



Topic:

Using Dialogic Reading to help build the language development of 2- and 3-year-olds

Research tells us:

Two- and 3-year-old children experience impressive gains in language development through shared storybook reading with adults trained in the skills of dialogic reading.

This form of shared reading is most beneficial when young children experience the practice with trained adults in both their home and childcare settings. In other words, dialogic reading is most powerful when both parents and teachers are trained in and use its techniques. One-to-one reading conditions are more beneficial than small-group reading sessions, especially with children who have or are at-risk for language delays. By being patient in giving children enough time to respond to their questions, adults using dialogic reading further enhance its benefits.

Pages of powerful fun!

Shared book reading boosts early language development

It's exciting to find that a time-honored and beloved early childhood activity—the shared reading of storybooks—can, with a bit of tweaking, become a more powerful promoter of early language development and school “readiness.” In the joint reading practice called *Dialogic Reading*, first described by researchers G. J. Whitehurst and colleagues in 1988, adults learn and use specific techniques that help children become active partners in reading picture books together. In fact, in dialogic reading, *the adult learns to help the child become a teller of the story.*

Patricia A. Cutspec, Ph.D., of the Research

and Training Center on Early Childhood Development, analyzed the findings from 10 studies of dialogic reading with 628 young children to assess the impact of this practice on the language development of 2- and 3-year-olds. The studies clearly showed that:

- ◆ Dialogic reading is a valuable practice with positive language development benefits for very young children;
- ◆ Children who experience dialogic reading in both home and daycare settings benefit even more than those who take part

in only one or the other;

- ◆ Dialogic reading is more beneficial in one adult/one child sessions than in small-group storytimes; and ▶



Acting on the evidence:

Promote the language development and “readiness” for school of 2- and 3-year-olds by doing the following things as you enjoy reading children’s picture books together:

- ▶ Ask “what” questions.
- ▶ Follow the child’s answers with more questions.
- ▶ Repeat what the child says.
- ▶ Help the child as needed. If necessary, answer the question you’ve asked the child and have him or her repeat what you have said.
- ▶ Praise and encourage the child.

- ▶ Follow the child’s interests.
- ▶ Slow down and give the child time to respond to your questions.
- ▶ Have fun!

When the above practices are mastered and regularly incorporated into shared reading sessions, add these additional three techniques:

- ▶ Ask open-ended questions.
- ▶ Expand what the child says.
- ▶ Have fun in ways that will encourage continued interest in reading.

◆ Adults should patiently allow children, particularly children with or at-risk for language delays, plenty of time to respond to questions during dialogic reading sessions. In fact, when adults take this delay in response time into account, they give children with disabilities an advantage that can be a central ingredient in increasing their understanding and language development.

The techniques an adult reader uses in dialogic reading with a young child are designed to build one upon the other, like blocks in a tower. They are:

1. Ask “what” questions.
2. Follow the child’s answers with additional, related questions.
3. Repeat what the child says.
4. Help the child as needed. If necessary, answer the question you’ve asked the child and have him or her repeat what you have said.
5. Praise and encourage the child.
6. Follow the child’s interests.
7. Slow down and give the child time to respond to your questions.
8. Have fun!

When the above practices are mastered and regularly incorporated into shared reading sessions, three more techniques are added:

9. Ask open-ended questions.
10. Expand what the child says.
11. Have fun in ways that will encourage continued interest in reading.

Let’s join Nathan Li and his three-year-old daughter, Lucie, as they share dialogic reading. It’s bedtime, and Lucie has selected *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Numeroff, a picture book they borrowed earlier in the week on a trip to the public library.

N: “If you give a mouse a cookie, he’s going to ask for a glass of milk.” What are they doing?”

L: Go inside.

N: Right! Now the boy and mouse are going into the house. Can you say that?

L: Going into the house.

N: Good. Look, now they’re in the kitchen. What’s that?

L: Milk.

N: Yes, a glass of milk for the mouse.

L: Glass of milk.

N: “When you give him the milk, he’ll probably ask you for a straw.” What’s that?

L: Cupboard.

N: You’re right. The little boy is taking everything out of the cupboard, trying to find a straw. Do you remember the time you and I had to look and look to find the candles for Mommy’s birthday cake? What a mess!

L: Yeah.

N: “When he’s finished, he’ll ask for a napkin.” Look at the mouse’s face now. What does he need?

L: Napkin.

N: He needs a napkin for his messy mouth. “Then he’ll want to look in a mirror to make sure he doesn’t have a milk mustache.” What happens on this page?

L: In the bathroom. They go in. He looks in the mirror.

N: Very good. He looks in the bathroom

mirror. “When he looks into the mirror, he might notice his hair needs a trim. So he’ll probably ask for a pair of nail scissors.” What do you think the boy will do now?

L: He goes for scissors.

N: He’s going to get ... (Nathan turns the page) ... nail scissors! Right! Look at that mouse go to work. Another big mess! Do you know what those are? (Nathan waits while Laura thinks, but she doesn’t respond.) Those are knobs for turning on the water faucets—hot and cold. The mouse is standing on a faucet to reach the mirror. Can you say faucet?

L: Faucet. Look, more! (Lucie points to the illustration showing plumbing at the back of the sink).

N: You have good eyes, Lucie. Those things look like faucet knobs, too. They open or close off these water pipes, see? Let’s take a look at the pipes behind our sink after we finish reading, okay? Now back to that funny mouse. “When he’s finished giving himself a trim, he’ll want a broom to sweep up. He’ll start sweeping. He might get carried away and sweep every room in the house.”

Nathan and Lucie chuckle at the picture of frantic sweeping and huge mounds of dust. “Now what?” Nathan asks. They turn the page and continue...

Material quoted above is from:

Numeroff, L. J. (1985). *If you give a mouse a cookie*. New York: Harper & Row.

Patience is powerful!

Be prepared for a delay between the time a young child hears your question and responds to it. It’s important to be patient, allowing ample time for the child to take in your question, think about it, and produce a response. Relax and enjoy the fun of reading together!



Take another look:

Visit www.researchtopractice.info to read or download the complete research synthesis by P. A. Cutspec (2004). Effects of dialogic reading on the language development of young children. *Bridges*, 2(1). The synthesis, this *Bottomlines* research summary, and a variety of practice guides based on this topic are available online. Obtain printed copies from Winterberry Press, wbpress.com, P. O. Box 2277, Morganton, NC 28680. 800-824-1174, 828-432-0150.