

Making the Most of Story Time

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Story time is a very special time for most young children and their parents. It is generally a quiet, comfortable time when both the parents and their offspring can relax and enjoy some special moments together as they explore the delights of the world of pictures and print. Many parents introduce their children to books well before their first birthday. Of course the nature of the interaction between the child and parent during book reading routines changes as the child develops. It is always a time of closeness and sharing but within its predictable context there are exciting opportunities for parents to observe the developing skills in their children and to enhance the development of these skills without destroying the spontaneity and enjoyment of the experience.

Shared Book Reading as a Language and literacy Intervention

It is commonly agreed that literacy does not begin when children are taught to read their first words at school. Children who are most likely to achieve high levels of reading have experience of literacy environments long before they begin school. They learn that people can receive and send information in ways other than through oral language when they observe adults and older children using timetables and recipes, writing shopping lists, taking messages and participating in the many reading and writing opportunities that occur naturally every day

Educators promoting early literacy skills in young children commonly suggest that parents read books regularly to their children and talk about the stories in them. The idea is that children develop an interest in reading and a familiarity with books. Many young children already know something about the language of books before they begin school. They are familiar with the way books are

used, the fact that they contain print and are aware that these written symbols have an oral language equivalent.

Many studies have investigated the quantity and quality of home literacy experiences of children from a variety of populations. Marvin and Mirenda (1993) surveyed the homes of disadvantaged preschoolers enrolled in Head Start, children with special needs, and typically functioning children to compare the literacy experiences of these groups of children. The results showed that the lowest priority and expectations for literacy development was found in the respondents for the special needs group of children. Children from this group were also exposed to fewer types of literacy experiences at home. It is unfortunate that children with disabilities may be denied many early literacy experiences that may assist in both language and literacy learning. In a study comparing the home literacy experiences of children with and without disabilities Marvin (1994) found that children with disabilities, even single disabilities such as language delay had less stimulating and less supportive literacy environments than did non disabled peers. It may be that the parents of children with disabilities frequently have lower expectations of their children and therefore may not see the value of early literacy experiences for them.

A recent study conducted by masters students from the Special Education Centre at Macquarie University surveyed parents of preschool children with and without disabilities in order to explore the literacy experiences of these populations. In particular the study sought to examine shared book reading experiences in the home and the value that the parents of both groups of children placed on reading. Generally, the two groups of parents viewed shared book reading as an educational tool to be used to encourage reading. Whilst these findings are in strong contrast to those of the previously cited studies, it is important to note that the parental groups used in the Macquarie study were not randomly selected and the sample size was relatively small (58 parents of children with disabilities and 70 parents of children without disabilities). The majority of the parents of children with disabilities were receiving regular support from community based early intervention programs and this may well have affected the way in which the parents viewed many of

the routine experiences available to their children. It is an important study, however, in that it does provide some evidence that parents of children with disabilities value the importance of shared book reading.

Bus, van Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini (1995) recently conducted a quantitative meta-analysis of 29 empirical studies examining shared book reading between parents and preschoolers. The meta-analysis demonstrated that the frequency of shared book experiences at the preschool level is related to outcome measures such as language growth, emergent literacy and reading achievement. Other researchers believe that the evidence relating to the benefits of shared book reading is not as compelling as this. Many studies demonstrate minimal increases in early literacy skills following the implementation of shared book reading. Of course these minimal increases could result in greater increases in later school years.

In addition to gaining an advantage for the enhancement of literacy skills in the long term, shared book 'reading' with adults provides young children with many opportunities for language learning. Recently there has been a number of studies investigating the effect of joint book reading on the language development of preschool children. The suggestion is that joint book reading provides a focus for communication and a model of appropriate language structures that are repetitive and easily rehearsed. According to Debaryshe (1993), the age of onset of home reading practices is an important predictor of oral language skills and that during joint book reading sessions parents provide more sophisticated models of language than in free play or caretaking activities.

The use of routines has also been shown to enhance language acquisition. Routines can form a sequence of exchange with a limited response so that there are frequent and practical opportunities for skills to be developed. Routines can involve children in the patterns of language. Additionally, a routine is a familiar environment in which a child knows his or her role so that new language skills can be attempted. This is particularly important for children with disabilities who are easily distracted by novel stimuli. From this point of view book reading can be an ideal routine. It is well defined, frequently repeated and highly structured.

Shared book reading is a naturally occurring event in most children's homes and schools. A book can be selected for appropriateness in the areas of content, complexity and interest making it highly adaptable to a wide population of children of varying levels of language development, age levels and cognitive abilities. The level at which the child is asked to respond can also be modified as the language objectives for that child are met. The book reading activity itself can be elaborated as the child's language develops.

Shared book reading provides the natural opportunity for joint attention between the reading partner and the child. Joint attention takes place when the participants of an activity are concentrated on the same stimuli. Joint attention has shown to be an important component of language development because a child will better understand what an adult is saying when he or she is looking at the object in question. Tomasello and Todd (1983), in their study of 24 mother-child dyads, found that long periods of joint attention lead to the learning of early words and that the shared meaning between the adult and child seemed to be a key component in facilitating specific aspects of language development. The children in their study talked more, appeared to learn the names of the objects that the child and mother were focused on, and engaged in longer conversation when the pair were involved in joint attention. Books make it easier to establish joint attention because the focus is obviously the pictures on a specific page. Additionally, the adult and child are able to sit closely together and it is easier for the adult to determine if the child is focused on the book and if his or her attention is being maintained. The opportunity for joint attention to an object or objects of interest through picture books also allows for a non-transient referent. This referent may highlight the distinguishing features of a concept thereby making concept learning and labelling much easier. The progression from a picture representing an object to a word representing an object can be facilitated through picture book reading. The language of print with the repetitive presentation of more sophisticated structures can be facilitative of more advanced structures in children's language.

Ratner, Parker and Gardner (1993) have written one of the few papers targeting the effects of joint book reading with children with communicative

impairments. These authors have compiled a list of children's books that can be used to teach specific syntactic structures. The resource list represents a wide range of syntactic and grammatical structures that are acquired easily by typically developing children but are challenging to children with language impairments.

Effective strategies used by the reading partner

The interactive nature of shared book reading has resulted in much being written about specific techniques which have been shown to be effective in increasing language production in children. Whitehurst and his colleagues (e.g. Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994) demonstrated that changing the responses of parents or caregivers in book reading activities stimulated their children's language production. Parents were taught to use open-ended questions, function/attribute questions and expansions to respond to their children's attempts to answer questions and to decrease questions that could be answered by pointing. This resulted in increased levels of expressive language in these children. The program is called dialogic reading and has been experimentally evaluated in a number of studies. Dialogic reading incorporates three major components: a) Evocative questions are used to ensure that the child takes an active role in the shared book reading experience. Active learning is more effective than passive learning. b) Parental feedback is given whereby the parent is encouraged to provide expansions, modelling, corrections, and praise. c) Progressive change is incorporated so that the reading partner is stimulating the child to do slightly more than what he or she normally does. This allows the child to function at the highest level possible.

Further studies have investigated specific techniques used by adults during shared book reading activities and the effects on children's language production. Pemberton and Watkins (1987) looked at the effects of using recasts versus modelling techniques on the language development of 3-4 year old disadvantaged children during interactive book reading. A recast follows the child's utterance and reiterates its meaning while changing one or more of its grammatical components. A model differs in that there is no paired presentation of the sentences. The results showed that both recasts and

modelling techniques produced significant language gains from the twenty children participating in the study.

An important component of joint attention is that the child's lead is followed. If the adult is having to direct the child's attention, it is probably not 'true' joint attention. This is an important point since Tomasello and Todd (1983) have found a positive correlation between child directed joint attention and greater word learning. Researchers who focus on children with disabilities acknowledge that being directive with children with very limited language seems to be useful since it keeps these children involved during the interaction. However all would acknowledge that, wherever possible, the child's lead should be followed and that directives should be used primarily to maintain joint attention.

Conclusion

Shared book reading activities provide valuable opportunities for the development of both literacy and language related skills in all children. The opportunities provided, through bookreading activities, to children with disabilities, in particular those with significant language delays, are particularly valuable. For these children it is a comfortable and predictable context for developing and practising language. The shared book experience will be greatly enhanced if the reading partner, the parent or caregiver, maximises language learning opportunities by the appropriate selection of books, following the child's lead wherever possible and modifying his or her own language to accommodate to the developing language of the child.

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