

Expanding on Early Literacy

Promoting Emerging Language and Literacy during Storytime

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One of the most important academic achievements for a young child is learning to read. Unfortunately, many children are already behind when they enter kindergarten. Sobering evidence from multiple sources indicates that children who fall behind in reading acquisition do not catch up.¹ For example, Francis et al. demonstrated that children who fall behind in reading at seven years of age continued to lag behind at age twelve and beyond.² In the classic model known as the Matthew effect, Stanovich indicates that early lags in literacy become magnified with reading development.³ Specifically, the Matthew effect shows the rich get richer (in this case, good readers become more fluent and effective) and the poor get poorer. This phenomenon has been observed in research examining how new readers acquire the skills to read: early success in acquiring reading skills typically leads to later successes in reading as the learner grows. Failing to learn to read before the third or fourth year of schooling may be indicative of life-long problems in skills central to literacy.⁴ Children who fall behind in reading read less, increasing the gap between them and their peers. As children advance in school, text becomes increasingly difficult and students must “read to learn” (where before they were learning to read). Their reading difficulties then create deficits in most other subjects.⁵

Thus research-to-practice efforts for a number of intervention programs focus on preliteracy skills.

The current research on early literacy instruction has provided the information necessary to promote emerging literacy in young children. Several special panels have convened to address the issue of literacy in children, focusing in part on the skills and types of interventions that are precursors for later literacy. These panels include the National Research Council, National Reading Panel, and the National Early Literacy Panel.⁶ The results of these panels provide overlapping support for a common set of skills important for literacy development as well as a basis for the activities designed to promote early literacy presented below.

Preliteracy Skills to Prepare Children for Reading Success

Converging evidence suggests the skills that best prepare children for later reading success include alphabet knowledge, concepts about print, phonological awareness, and expressive vocabulary.⁷ Alphabet knowledge is simply the ability to recognize and name letters. Young children who know letters

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are likely to be those with the greatest exposure to books. While it is important to teach children these labels, the research is clear that teaching letters alone will not make a child a reader.

Similarly, “knowing” about books, such as knowing the difference between words and pictures, the front and back of the book, and tracking from left to right tell us about children’s exposure to books. These concepts about print can be taught rapidly through shared book reading.

However, similar to alphabet knowledge, concepts about print are not sufficient to make a child a reader. For children to begin to learn to read they first need to understand that the spoken word comprises different sounds. This knowledge, referred to as phonological awareness, is a very strong predictor of later reading success.

Specifically, phonological awareness refers to attention to how spoken words sound and are pronounced. This can include global aspects of words, such as attention to word length, number of syllables, and shared rhymes. Phonological awareness also includes more fine-grained analysis, referred to as phonemic awareness: the understanding that speech is composed of a series of individual consonants and vowels, or phonemes. While phonological awareness is a powerful predictor of later reading success, research has shown that phonological awareness is just one of the oral language proficiencies important for reading. Along with phonological awareness, expressive vocabulary (the number of words a child can produce) consistently has been shown to be a strong predictor of later reading success. Vocabulary production highlights the critical importance of spoken language in the preschool years. Simply put, children who know fewer words will be able to identify fewer words once they begin reading. Hart and Risley found children who enter school with lower vocabulary scores tend to hear fewer different words, hear fewer words per interaction, hear more commands rather than prompts and questions, and have less interaction with adults.⁸ Thus an emphasis on expressive vocabulary together with alphabet knowledge, concepts about print, and phonological awareness can help to promote early literacy in young children. As outlined below, these concepts can easily be integrated into library storytime.

Effective Literacy Instruction during Storytime: Research to Practice

In this section, we turn to the elements of effective literacy instruction that can be applied by librarians while reading a story to young children. Based on what we know from studies of young kindergarteners, we have established that effective literacy instruction includes a number of important elements.

First, effective literacy instruction is intentional. That is, activities and books are planned in advance to meet a specific goal, such as choosing vocabulary words to focus upon when reading stories. To be effective, it is important to decide explicitly what the information is the child should learn, to model the desired activity or skill, and to provide the opportunity for the child to try it out and give feedback.

Additionally, effective literacy instruction is both systematic and sequential. Together these terms refer to the fact that instruction must build from what is known to what is new, presenting developmentally appropriate concepts. For example, an emphasis on book handling is more appropriate for a group of two- and three-year-olds, while working on alliteration might be better suited to four- and five-year-olds. The activities and books chosen should be interesting and developmentally appropriate to fully engage children so they enjoy learning. Concepts also should be reinforced with ample practice.

Children love to do things over and over (including reading a favorite book). Hands-on practice with concrete materials, such as an easel for writing, manipulatives for youngsters (for example, foam models of the alphabet), and access to previously read books, facilitates this practice. Finally, in every activity, it is important to involve all of the child’s modes of interacting. During storytime, children should not just be listening, but speaking and “reading.”

Activities to Promote Literacy

Below we identify specific skills essential to literacy development and provide activities to introduce these skills to children during storytime. The activities make use of children’s books found in local libraries and can be adapted for use with any favorite children’s books.

Alphabet Knowledge

One important skill essential to the acquisition of literacy is familiarity with the alphabet. For children to recognize words, they must recognize the letters of the alphabet. To introduce alphabet knowledge, one can begin by showing a child the first letter of her name. This helps the child not only identify the letter, but connect it to something meaningful. To expand on alphabet knowledge during storytime, there are countless books that focus on the letters of the alphabet. These books can be used and then linked to the alphabet song. When working with very young emergent readers, it is important to choose books that use one sound for each letter and have consistent, easy-to-read text (for example, “C is for cat”). This gives each child a clear example of what the letter should look and sound like. Some popular alphabet books useful to read at this stage are *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, *The Letters are Lost*, or *Dr. Seuss’ ABC*, which are composed of repetitive, sing-song phrasing to capture a young child’s attention.

Concepts about Print

Concepts about print include the ability to differentiate between letters, numbers, words, and pictures. This can be taught while reading a simple book with large clear print and labeling what is on each page. In addition, children must be taught that it is print, not the picture that is read in stories. This can be done by tracking each word with a finger or pointer while reading aloud.

Book Handling Skills

Book handling skills include knowing how to hold a book properly and knowing that reading progresses from left to right. This initially can be taught through example by letting the children watch as you read. Later on, children can be explicitly taught how to hold a book and turn the page with books that have repetitive patterns. A good example of a book with repeating patterns is *I Went Walking*. This book repeats the same lines of “I went walking. What did you see? I saw a . . .” This story can help children develop book-handling skills by using the pictures and repetitive pattern to anticipate the next line. One activity that can be done with this book is to read aloud “I went walking” and have the children respond chorally “What did you see?” Then, read the first half of the answer “I saw a . . .” and have the children use the picture to answer what was seen.

An important element of book handling skills is the concept of translating speech to print. This is the concept that what the reader is saying corresponds directly to a printed word. This understanding gives the child a concept of the word as a unit of meaning composed of letters. One activity used to reinforce this concept is to read repetitive, rhythmic books with few words on each page, such as *I Went Walking*, *Jump, Frog, Jump*, *Barnyard Banter*, and *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* Children first learn to chant the refrain and then begin to match what they are chanting with the written words. As previously stated, tracking what is read with your finger is helpful for children to understand they are saying words written on the page.

Phonological Sensitivity

Phonological awareness refers to attention to how spoken words sound and are pronounced including word length, number of syllables, shared rhymes, and phonemes. Phonemic awareness is one small but critical part of phonological awareness and is defined as an understanding that speech is composed of a series of individual consonants and vowels known as phonemes. As a good start, some books emphasize the sounds of words. For example, *Rattletrap Car* includes such phrases as “Clinked clanked bing bang pop!” which is a fun book to both read and listen to during storytime.

As children first begin to learn how to read, their phonological awareness develops through their phonological sensitivity. Phonological sensitivity is the ability to recognize specific attributes of groups of letters larger than phonemes (words). One important concept involved in phonological sensitivity is the production and recognition of rhyming words. Children as young as two years are sensitive to words that rhyme, and the ability to recognize and produce rhyming words is central to developing phonological awareness. Examples of books that introduce children to rhyming are *There's a Wocket in My Pocket*, *Is Your Mama a Llama?*, *Fox in Socks*, and *Jamberry*.

Another important concept involved in phonological sensitivity is the ability to segment and delete syllables. Teaching children to recognize syllables can be done during storytime by asking

children to “clap out” words into syllables. One way to introduce this skill is by demonstrating it with the child’s name. The librarian leading storytime may choose several children to stand up and state their name, and then demonstrate how to clap out the syllables in the child’s name (for example, Meredith, “Mer” clap, “e”, clap, “dith” clap). After the children become familiar with the activity, the librarian can expand it to include vocabulary words from the storytime.

An additional skill that contributes to phonological awareness is alliteration. Alliteration is the ability to recognize repetition of word onsets (initial sound before the first vowel). An example of alliteration is the “L” sound in “Lawrence the leopard made lemonade.” There are many books with a focus on one or two initial sounds that can help foster this skill during storytime. Such books include *Wemberly Worried*; *Slowly, Slowly, Slowly*, *Said the Sloth*; and *Dr. Seuss' ABC*. One activity children can participate in during storytime that can help develop the recognition of alliteration is matching picture cards depicting the same initial sound. Another activity is having children sort objects and pictures with the same initial sounds into labeled mailbags. Each bag can have a picture cue reminding them what sound belongs in each bag. It is important not to confuse letter names with the sounds that the letters make. Again, phonological awareness focuses on the sounds of our language.

Expressive Vocabulary

Strong expressive vocabulary is another predictor of reading success. Recent estimates indicate poor children often enter school with limited vocabulary knowledge. Children with low vocabulary need to solidly establish two or three words a day to be ready for fourth grade material by the fourth grade.⁹ Yet research indicates there is currently minimal instruction in vocabulary in the early elementary grades; teachers typically do not focus on explicit vocabulary instruction until third or fourth grade, when it is already too late for kids to catch up.¹⁰

Books, not surprisingly, are the richest source of diverse vocabulary.¹¹ Thus storytime can be utilized to help develop a rich expressive vocabulary for children. For example, children can be asked to act out verbs, such as “squabble,” introduced in *Mr. Gumpy's Outing*. Furthermore, you can ask children to relate a new word to their own life. For example, in the story *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type*, the word “furious” is introduced. At the end of the story, you can define the word for the children by saying, “furious means very, very mad” then, expand on this lesson by asking children if they or anyone they know has ever been furious. The children can explain and act out their answers. Another activity to foster expressive vocabulary is to take advantage of a new word that is repeated several times in one book. Evidence shows the best way to teach a word is to use it multiple times in different contexts.

For example, *Tops & Bottoms* uses the word “harvest” five times. Although this is not a critical word for four-year-olds, it is central to the story. The reader could explain what it is in the first or second mention (when you pick the vegetables) and

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from then ask the child to produce it (When it was time for the . . . "harvest"). Another activity to support expressive vocabulary is a concept sort. In the case of *Tops and Bottoms*, children could be asked to sort pictures of different things harvested in the book according to whether they are fruits or vegetables. An additional way to support vocabulary is to include books with verbs that can be acted out, such as "stared" or "roared" in *Officer Buckle and Gloria*. Other examples of books to support vocabulary development are those with nonfiction information, such as *The Water Hole* and *Commotion in the Ocean*, which introduce scientific vocabulary to children. The introduction of a familiar story paired with higher-level vocabulary can further support the learning of new words, as demonstrated in a more modern version of the classic story *Henny-Penny*, which has such words as "wolfed," "greedy," and "grunge."

As stated in the introduction, researchers know early intervention is of the utmost importance for children to learn to read and to avoid problems with literacy as children develop. Researchers have also identified many of the specific skills that are shown to be powerful predictors of reading skill. The library storytime provides an excellent opportunity to introduce some of these skills. Although time and resources may be limited during

storytime, some simple and targeted activities as suggested in this article can provide young children with an opportunity to practice the skills essential to pre-literacy development. While specific books were presented to accompany these activities, there are many other books that would support these skills and promote early literacy during storytime. ☺

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