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Strategies for Supporting Early Literacy Development

“
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Annie is a teacher in an early childhood classroom located in a community child care center. Between 16 and 20 children are in Annie’s class, depending on the day; they range in age from 3 to 5 and have a variety of diverse learning needs, including disabilities. As many of the children attend all day, (i.e., 7:30-5:00), Annie is able to provide a variety of age- and developmentally appropriate activities throughout their day, including opportunities for reading books. Annie reads a story to her whole class at least twice per day. Annie’s whole class book-reading sessions typically last about 3 to 5 min and while she tries to incorporate strategies to promote discussions about the book during the sessions, it is difficult to do so consistently and to even know which of the strategies are the most effective. She feels like she is doing the best she can but wonders what she can do while reading that will help engage her class and most importantly, enhance their learning. Annie has children with a diverse set of learning needs, including a child with autism (Walter), two children with developmental delays in the areas of communication and behavior (Isabel and Mark), and two children who are learning English as a second language (Joe and Jorge). Annie wants to make sure that all her children, including

those with special needs or who are potentially at risk for future delays, are receiving the necessary accommodations they need to be as successful as possible.

The development of early literacy skills is critical to children’s later success in reading and reading-related activities (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998); therefore, understanding how teachers can support early literacy development is equally important. The purpose of this article is to provide information on how early childhood teachers can use specific strategies and techniques as well as provide accommodations and modifications for children with disabilities and other diverse learning needs during book-reading sessions, to support all children’s early literacy skill development. More specifically, the information will address (a) the importance of early literacy skill development, (b) specific early literacy strategies that can be used within the context of book reading, (c) creating an atmosphere conducive to literacy learning, and (d) encouraging parental involvement in early literacy development.

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Importance of Early Literacy Skill Development

To optimize one’s ability to support early literacy development during the preschool years, early educators need a solid understanding of the impact that early literacy skills has on children’s later reading success. Furthermore, early educators should know and understand the key aspects of early literacy. What is early literacy and why is it important?

The What and Why of Early Literacy

Emergent literacy reflects the intertwined knowledge about reading, writing, and language that is gained prior to formal literacy and reading instruction (Erickson, 2000; Justice & Kaderavek, 2004; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Three important aspects of early literacy are (a) oral language, (b) phonological awareness, and (c) print awareness/letter knowledge (Allor & McCathren, 2003). Table 1 provides detailed definitions and specific examples for each of these aspects of early literacy. All children, including those with diverse language backgrounds and those with special needs, can be supported in development of each of these aspects.

The acquisition of early literacy skills has become an important topic in research (National Reading Panel, 2000; Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000; Snow et al., 1998) as well as in national legislation with the enactment of No Child Left Behind in 2001. Not only is early literacy skill development a focus for researchers and legislators but it

should also be a focus for early childhood educators, particularly for those who teach children between the ages of 3 and 5. Preschool teachers have the power to influence early literacy skill development and potentially impact children’s later success in school. Children entering kindergarten who have emergent competence in early literacy skills (e.g., letter knowledge, print awareness) demonstrate higher levels of reading achievement in their early elementary years than children who lack these skills (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Learning to read has become one of the most important skills of childhood, with children who experience difficulties with learning to read being at a greater risk for possible academic failure (Hagtvet, 2000). Whitehurst (2001) reports that children who struggle with reading are not only at risk for school failure but are also more likely to struggle with social and emotional issues, delinquency, and drug abuse. Therefore, it is essential to address this issue when children are young, emergent language learners and before they are unsuccessful in learning to read (Podhajski & Nathan, 2005). Because early literacy skill development is a means to deter future problems with reading and reading-related activities, it is clear that these skills should be addressed intentionally and specifically during the preschool years.

Teaching Early Literacy Skills During Book Reading

Many activities within preschool classrooms support early literacy

Table 1
Early Literacy Definitions and Examples

Definition	Example
Oral language—Includes aspects such as vocabulary and basic concept development	Ask questions that encourage children to respond with more than just a one- or two-word answer. For example, “What do you notice about what the monkeys are doing?” Or if a child were to notice and comment about how the monkeys are hanging from the ceiling, Annie could expand on what the child has noticed by saying, “Yes, they are hanging from a chandelier. A chandelier is a big, fancy light that hangs from the ceiling.”
Phonological awareness—An understanding that oral language is made up of sounds or groups of sounds	Point out a sentence with two words and one with six words, thereby opening up a discussion about sentences that are long and short. Have children clap and count out syllables to words like “monkey” and “hippopotamus.”
Print awareness—Developing an understanding of the basic forms and functions of print	Point out the difference between words (e.g., McDonalds) and nonwords (e.g., the “M” as in golden arches) when they are displayed, and talk about how we read top to bottom and left to right.
Letter knowledge—Knowing how to quickly recognize and visually discriminate the visual shapes of letters (Allor & McCathren, 2003)	If there are individual letters, for example Zs above someone who is sleeping, point those out to the children.

development; however, reading books to children is a particularly powerful platform for introducing and enhancing literacy skills (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Lonigan, 2004; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Books are a great learning tool for young children. Books are pleasurable and experiences with books build a positive attitude toward future reading (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Let’s now consider how book-reading sessions can be further elevated through the use of specific strategies, dialogic reading and print referencing, both having strong evidence for their effectiveness (Justice & Pullen, 2003; Whitehurst, 2001).

Make Reading a Conversation

Dialogic reading is an approach to reading that engages the child by making them an active participant in the story (Whitehurst, 2001).

More than just simply reading the story to children, this approach becomes more of a conversation between you as the adult and the children. At the heart of this strategy are frequent interactions between adults and children, and as you may guess, interactions translate into dialogue in the form of talking and discussions. Encouraging conversations during a book-reading session provides opportunities for all children, including children with disabilities and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, to participate and feel included. Dialogue is encouraged through the use of specific prompts. These specific prompts, as outlined by Whitehurst et al. (1994), align with the acronym *CROWD* and are specified as *completion* prompts, *recall* prompts, *open-ended* prompts, *wh* prompts (who, what, where, and why questions), and *distancing* prompts.

Again, let’s return to Annie and her children as we talk about each

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of these prompts individually. Completion prompts allow the children to provide a missing word or words to complete a sentence. For example, Annie could provide the statement, “Brown bear, brown bear . . .” allowing the children to add “what do you see?” Completion prompts are easier to use after children have been exposed to a book more than 1 time and opportunities for repetition of words and or phrases are available. Recall prompts involve asking the children to remember specific aspects of the story. For example, questions like “What happened when. . .” and “What do you remember. . .?” and asking questions at the end of the book reading about what happened throughout are all great ways for Annie to use recall prompts. Open-ended prompts are just that, open-ended questions that allow the children to respond with their own ideas, challenging them to go beyond just a simple yes or no to a more complex, detailed thought. Examples of open-ended prompts that Annie could use include (a) “What do you think . . . ?” (b) “How do you know . . . ?” and (c) “What was your favorite part of the story?” Prompts in the form of “wh” questions are the familiar *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*. These types of prompts are sometimes the most frequent and at times the easiest questions to ask, such as “What is happening here?” “Why is he doing that?” and “Who is helping her?” Finally, distancing prompts require making a connection to children’s background experiences and for that reason, can be more challenging to generate. Having read the book beforehand and thought about how the book can tie to what children potentially

already know can help ease the use of this strategy. Ways in which Annie can incorporate distancing prompts include asking questions such as “Have you ever . . . ?” or “What do you know about . . . ?” Table 2 provides further definitions, examples, and accommodations for diverse learners for each of these strategies.

Dialogic reading strategies help to transform a typical book-reading session into a conversation between adults and children. The conversations are initiated when children are prompted for responses based on the content of the book. Keep in mind the acronym *CROWD* as it will help with remembering each type of prompt that can be used. The second strategy that can be used within the context of storybook reading is print referencing.

Drawing Attention to Print

Print referencing is a technique used to draw children’s attention to print, specifically print within a story (Justice & Pullen, 2003). The idea behind print referencing is that increased attention to print ultimately means that children are noticing and learning about print more quickly. To facilitate attention to print, the teacher uses verbal and nonverbal techniques. There are three specific components to print referencing: (a) questions about print, (b) comments about print, and (c) tracking your finger along print while you read (Justice & Ezell, 2004).

Questions and comments about print (i.e., verbal techniques) allow the teacher to highlight print that is different or unique on the pages of a book (Justice & Ezell, 2004).

Table 2
Dialogic Reading Prompts, Examples of Use, and Accommodations for Diverse Learners

Prompt	Example	Accommodation
Completion—Completing a sentence with familiar word(s)	<p>“Brown Bear Brown Bear, What do you see?” (Martin, 1967)</p> <p>“Brown bear brown bear _____?”</p> <p>“Purple cat purple cat _____?”</p> <p>(Complete with the words “what do you see?”)</p>	<p>Provide the child with a picture or real object to use in place of having to speak the words.</p> <p>Prompt the child with the first word or words and have them complete the rest.</p>
Recall—Remembering some aspect of the story (e.g., words, pictures, character, plot)	<p>“The Very Hungry Caterpillar” (Carle, 1969)</p> <p>“Can you remember some of the foods that the caterpillar ate?”</p> <p>“What did he turn into at the end of the story?”</p>	<p>Provide a child with their own copy of the book so they can more easily keep track of the sequence of the story.</p> <p>Reread the story individually or in small groups to assist with comprehension and recall.</p>
Open ended—Requires more than just a one- or two-word response	<p>“I Was So Mad” (Mayer, 2000)</p> <p>“What was your favorite part of the book?”</p> <p>“How could the story have ended differently?”</p>	<p>Script out the first part of the response (“My favorite part was . . .”) and have the child complete it.</p> <p>Have the child choose between two different scenarios provided by the teacher in place of coming up with it all on their own.</p>
Wh prompts—Who, what, when, where, why	<p>“Rosie’s Walk” (Hutchins, 1971)</p> <p>“Who was Rosie trying to get away from?”</p> <p>“Why do you think she was trying to get away from the fox?”</p> <p>“Where were some of the places that she walked?”</p>	<p>Preread the story to familiarize a child with the content.</p> <p>Allow the child to use a pointer, wooden spoon, feather, flyswatter, or other pointing device to indicate their answer.</p>
Distancing—Connecting the story with children’s background knowledge	<p>“The Little Red Hen” (Byron, 1994)</p> <p>“Has anyone ever made bread before?”</p> <p>“Have you ever needed help with something before and no one would help you?”</p>	<p>Talk with families about any previous experiences with the content of the book.</p> <p>Allow extra time for the child to think and respond.</p>

Children often do not see these subtle differences in print unless it is directly pointed out to them. Annie could incorporate questions about print by asking “What do you think this sign says?” or “What is different about how this word is written compared to these other words?” Comments about print that Annie could make include, “He has a #1 written on his hat.” or “Notice on this page there is a list of all of the things the crocodile wants to do today.” In addition, tracking words on a page with your finger (i.e., nonverbal technique) also encourages children to connect with specific letters and/or words as they

are being read. Particularly with books that use the same word and/or phrase repeatedly throughout, pointing to specific words can help children to recognize and perhaps even begin to read those words on their own.

How can print-referencing strategies be incorporated? Again, let’s use Annie as a model. Annie noticed that there were color words written in the same color font (i.e., the word *blue* written in blue) in the book she was reading. After pointing out these color words to the children, they were able, during the next book reading, to name these words independently when she

Table 3
Print-Referencing Strategies, Examples of Their Use, and Accommodations

Strategy	Example	Accommodation
Comments about print— Talking about print on a page	“Oh My Oh My Oh Dinosaurs” (Boynton, 1993) “Look on this page you can see numbers above the elevator”	Have the child come up and point to or tell you about the print on the page.
Questions about print— Asking questions about print on a page	“Oh My Oh My Oh Dinosaurs” (Boynton, 1993) “What do you notice about the words <i>big</i> and <i>tiny</i> on this page?” (the word <i>big</i> is written very large and the word <i>tiny</i> is written very small)	Highlight the print you want them to notice with a magnifier, highlighter, or by covering up the rest of the print on the page.
Tracking your finger—Point to each word as it is read	Simply pointing to the words as they are read	Allow the students to point to the words themselves, even using a fun object like a wooden spoon, fly-swatter, or feather.

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pointed to them. Table 3 provides definitions and specific examples of print-referencing strategies as well as accommodations for diverse learners.

The print-referencing technique involves verbal (questions and comments) and nonverbal (tracking finger along print) references to print. The goal of print referencing is to get children to really notice print so they become aware that there are more than just pictures on the pages of books. There are letters, words, and sentences which when put together, tell a story.

Creating a Literacy Learning Atmosphere

Including dialogic reading and print-referencing strategies during book-reading sessions is a great way for teachers to build children’s literacy skills. However, a close eye for establishing an atmosphere conducive to literacy learning can make book-reading sessions even more powerful. This next section provides information on creating an

atmosphere of literacy learning for all children through considerations for (a) selecting appropriate books, (b) preparing for a book-reading session, and (c) the role of teacher–child interactions.

Selecting Appropriate Books

Book selection is an important and often overlooked component when taking into account the impact that book reading can have on children’s development. Books for children at the preschool level are abundant and easily accessible. However, ease and accessibility should not completely dictate the types of books chosen for book reading. Books should be chosen with the specific needs of each child in mind. Books that relate to everyday experiences can help keep a child’s interest (Shedd & Duke, 2008), particularly for children who are learning English as a second language, as their ability to relate to the content of the story is critical to their understanding of the story. If a child has a favorite topic, dinosaurs for example, including books on this

topic can assist a child with autism or a child with difficulties with language or behavior in becoming and remaining engaged.

The length of the book and the number and types of words on each page is also critical, especially for children with disabilities. Therefore, select books that are age and developmentally appropriate. The length of the storybook session should range between 10 and 15 min to make the most out of the attention you DO get from children during a reading session. Vivid, captivating, and interesting illustrations should accompany text that is challenging yet understandable to children at the preschool level. In general, the illustrations should be more prevalent on the page compared with the amount of text.

What else can you consider as you are selecting books to read to

your children? Books that relate to social behaviors, such as friendship and sharing, are important and should reflect the similarities and differences in various cultures, race, gender, and individual capabilities. Annie worked very hard to find and include books that represented Joe's and Jorge's cultures, Chinese and Latino, respectively. Furthermore, books that include a variation of different kinds of print as well as those that have a beginning, middle, and end allow for increased opportunities for implementation of the dialogic reading and print-referencing strategies previously discussed. Periodically, use books that can aid in development of specific literacy skills, whether it is an alphabet book to develop letter/sound knowledge or a rhyming book to work on phonological awareness (Shedd & Duke, 2008). See Box 1 for considerations in selecting books.

Box 1

Key components of book selection:

- age and developmentally appropriate in terms of content and length
- representative of all children and families across culture, race, gender, ethnicity, and ability
- good balance between text and illustrations
- challenging yet understandable vocabulary
- opportunities for discussion can be found from the content of the book

Books can also serve multiple purposes. For example, a book about colors can offer new ideas and opportunities not only to teach colors but also to build knowledge or vocabulary related to objects in the book. Children with language delays or who are developing their language skills (i.e., children who are English language learners) can benefit from books that focus on vocabulary in content specific areas such as science or mathematics. Finally, rereading the same book is not only very appropriate but also

very beneficial in terms of children's level of learning. In fact, repetition helps children develop memory, sequencing, and communication and social skills, while broadening their knowledge base and helping them predict events. Children may also begin to understand sentence structure and vocabulary and perhaps even incorporate these into their own conversations (Lewman, 1999; Shedd & Duke, 2008).

After some careful thought and planning for her next book-reading session, Annie was particularly

pleased with the results. She had found a Dr. Seuss book, one that was not familiar to her but appeared to fit within her theme of body parts. The length of the book and number of words on each page were equally appropriate and challenging. She discovered that this book provided opportunities for children to rhyme, identify colors and color words, and read print on signs throughout the book.

During the first reading of the book, Annie pointed out unfamiliar vocabulary and answered questions the children were asking about the book. During the second reading, Annie used the dialogic reading and print-referencing strategies to highlight features of the book such as rhyming and color words. Finally during the third reading, the children, now familiar with the content, responded to many of the prompts Annie was using. Mark was able to independently identify some of the colors and color words, Isabel picked out some rhyming words, and Joe and Jorge remembered what the print on the signs was telling them. Annie realized that the combination of selecting of an appropriate book together with use of the strategies really made for a great learning experience for all the children.

Preparing for a Book-Reading Session

Overall classroom environment and arrangement can have a direct impact on children's learning. The same can be said for specific areas of the classroom, such as where book-reading sessions are held. Where and how you arrange yourself and the children are important considerations. Seat

yourself where all children can easily view the book (Shedd & Duke, 2008), perhaps even choosing an area of the classroom where natural lighting is available. Consider seating children who need proximity to the teacher and may require redirection closer to you and the book. Distractions are potentially everywhere in a preschool classroom. Minimize the opportunity for distractions by facing children away from interesting toys or other commotion in the classroom, such as cleaning up from a previous activity or setting up for an upcoming one. If the schedule of your book-reading sessions corresponds with other buildingwide activities such as recess or large transitions down the hallway, attempt to move the children to a quieter area of the classroom.

Children often require reminders and at times, even direct teaching of the concept of personal space. This concept can be particularly challenging for children like Isabel and Mark who struggle with behavior issues, especially during book reading when children are seated close to one another. Outlining a child's space with a carpet square or small rug can help to define that personal space and help to reduce opportunities for unwanted touching between children. Other children may require alternative seating such as a rocking chair or bumpy seat if they need sensory input while sitting or are prone to behaviors such as lying down, rolling around, or trying to escape from the activity. Let's come back to Annie and Walter to illustrate this point.

After several particularly rough book-reading sessions, Annie

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realized that changes had to be made to better support Walter. She had always put out carpet squares for all her children, but Walter was unable to sit for more than a few seconds before attempting to flee or displaying other inappropriate behaviors (kicking, flailing, etc.). Annie moved a rocking chair from her library center to the book-reading area, placing Walter among his peers but in an adapted arrangement. Walter was able to receive the stimulation he needed from the rocking and learned to stay engaged for increasing amounts of time as a result of this change.

Providing a fidget, small toy, or other manipulative that a child can use to “play” with but helps them remain seated during the book reading can also be an effective strategy. However, use caution as some objects can end up in the child’s mouth or otherwise be used inappropriately. If a child is distracted during large-group reading sessions or has a short attention span, providing them with their own copy of the book you are reading could help them to stay engaged throughout the session. Reading a story to an inattentive child individually or with a small group of children prior to the large-group reading session cannot only help the child to potentially be more actively engaged but also prime them to answer questions or make comments during discussions.

During a week-long theme on animals, Annie really wanted to make sure Isabel, Mark, Joe, and Jorge were actively involved in their large-group book-reading sessions. She selected books that included animals that Joe and Jorge would be familiar with from their native countries. She gathered these four

children in a small group and read the same animal book they would later be reading at large group. Together, they practiced saying the animal names and discussed what the animals were doing in the pictures, for example, eating, running, or swimming. During the large-group reading, all four children were noticeably involved as they made comments and answered questions about the story.

Teacher–Child Interactions

Teacher–child interactions with books such as asking questions and making predictions can facilitate language development (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). In fact, these interactions are a great way for all children regardless of ability or background to learn language, above and beyond just simply listening to the story being read. When teachers increase preschool children’s access to books and enhance the quality of how the books are read, their language and early literacy development increases (Bus et al., 1995). Furthermore, the teacher’s attitude and way of interacting with children around books affect the children’s interest in and response to literature. A teacher who is having fun and being expressive through his or her face, gestures, and tone will in turn help children become more excited about participating in a book-reading session.

What about interaction style, specifically, for Annie? Annie can focus more on what the child is trying to say, rather than the language forms they use. Joe and Jorge could be encouraged to answer in their native language and if necessary, Walter could show a picture, gesture, or sign to indicate

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what he wants to say. Throughout the book-reading session, Annie could repeat, expand on, or add to the children’s responses, indicating her enthusiasm and encouraging further language use by Mark and Isabel. Finally, Annie can provide multiple opportunities for children to respond but not demand or require an answer. Joe or Jorge may not know or be unsure of an answer and given multiple opportunities, will likely respond when they feel most comfortable (Martinez, Roser, & Dooley, 2003).

Getting Parents Involved in Early Literacy Development

Parental involvement is a key component in increasing early literacy skills for preschoolers. In fact, family members have the best opportunity to support their children’s development of literacy skills (Torgeson, 2000). In what ways can Annie encourage parents to promote literacy development during book reading with their children away from school? Certainly, emphasizing to parents the importance of reading and participating in other reading-related activities is a good first step. Rereading of familiar and favorite books is an activity that can include all family members. Annie could provide all parents with a handout or other informational sheet about dialogic reading and print-referencing strategies, even going so far as to list specific behaviors (i.e., accommodations) parents can model to meet the specific needs of Walter, Mark, or Isabel. Annie could be sure Joe’s and Jorge’s parents are

included by having the information translated into their home languages. Annie could organize a family reading night or a borrowing system of books for a family’s home library as ways to help them select developmentally appropriate books. Finally, Annie can emphasize the notion of practice and reinforcement to parents, which allows children to acquire and generalize early literacy skills (Bruns & Pierce, 2007).

Annie’s book-reading sessions have become one of the favorite parts of her day. Selecting books and figuring out the most appropriate ways to support each of her children has been challenging, yet so rewarding at the same time. Several parents have commented on how they were able to use the information she provided about the strategies and accommodations to connect more with their children while reading books at home. Annie feels as though the strategies she is using can have a positive impact on the children’s early literacy development now as well as support their future development.

Conclusion

Early literacy development is critical. A solid foundation in early literacy skills has been shown to help decrease struggles children could face in learning to read. Regardless of ability or background, accommodations can be put into place to support each child’s literacy skill development. Within the context of book reading, several strategies can be used. This article highlighted two evidence-based practices—dialogic reading and print referencing. Dialogic reading includes prompts (completion,

recall, open ended, wh, and distancing) and print referencing includes comments and questions about print as well as tracking your finger along print while reading.

The classroom atmosphere contributes to the children's overall literacy learning experience. Selecting appropriate books, preparing for a book-reading session, and being aware of your interactions with the children are all

important considerations when working with a diverse group of children. The home-school connection is critical, particularly at the preschool level. Many of the strategies and techniques that you implement in the classroom can very easily generalize to the home. Share ideas with parents and help them become active participants in supporting their child's literacy development.

Note

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