

# Storybook Reading with Young Children

by Jennifer Gonzalez

*Of all the literacy experiences children can have during their preschool years, storybook reading seems to be the most powerful in helping them learn language and gain knowledge about the world.*

--Judith Schickendanz, Ph.D, Professor of Education, Boston University

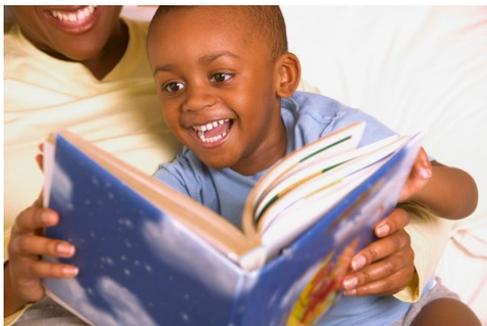
Pop your head into any one of our ECL classrooms and it is likely that you will find an adult engaged in storybook reading with a child. The benefits of this daily activity are numerous and powerful. By reading aloud to the children in our programs, we help them to learn about reading and books, about stories, about language, and about the world. Perhaps one of the most important discoveries children make is that reading can be an enjoyable activity; if children are to become good readers they must find pleasure in reading.

## What does research tell us?

Literacy begins at birth and experiences throughout early childhood affect the development of literacy. Reading, writing, and oral language are connected and develop together as young children engage in activities that promote both verbal and written language (Moats, 2003).

**Learning to read and write is essential for a child's success in school and in later life. Research has shown a stable relationship between children's skills at school entry and future academic achievement. Children who enter school unprepared are likely to demonstrate low academic performance at a later time (Jackson et al., 2006; Molfese et al., 2006; Roberts, 2003). It is important to recognize that this does not mean that children need to read and write early, it means that they need to have experiences that lay the foundation for future reading and writing success.**

Storybook reading has an important impact on long-term language and literacy development. In fact, reading aloud with children has



been found to be one of the most significant ways adults can foster a child's emerging literacy. For young children, picture book reading provides experience with vocabulary, sound structure, the meaning of print, the structure of stories and language, and provides opportunity for sustained attention (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Grambrell & Mazzoni, 1999; Justice & Pullen, 2003; Whitehurst et al., 1994).

## What can families do?

As parents, you are your child's first and most important teachers. Because of shared reading's significant impact on emergent literacy, children should be read to every day. Shared book reading at home can be a warm, affectionate time between a parent and their child. This is often an opportunity for uninterrupted time together; where a parent and a child are jointly focused and relaxed.

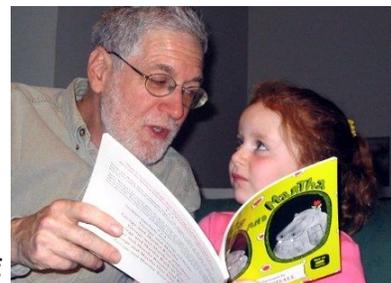


## To set the stage for shared book reading experiences at home:

- ◆ Store books in low, easily accessible places.
- ◆ Consider creating a reading nook in your home. Try filling up an inflatable baby pool with pillows to create a cozy place to read.
- ◆ Use durable "board books" with infants and young toddlers; they can stand being mouthed and chewed.
- ◆ Provide books that vary in content: picture books, alphabet books, fiction and nonfiction books, rhyming books, and homemade books.
- ◆ Make use of your local library. Have your preschooler get their very own library card and encourage them to pick out some books that they would like to take home.

## How we read is important!

Reading aloud might seem like such a natural activity to do with young children that adults wouldn't need any suggestions on how to do it. However, studies have shown that reading stories as an act in itself does not necessarily promote literacy (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000). Careful attention should be placed on the process of shared book reading—*how we read with children is important.* As noted by one researcher, **"No one can learn to play the piano just by listening to someone else play.**



**Likewise, no one can learn to read just by listening to someone else read. Children learn most from books when they are actively involved"** (Whitehurst, 1992). Research advocates for

the use of interactive book reading as a way to do this.

**I**nteractive book reading with **infants and young toddlers** should be an extension of the give-and-take exchanges that occur naturally between children and warm, responsive adults.

To capitalize on these natural interactions and ensure that children are actively participating, **adults should consider the following guidelines** (Rosenkoetter & Knapp-Philo, 2000):

While reading, **follow the child's lead**. This may mean focusing on the pictures, reading a book multiple times, reading the book out-of-order, or ending the book before it is finished.

Allow children to **explore the physical properties of a book**; allow them to hold it upside down or turn the pages.

**Let the child participate** in reading by pointing to pictures.

**Play up passages that your child enjoys most**, even if it means straying from the text, for example,

Adult (reading the book): *Grrr. The bear began to growl.*

Child: *Grrr.*

Adult (no longer reading the book): *That's right. It was a BIG bear. GRRR!*

Choose books that appeal to the **child's interests**, even if they don't necessarily coincide with yours!

**I**nteractive book reading with **older toddlers and pre-schoolers** provides an opportunity for adults to foster language and literacy development by building on their children's comments about the story, posing questions to extend discussions about the story, encouraging personal reactions to the story, and drawing attention to the letters and words in the story. This type of shared book reading is also known as *dialogic reading*. In addition to gains in story comprehension skills, research has found that participation in dialogic reading helps to foster children's vocabulary growth because it allows for the discussion of the meaning of the story as well as the meanings of words used in the story (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1994).

**T**he goal of dialogic reading is for the child to become the storyteller and you as the adult to become the active listener. The dialogic reading process begins when the adult prompts the child, using ques-



tions, to say something about the story. The adult then paraphrases and expands on the child's response. The adult may continue to use questions to facilitate the child's storytelling.

**Adults can stimulate shared-reading conversation through the following prompts:**

**Completion prompts** are typically used in books with rhyme or repetitive phrases.

Example: "*Chicka chicka boom boom. Will there be enough \_\_\_\_\_?*"

**Recall prompts** ask children to recall what has already occurred in the story.

Example: "*Remember when we read Toot and Puddle? Who were they?*"

**Open-ended prompts** ask children to focus on the illustrations in the book.

Example: "*What is happening on this page?*"

**Wh- prompts** (what, where, when, why, and how) help children to learn new vocabulary.

Example: "*What is that?*"

**Distancing prompts** require children to relate book content to experiences in their own lives.

Example: "*I think Sophie was really angry. When do you feel angry?*"

The purpose of dialogic reading is to engage children in picture book reading, while simultaneously creating language-rich dialogue. Throughout the process the adult should provide encouragement and feedback.

Keep in mind that it is important to include *both* prompts and straight reading (no prompts or questions) within each shared-reading experience. When implementing this technique, it's important to remain aware of your child's interest. If he/she seems overwhelmed by questions, consider altering your method. You may choose to use fewer questions or decrease the difficulty of the prompts. Without prompting, children may also interject their own comments. In such cases, follow your child's lead and continue the dialogic reading process.

**I**nteractive story-book reading can be a pleasurable experience for adults and young children alike. Children not only enjoy listening and joining in, they also learn much about language, both oral and written. They learn about how books and stories work, and



they learn more about the world and the people in it. As you read to your children daily, you are giving them a head start on their journey toward literacy.

Happy reading!

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