

Shared book reading

Almost all children come to reading instruction with better spoken language than decoding skills. Books that children are reading independently in the early stages of reading instruction will not provide the complexity of language required to ensure language growth. Research has shown shared book reading to be a highly effective pedagogy for enhancing spoken language skills.

What is shared book reading?

Shared book reading describes the interaction that occurs between an adult and a child when reading or looking at a book. During interactive shared book reading, the child and adult are active participants in the construction of a dialogue, or a conversation, surrounding the book. It is a language-based activity that is a unique learning context as it presents both oral and written language simultaneously. A key feature of shared book reading is the intentionality of the adult reader, who purposefully structures the interactive reading experience to challenge, extend, and scaffold children's skills.

Why is shared reading important?

Shared book reading increases children's familiarity with the sounds and grammar of their language, exposes them to the pragmatic rules that govern the use of language, provides them with models of how narratives are organised in their culture and teaches fundamental knowledge about books and print. Children's books often contain more complex and abstract vocabulary than spoken language.

Shared book reading provides children with opportunities to build relationships with the adults in their lives. It is within the context of children's relationships with adults that children's developing competencies about language and literacy may emerge (Piasta 2000).

The research

Shared book reading is effective for all children regardless of age, including those at risk of academic difficulties (National Early Literacy Panel 2008). Research has shown that shared book reading positively affects children's language and literacy development, including story-related vocabulary, story grammar knowledge and story comprehension. Accumulating research shows that simply reading books with children is not as effective as intentionally focusing dialogue on specific language features of the book, such as characters or settings, interesting vocabulary or aspects of print. Embedding scaffolds into reading systematically builds children's skills in specific areas and increases engagement and participation.

High quality shared book reading

While ensuring that all children are read to on a daily basis is an important goal, the types of reading experiences in which children are engaged must be of high quality. Research suggests that the way in which most adults use storybooks does not always take full advantage of their potential as a teaching tool (Pentimonti & Justice 2010). Shared book reading interactions can be manipulated to maximise children's gains from this important activity. For instance, adults can point to print and track print when they read to help develop children's interest in written language and awareness of print forms and functions. Likewise, adults can pause during reading when they encounter unfamiliar words to define and talk about these words.

A feature of high-quality shared book reading is repeated book reading, which influences both language and literacy development. The average effect size for the relationship between repeated reading and outcomes is larger when a book is read four or more times (Trivette, Simkus, Dunst, & Hamby 2012).

Next steps

For more information, contact your school speech language pathologist or the Reading and Writing Disorders Advisory Service. The Advisory service may be accessed by telephone or email on weekdays between 8:30am and 4:30pm.

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