](#) indicate that watching TV with subtitles can improve kids' literacy, vocabulary, comprehension skills, and reading fluency.

Turn on the Subtitles is a new global movement that has brought together education leaders, entrepreneurs, celebrities, and parents to communicate a simple message: Turn on the Subtitles!

"As a father to young kids, I have seen the impact of this simple act and want to get the word out that with just one click we can help billions of children learn to read," Henry Warren, Co-founder of Turn on the Subtitles, said in a recent news release.

Look for Caterpillar Captions

This year, the nonprofit will launch Caterpillar Captions, a new caption service for broadcasters. The service uses a font and stylesheet that improves accessibility and readability for kids. If you see a blue caterpillar on your favorite channel or streaming service, that means it has adopted the new font.

What do local literacy experts think of Turn on the Subtitle?

"I actually had never thought about the impact that subtitles could have on gaining reading skills for young kids," said Lisa Cenicerros, Literacy Programs manager for the Seattle-based [Page Ahead Children's Literacy Program](#). "I think it's a great idea and something very simple for families to try. In the least, it will give kids that word exposure and some print awareness they might not otherwise get when watching their favorite TV show."

What does the local children's literacy picture look like?

Cenicerros says that students in our region are struggling with literacy, especially after the pandemic.

"It comes as no surprise that literacy scores dropped," she says. "Pre-pandemic, in the spring of 2019, 55.4% of 3rd graders in Washington were meeting reading standards. But now only 47.7% are meeting standards."

According to Cenicerros, the numbers for students from low-income families are more alarming: 38.9% of 3rd graders met reading standards in 2019 compared to 31.7% in 2023, although students from low-income families in Seattle public schools are doing a bit better, with 33.4% meeting the standard.

Link books to shows

Cenicerros and Page Ahead say there are many strategies for encouraging kids' literacy, and a big one is allowing children to choose their books. She points out that this often leads back to television.

"We've noticed that kids enjoy reading when they get to choose their favorite book, and often those books feature their favorite TV show character," Cenicerros said. "If a parent notices that their kid is a big fan of Bluey, they should try to find some Bluey books at their library that they can read with their kid."

Ceniceros suggests that when reading that book, parents might ask their kids questions about the character or story: Who are their friends? How is the character feeling? What is the character doing?” Questions help kids connect with the story and learn that reading and books can be fun.

Subtitles advocates point out that a single children’s movie can add exposure to 20,000 subtitled words — about the same as the average children’s chapter book.

No they won’t

As a parent, you might wonder, won’t my kids just turn them off when I’m not here?

It turns out they can’t. A [1991 landmark study of subtitle behavior](#) showed that subtitles cannot be ignored. Viewers automatically exhibit reading behavior when they are on. [A 2007 study](#) re-confirmed this finding, showing that both children and adults exhibit automatic reading behavior while watching media with subtitles on.

Equally important, during a 2021 study, [the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts \(NESTA\)](#) showed that kids are highly unlikely to turn subtitles off once they are on. Of the 450,000 children observed watching videos, 98% kept them on. Moreover, no children in the study complained about having them on.

Same language subtitles

“We know that children watch an average of three to four hours of TV a day, and by simply turning on subtitles in the ‘same’ language, we can help them become better readers,” said Dr. Brij Kothari, founder of the international nonprofit [PlanetRead.org](#). “Research shows that children read captions when they’re available and achieve significantly better literacy outcomes — especially for those struggling with reading. It’s so significant that India just passed a law that requires 50% of television content to [have subtitles on by 2025](#).”

Ceniceros is a convert.

“Using subtitles as one more tool for promoting literacy is just like pointing out signs for kids to read,” Cenicerros adds. “Anything that is familiar and they see frequently can help with letter recognition and ultimately reading.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



CHERYL MURFIN

Cheryl Murfin is managing editor at Seattle's Child. She is also a certified doula, lactation educator for [NestingInstinctsSeattle.com](#) and a certified AWA writing workshop facilitator at [Compasswriters.com](#).