

An Easy Way To Help Kids Learn At Home: Turn On The Captions



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Making captions the default setting for kids' TV could be an easy way to boost literacy, especially for struggling readers.

A new organization is [pushing](#) for children's TV and video programs to automatically display captions to boost literacy. It's an easy thing to do, and it has even more research behind it than advocates realize.

"If I told you there was a magic button," says a British-accented child's voice-over in [a video](#), "and when it's pressed, it doubles my chances of becoming literate—which decreases the chances of me committing a crime, and even reduces the chances of me dying early by 75%—would you believe me?"

The big reveal in the video—produced by a U.K.-based advocacy group called [Turn on the Subtitles](#), or TOTS—is that the button isn't magic at all. It's real, and it turns on the captions that already exist for almost every TV or video-on-demand program, including those on YouTube. TOTS' goal is to raise awareness among parents to turn on those captions at home—or, better yet, to have broadcasters and content providers display the captions automatically on programs directed at six- to ten-year-olds. Viewers would be able to turn the captions off, but the default setting would be "on."

The idea that this simple change would boost kids' reading ability has [solid evidence](#) behind it, although the claims made by the adorable voice in the video may overstate the benefits. TOTS relies on [research](#) showing that children generally do read captions when they're available, and that they lead to significantly better outcomes, especially among those who struggle with reading. One experiment in India involved schoolchildren who couldn't read a single letter in Hindi. They were shown videos of Hindi songs once a week, with or without captions in the same language. After five years, 70% of the kids in the group that got captions were functional readers, compared to only 34% in the group that didn't.

It's tempting to conclude that while children are stuck at home during the current pandemic, often glued to TV screens, we could keep their reading progress on track just by turning on captions. But there's no evidence that captions *alone* will have this effect, as opposed to captions shown to children who also attend school regularly, in person. And captions alone won't be much help to children who haven't yet learned to decode, or sound out, words. A few kids will be able to pick up the skill of decoding more or less on their own, but most will need explicit instruction, preferably [with systematic phonics](#).

Still, even if it's not a panacea, turning on captions could be a simple and painless way to improve reading ability for many children. And the evidence behind the idea goes beyond the studies of captions (or same-language subtitles) cited by TOTS. Captions promote what reading researchers call "fluency"—the ability to read smoothly and with appropriate expression. Often overlooked or misunderstood, fluency provides what one expert has called [the "bridge"](#) between decoding and comprehension. And the lack of it, or disfluency, holds many students back, especially when they reach [higher grade levels](#).

One prerequisite for fluency is the ability to decode automatically. That frees up space in the mind to focus on meaning. The other component is "prosody," or the ability to do things like pause when appropriate—for example, at a comma or a period—or put emphasis on the right words.

When schools have focused on fluency, [they've often mistaken](#) the goal as speed. Kids are told to just reread a passage until they can do it as quickly as possible. It's true that if you read too slowly, it interferes with comprehension. But that also happens if you read too quickly. The point should be to read for *meaning*, not speed.

One way for students to develop fluency is to [listen to an expert reader](#) while following along in the text themselves—an experience quite similar to watching a video with captions. Kids can hear how words are pronounced, while matching them to their written forms, and hear all the aspects of expression that go into prosody.

But most research on fluency has focused on having children read a text repeatedly themselves, perhaps after hearing it modeled by an expert. Not only do they get better at reading that specific text, they become better at understanding other texts as well. Kids who watch a captioned video won't get a chance to engage in repeated rereading, unless it's a recording and they watch it again and again (which, as many parents can attest, children often want to do).

Still, there's also evidence that listening to an expert reader can have a powerful effect on comprehension even without repeated rereading—and that the effects also transfer. In one small study done in England, for example, struggling readers who simply listened to a teacher read two novels aloud over a period of three months made a whopping *sixteen months of progress* in comprehension, as measured by a standardized test.

One caveat is that watching a captioned video that consists mostly of dialogue won't help familiarize kids with the conventions of written language, which is almost always *more complex* than spoken language. But there are lots of videos out there showing adults reading children's books aloud, especially during the current period of remote learning—including some *featuring famous actors* that already automatically display captions. Tennessee's education department *is broadcasting* lessons on public television as well as posting them *on YouTube*, and the English language arts videos consist mostly of read-alouds. Turning on those captions could be hugely beneficial. (To turn on captions on YouTube videos, just click the button marked "CC" at the bottom right. Alas, the captions on the Tennessee videos are auto-generated and, while accurate, lack appropriate punctuation.)

To be sure, captioned TV or videos aren't a substitute for a rich, interactive, in-person education. And other crucial factors go into comprehension in addition to fluency—perhaps most important, and most overlooked, *knowledge of the topic* at hand. But especially as compared to other literacy-related initiatives, it takes little effort to turn captions on. They can reach any child who has a TV, as *over 95%* of American households do. That means they can reach children in households too poor to have reliable internet access, which are the same households that are *more likely* to have struggling readers. There's no downside, and the potential benefits are substantial.

And when schooling eventually returns to normal, there's *much more* that can be done to boost fluency. Instead of turning fluency practice into a mindless race against the clock, teachers can have kids read repeatedly for meaning, engage in choral reading, learn songs, recite poetry, and perform plays. Those activities may sound fusty and old-fashioned, but *research suggests* they can help put many kids on the path to academic success.



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