

# Books about!



## Benefits and guidelines for reading to young children

by Dena Crook

*"Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?"*

*"I see a \_\_\_\_\_."*

If you can complete this sentence, children's books must abound in your daily encounters with children. Congratulations! You are setting up your young children for success in the acquisition of school-related knowledge, and you are paving the way to helping them become lifelong readers.

But why is reading aloud to young children so important? The simple act of sharing books by reading aloud to children is a powerful way to nurture a child's literacy environment (Goodman 1994).



## Benefits of reading aloud

Adams (1990) found that young children who enter school with 1,500 hours of being read to are more prepared for learning to read. So with each book you read aloud, you are helping a child acquire time toward the 1,500 hours. More important, research shows that you are cultivating specific knowledge and understanding about literacy. Three such areas are oral language, print concept knowledge, and comprehension. Additionally by being read to, young children develop positive associations with books.

**Oral language.** This encompasses the words we use and how we use words to express ourselves and understand others. Oral language is a contributor to reading achievement (Pullen and Justice 2003). The following example between Hannah (3 years old) and her mother illustrates how books increase a child's oral language. In this scene, Mom is reading *Go, Dog. Go!* (Eastman 1989).

Mom (reading the book): *One dog up on a house.  
Three dogs down in the water.*

Hannah interrupts and points to the picture:  
*Water.*

Mom: *What are they doing in the water?*

Hannah: *They're flipping in the water.*

Snow and Ninio (1994) describe ways in which reading aloud to preschool children promotes oral language. The book, they say, is the dominant partner in reading aloud because all conversation between the expert reader and child results from it, especially the pictures. Looking at Hannah and her

mother's conversation, we see that the page that was read and its corresponding picture serve as springboard for mother and child to talk about the water and what the dogs were doing in it.

The conversational opportunities created in a read-aloud situation allow young children to learn rules related to oral language. In the above example, Hannah learns that having a conversation involves taking turns. She speaks, her mother speaks, and then Hannah speaks again.

Other oral language learning may include discovering what a word means and how words are combined in sentences to sound like spoken English. Without the combination of book, reader, and child, this kind of oral language learning would not have occurred.

**Print concept awareness.** As young children observe how books are read by an expert reader, they learn concepts, such as how books are held and in which direction print is read. Children begin to understand that it is the words on the page that are read and not the picture. They also begin to recognize letters and words.

The following interaction between Hannah and her father serves as an example of how reading aloud to young children helps promote knowledge of print. Hannah's father is reading *Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed* (Christelow 1989), a book Hannah's parents have read to her several times.

Hannah: *You missed a page.*

Dad: *I didn't miss a page.*

Hannah turning the page back: *Yes, you maybe did miss a page.*

Dad: *You are right! I did miss that page.*

In the above example, Hannah demonstrates her knowledge of how pages of the book operate. She realizes that her father turned to a page that was not read, and she knows how to go back and find it.

Teale (1994) looked at the literacy development of 24 preschool children and found that the children who showed knowledge about print concepts had the most highly developed beginning literacy ability. The development of print concept knowledge lays a foundation that sets up children for later success when they are independently reading and navigating their way through a book.

**Comprehension.** The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading (CIERA) reports that

reading comprehension instruction begins before students learn to read conventionally (2004). While students are listening to an expert reader, they are provided the opportunity to understand the story.

## SHARE BOOKS YOU ENJOY READING.

Aaron (1997) writes that many of the same types of comprehension processes we use to listen and understand we use to read and understand. Reading aloud to young children, therefore, provides opportunities to strengthen comprehension both at an oral level and a written level for when children begin reading independently. This idea is demonstrated in the following scene as Hannah's mother reads *Green Eggs and Ham* by Dr. Seuss (Geisel 1988).

Mom (stops reading): *What is that car doing?*

Hannah: *It's getting up in the tree.*

Mom: *It's getting up in the tree. Do cars get up in the tree?*

Hannah: *Yes.*

Mom: *In this book they do. But does Mommy usually drive her car in the tree?*

Hannah: *No.*

In this example, Mom uses the book as an opportunity to nurture Hannah's comprehension. She asks a question that can be found in the book ("What is the car doing?"), and a question that forces Hannah to think at a higher level about her own knowledge about cars (Do cars go up in trees?).

During read-aloud situations, the adult helps the child make sense of the text by interpreting the written language based on the child's background knowledge, beliefs, and experiences (Morrow 1988). Research has shown that the number of stories a child hears prior to entering school directly affects the child's reading comprehension at ages 7 and 11 (Wells 1986).

**Interest.** Positive associations formed from being read to can lead to an increasing interest in books. That interest influences the level of comprehension, amount of reading done, and attitude toward reading (Galda and Cullinan 1991).

Morrow (1983) looked at the similarities and differences of kindergarten students considered to have

a high interest in reading compared to those having a low interest in reading. She found that students with a high interest had experiences in which they were read to daily, were surrounded by books, and had writing materials available to them. In addition, reading was a valued practice in the children's homes.

After reading *Green Eggs and Ham*, Hannah and her mother have the following conversation.

Mom: *Do you like Green Eggs and Ham?*

Hannah: *Ummm.*

Mom: *Do you like this book?*

Hannah: *Yes.*

Mom: *Why do you like Green Eggs and Ham?*

Hannah: *Do Bumble* (Hannah holds up another book, *Tumble Bumble*).

Hannah doesn't want to stop reading. She shows her mother that she is interested in reading and exploring more books. Who would not grin and feel a happy tug at the heart to experience moments such as this? Hannah's interest in reading motivates her to seek more experiences with books. Children with a high interest in reading are early readers and typically score higher on school achievement measures (Morrow 1983).

## Guidelines for reading aloud

As you walk toward your bookshelf to select your next book to read aloud to children, keep the following STORY guidelines in mind.

**Share.** Share books you enjoy reading. If you enjoy the book, children will feel your love for it. It's hard to read a book you don't like. Also share books that you know children will love hearing. A group of children interested in dinosaurs may love listening to Yolen and Teague's *How Do Dinosaurs Say Good Night* (2000) or Most's *If the Dinosaurs Came Back* (1978).

## WILL YOU READ ME ANOTHER BOOK?

**Talk.** Take the time to stop and talk as you are reading to children. Talk about the things they might see on the page, words they may be hearing, or the events of the story. Make the conversation as natural as possible. In other words, refrain from turning the talk into a quiz. Also let the children guide the conversation. They will notice and ask questions if you pause in your reading from time to time.

**Oral expression.** Read with expression that engages and captivates children. This will help the story come alive for them, which in turn builds their interest and attention. If a dinosaur is stomping its feet, then let the children feel, hear, and mimic stomping feet.

**Read! Read! Read!** Whenever the opportunity presents itself, read to young children. Having 1,500 hours of lap time (Adams 1990) will go a long way in setting up children for success in their adventures in learning to read.



**Yearn.** Leave children yearning to hear more. This happens when you engage them in authentic conversation and read with great expression. After sharing a book, you want to hear: "Will you read me another book?"

By following the guidelines, we can nod to the opening line of *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* and say "Child, child, what do you see?" "I see an adult who loved reading to me."

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