

4th-Grade Readers . . . Not Too Old to Snuggle

Children continue to need one-on-one attention during reading, even when they're too big to sit on your lap.

By Anne Gutshall

Teachers and parents are well aware of the benefits of reading out loud to children, especially young children (Allington 2001; Davenport et al. 2004). Our kindergarten and 1st-grade classrooms are filled with the lovely sound of teachers reading books out loud, children reading books to themselves, and guest readers, like the school principal and students' parents, being invited to read to the class. The image of little 5-year-olds snuggled up in the school library on cozy bean bags, listening to favorite stories, is quite familiar to us.

But what about those great big, hunkin', 9- and 10-year-olds? You know, the ones who are taller than their teacher. The 4th-grade kids for whom, for many, the early signs of puberty are already beginning. Surely, they're too old to snuggle up and read with an adult? And furthermore, if they aren't fluent readers by 4th grade, don't they need major reading intervention? And if they're adequate readers, shouldn't we just focus on those needing more help? Moreover, shouldn't individual reading with 4th graders take place at a sensible school desk or table with a wide berth between the child and the teacher, or even more comfortably



The Cool Cats reading buddy program is a partnership between the College of Charleston's School of Education, Health, and Human Performance and Cainho Elementary School in Huger, South Carolina. Preservice teachers from the College of Charleston are recruited to travel to the rural school and read, one on one, with 4th-grade students.

■ ANNE GUTSHALL is a visiting assistant professor in the School of Education, College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

From the students . . .

I learned lots of big words and was happy with the reading buddies. It was a sad moment when they left, it was hard for me.

— Katie, age 9

I liked that they would help me when I got stuck on a word, and they would tell me what it means. I also liked when they would ask me where I wanted to sit.

— Tai, age 10

They helped me to read better and understand the words while I'm reading the book. Then I could have somebody to tell my feelings to about the book. They make me want to read more often.

— Kayla, age 9

I really liked having the reading buddies this year because they were fun. I felt that they would be great teachers. My reading buddy helped me figure out words when I said it wrong. She's a wonderful teacher!

— Jake, age 9

on a computer, where serious intensive instruction can occur? Or should it?

Christine Finnan asks educators to consider that upper elementary age students have needs for nurturing and caring that are unique to their developmental stage. In her book, *The Upper Elementary Years: Ensuring Success in Grades 3-6*, Finnan notes that many 4th- and 5th-grade classrooms are significantly different from primary-grade classroom environments. More specifically, students typically experience a classroom environment that shifts its focus from nurturing children to teaching content (2009, p. 122). This shift may be in direct conflict with the student's continued developmental needs for nurturing. According to Finnan, "upper elementary children have rather basic desires: accomplishment and affirmation, belonging and connection; academic, social and physical engagement" (p. 99).

One example of how 4th-grade students may benefit from snuggling up with a buddy to read is taking place in a rural South Carolina public school. The Cool Cats reading buddy program is a partnership between the College of Charleston's School of Education, Health, and Human Performance and Cainhoy Elementary School in Huger, South Carolina. Cainhoy is a rural, Title I, public school where 96% of the students are African American and 88% qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. In this pilot program, preservice teachers from the College of Charleston are recruited and earn a stipend to travel to the rural school and read, one on one, with 4th-grade students, most of whom are struggling readers.

Over the seven-week sessions, there is no articulated reading program, no prescribed curriculum, not even one uniform book that is used. In addition, all 4th-grade students are invited to participate. Students accompany their buddies to the library, pick a cozy spot, and snuggle up and read. The only instructions are for 4th graders and college-age students to split in half the time spent reading out loud.

Sounds easy, right? But does it work? Consistently, after each seven-week reading buddy session, 4th-grade students raised their oral reading fluency (ORF), as measured by the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Scale (DIBELS), an average of just over 20 words per minute. The results of this pilot are noteworthy; and upon reflection, the individual attention, physical connection, and human interaction may be the components that contributed to improving students' reading scores. Moreover, when the two 4th-grade teachers reflected on the program, they described children who wanted to come to

TABLE 1.

Comparison of ORF scores with Reading Buddies and Successmaker Computer Program

Intervention Type for 7 Weeks	Beginning ORF (words per minute)	Ending ORF (words per minute)	Change
Reading Buddies Fall 2007	80.96	102.7	+21.8
SuccessMaker Winter 2008	102.7	101.5	-1.2
Reading Buddies Spring 2008	101.5	121.7	+20.2

school on reading buddy day and who valued the connections with their buddies.

The reading buddies program had a very positive effect on my students. First of all, they looked forward to coming to school on Thursday so they could read with their buddies. They enjoyed the one-on-one contact. Second, I feel it helped with fluency, which the DIBELS scores proved to be true. The children are more confident readers and enjoy reading more now.

— Kathy Patee, 4th-grade teacher

I am not quite sure how to express what this program meant to our students. Not only do they grow in fluency and comprehension, but they're motivated to become better readers. Getting the students to want to read is one of my biggest challenges every year, but having someone dedicated and committed to them individually makes a world of difference. Each time the students came back from reading with their buddy, we would have to have a few minutes just for them to tell me about it. Today, as we cleaned our desks out for the end of the year, I saw numerous Christmas cards that the reading buddies gave to the students six months ago. I can't get them to find things I gave them five minutes ago, but that simple card and picture was of so much value to them that they held onto it for months and months.

— Deanne Martin, 4th-grade teacher

When loss of funding interrupted the reading program, the study investigator and 4th-grade teachers decided to have students participate in a popular computerized reading intervention during the usual reading buddy time, hoping it would sustain the students' progress. The 4th graders participated in 30 minutes of individual computerized instruction for seven weeks

during their usual reading buddy time. Teachers observed that the 4th graders didn't appear to enjoy reading instruction on the computer as much as they did with their college-age buddies, but teachers were shocked to learn the 4th graders' oral reading fluency scores made absolutely no gains whatsoever in seven weeks. In fact, those same students whose oral reading fluency scores had increased by an average of 21.8 words per minute with their reading buddies posted a -1.2 word decrease in oral reading fluency (ORF) scores as measured by DIBELS after the same seven-week intervention. Later, when the funding issues were resolved and the reading buddy program was reinstated, those same students improved their oral reading fluency scores, once again, by 20.2 words per minute in just seven weeks.

Education is a complicated business in which success in kids' learning and performance often seems elusive. A simple South Carolina pilot program reminds us that, in upper elementary classrooms, we might do well to remember that 9- and 10-year-olds still do want to snuggle up and read, and they aren't too old to listen to a buddy read a story to them, even if they're bigger than their buddy. **K**

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