

## SHARED STORIES – Preparing for Literacy!

The benefits of reading stories with young children are well documented. The atmosphere of shared reading promotes a love of books, a warmth and closeness between adult and child and opportunities for enhancement of language skills.

- But how can we make the most of the shared reading time so that we promote children's acquisition of vital literacy skills?
- Is there a particular style that we should adopt when reading with our children or particular techniques that we can utilize?

The answer is yes! Through **dialogic reading** and attention to **special word use** and aspects of **literate language**, children will increase their vocabulary, comprehend the subtleties of stories and learn to formulate and express their ideas, opinions and understandings. These skills are crucial to later success with written literacy skills in both reading and writing.

So how should we go about sharing stories? First and foremost the shared reading experience should be natural and enjoyable for both the child and the adult reader. Young children are sensitive to our mood and our level of engagement with them, so remember to be yourself as you read the book **together**. Suggestions for 'new' techniques should be adopted slowly, not at the expense of spontaneous interaction. Be sure to monitor the children's interest and participation in the story. Remember the meaning of the word **shared** – joint, united, mutual. Whether it is in discussion about a character, laughing at a joke or silently observing a detail in the illustration, enjoy the sharing of your time.

### HAVING A CONVERSATION WITH A BOOK

Having a "conversation" about the story as you read along is the essence of a technique devised by Grover Whitehurst in 1992 called **Dialogic Reading**. Whitehurst believed that **how** we read to young children is as important as how often we read. During the past 14 years, he and others have introduced this technique in widely varied geographical and sociological areas - in home, school and day care settings - and found that with this form of interaction, children's language levels increased compared with children who are read to traditionally.

In **Dialogic Reading** the adult, in essence, helps the child to become the storyteller by utilizing specific forms of interaction - such as prompting, asking questions, evaluating and expanding the child's response and providing opportunities for repetition. Over subsequent readings the adult becomes the keen listener and the child becomes more active in the interaction. It is interesting to learn about the main prompts that Whitehurst includes in Dialogic Reading. They form the acronym **CROWD**.

- **Completion prompts:** Leave a blank at the end of the sentence. E.g. "Little pig, little pig, let me ----- "

- **Recall prompts:** Ask the child about what has happened at any point in the story. E.g. Can you tell me what the first little pig made his house from?
- **Open ended prompts:** Use the illustrations and invite comments e.g. Tell me what you think the wolf is doing here.
- **Wh prompts:** Ask questions beginning with words such as what, where, when, why and how e.g. Where has the wolf gone now?
- **Distancing prompts:** Relate what you are reading about to the child's own experiences. E.g. Remember Uncle Billy's new house? It's made of bricks too but he painted over the top of them.

It is important to "mix up" the prompts and select those that match the needs of the child. Visit the same book many times, reading it straight through on some occasions and using prompts at other times. Maintain the atmosphere of shared enjoyment and don't push children with more prompts than they can happily handle.

### LEARNING NEW WORDS FROM BOOKS

Reading aloud with young children provides a wonderful opportunity to talk about new or specific words and what they mean. The context for the less familiar words that are encountered will be provided by both the text and the illustrations. Whichever book you or the children decide to read together, try to pay special attention to about 4 or 5 interesting words chosen from the story. Write them down on a "post it" note and attach it to the inside front cover of the book. Re-visit these words in other conversations with the children and make words and their meanings a focus of your interest.

Word learning, as discussed in our **Newsletter 17**, *Vocabulary - Making the Connections*, is a many-faceted process. Here are some suggestions -

- Say the word aloud a number of times and encourage the child to repeat it after you.
- Talk about how the word sounds - is it long or short, how many syllables or is there a particular feature of its sound pattern?
- Mention other words that mean nearly the same thing or sound similar but most importantly, relate the word to the child's own experience.

When you look closely you might be surprised at what a rich vocabulary is offered in the story books that we all enjoy. In the book *Never Keep a Python as a Pet*, by Scoular Anderson. (Hippo Books, 1990) the list includes the following interesting words: *chaos, proudly, suitable, squirmed, wandered, menace, announced, downhearted, dashed* Take the word **menace** as an example.

- Say the word menace. "It starts the same way as marvellous and magnificent and the word *menace* rhymes with *tennis* and *Dennis*."
- In this story the python was causing trouble inside the house so the boy took him for a walk. But even there the boy and his pet snake were not welcome. "*You're a menace!*" cried a woman, "*You ought to have that pet on a lead.*"

- "Remember when you wriggled and talked in the movies and the man behind said you were a *menace*? After that you tried to sit still so that he could concentrate."

There are a number of excellent programs such as **Woven Words** and **Read Together, Talk Together**, that provide suggestions to both teachers and parents about enriching vocabulary and story reading.

### **BOOKS USE SPECIAL LANGUAGE**

**Literate language** is a feature of many of the entertaining books we can choose to read with our children. (Read more about Literate language in our **Newsletter 11 Step into Literate Language**.) This type of language is more "dressed up" in style than the language we use in immediate casual conversations. We can better understand what the characters are thinking when the author uses specific words such as *wondered, planned, decided* (**cognitive verbs**). Also when **feelings** are described with words such as *excited, bewildered, afraid*, we gain insight into the consequences of other's actions and the reasons behind behaviour. Literate language should also be well organized and sequenced. The events in the story must be connected so that the readers clearly understand how the **time sequence** of the story unfolds (*next morning, after a few hours, eventually*). Other connectors have the important role of representing **the causes and effects** of the actions (e.g. *so, because, if, therefore*). In your "conversations" about a book try to include questions and comments about these key areas of literate language. For example - *Why do you think she did that? How do you think she felt then? What else could she have done? What would you have done? Why?*

### **EMERGENT LITERACY**

Shared book reading offers invaluable opportunities for expanding young children's oral language skills. As well, for preschool children shared book reading provides Emergent Literacy experiences. These include the conventions of print, such as which way to hold the book, the left to right arrangement of text and where you find the title. During your time of reading together point out features of print - repeated words, why some words are written in large font, punctuation marks such as an exclamation marks and speech bubbles.

Early book readings offer opportunities in two other areas that are essential to early literacy acquisition.

1. **Phonological Awareness** - the ability to "tune into" and talk about sounds in words.
2. **Phonic knowledge** - how sounds and letters match up.

The development of these skills is featured in a number of Love and Reilly literacy resources such as *The Oxford Essential Reading Series* (Oxford University Pres, 2000) and *A Sound Way* (Pearson Education, 1997). However, parents can provide children with many incidental opportunities to learn about sounds and letters through shared book readings. It doesn't require much preparation or equipment, just a willingness to have fun with sounds and stories.

Take for example, the story of The Three Little Pigs -

- Pretend that the three little pigs all had names that start with the "p" sound?
- Their mummy and daddy might have called them Percy, Peter and Paul.
- Can you say these names? - Percy, Peter, Paul, 'p', 'p', 'p'.
- If the little pigs had been girls what might they have been called? (e.g. Penny, Poppy and Pinky. 'p', 'p', 'p'.)
- If the name had to start with 'p' could one be called Rhonda? Sally? Pam? Tilly? Beth?
- Pigs - wigs, jigs, twigs, figs. All these words rhyme. They end the same way. Pigs in wigs. Pigs do jigs. Pigs build with twigs.
- Which of the little pigs built his house with twigs?

Write the word pig and the names of the three little pigs on paper. Show the initial letter of each word and say the 'p' sound. Say "See how we write the letter P." Trace the letter with your finger.

Books offer exciting and varied opportunities to explore sounds, letters, words and ideas. Take a fresh look at the books you already have on your shelves and spend a few moments thinking about how you can revisit them with new strategies, insight and enthusiasm.

## REFERENCES

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Never keep a Python as a Pet, by Scoular Anderson, (1991). Hippo Books.

Read Together, Talk Together

[www.pearsonearlylearning.com/products/curriculum/index.html](http://www.pearsonearlylearning.com/products/curriculum/index.html)

Woven Word Program

[www.cfchildren.org/cfc/wwf/wwindex/](http://www.cfchildren.org/cfc/wwf/wwindex/)