

# Using Shared Storybook Reading to Promote Emergent Literacy

Laura M. Justice • Joan Kaderavek

Do you know your *print awareness* from your *phonological awareness*? How does your *alphabet knowledge* differ from your *metalinguistic awareness*? If you are reading this article yourself, you know the answers to these questions (at least intuitively). And believe it or not, most 7-year-old children who are successful readers know the answers to these questions, too—if only subconsciously. Such awareness and knowledge came to them as their parents and caregivers cuddled them on their laps and read to them.

We now use the term *emergent literacy* to define these skills and concepts (see box, “What Is Emergent Literacy?”); and special educators and other professionals—and parents—are urgently pursuing techniques for improving the reading skills of young children with disabilities (see box, “What Does the Literature Say?”).

This article describes several techniques for structuring shared storybook reading interactions to best promote emergent literacy development for young children with disabilities. We present techniques for increasing the appeal and interactive nature of shared storybook reading and ways to promote children’s awareness of the literacy conventions naturally occurring within the shared storybook reading context.

**Embedded print encourages children to engage with written language.**

## Increasing the Appeal and Interactive Nature of Storybook Reading

When using storybook reading to promote emergent literacy knowledge in young children, we must ensure that children find the activity appealing and are highly engaged and actively involved in the book-reading experience.

Some children, including a substantial proportion of children with disabilities, do not enjoy participating in book-reading activities (Kaderavek & Sulzby, 1998a). This occurs for several reasons, as follows:

- Shared storybook reading is a language-based activity. For children exhibiting impaired language skills,

## What Is Emergent Literacy?

Emergent literacy refers to the reading and writing knowledge and behavior of children who are not yet conventionally literate. Historically, educators thought that children acquired knowledge about reading and writing only through formal literacy instruction. Thus, literacy development was not a concern for early childhood special and general educators. We now know that children amass considerable knowledge about written language within the period *from birth to about age 6*. This period, transcending both preschool and kindergarten, is generally referred to as the “emergent literacy stage” of reading and writing development.

In the emergent literacy period, children gain knowledge about reading and writing not through instruction, but rather through the simple acts of observing and participating in informal literacy events. In other words, formal instruction is not always needed for young children to develop emergent literacy. By observing others who are engaged in literacy activities and by participating in informal literacy events themselves, children gain important literacy prerequisites, including:

- The role of print as a communication device (*print awareness*)
- The sound structure of oral and written language (*phonological awareness*)
- The nature of letters and other print symbols (*alphabet knowledge*)
- The vocabulary used to describe literacy constructs (e.g., *word, spell, read; metalinguistic awareness*)

This emergent knowledge about literacy provides developing children an important foundation for their later and more conventional literacy skills. Preschoolers with adequate knowledge in these areas (e.g., print awareness, phonological awareness) generally emerge into better readers and writers than preschoolers whose knowledge is inadequate (Stuart, 1995). Thus, we need to ensure that all children acquire key emergent literacy skills during the preschool period.

book reading can be an overwhelming and demanding task. In fact, the communication demands of shared book reading are much greater than other activities, such as dramatic or pretend play.

- Children's enjoyment of book reading, as with any activity, is mediated by their active engagement in the activity. Children with disabilities, for a variety of reasons, may not be as actively engaged in storybook reading interactions as their peers without disabilities (Marvin & Miranda, 1993). Awareness of the potential for children to dislike or to be disengaged is important when using shared storybook reading as a means for facilitating emergent literacy knowledge.

### **Increasing the Appeal of Storybook Reading**

How can we create a potent social dynamic that motivates children to want to engage with storybooks? One of the most powerful means is by emphasizing the collaborative nature of shared storybook reading—by ensuring that both the adult and child play important, equal roles in the interaction (Rabidoux & MacDonald, 2000). When children are collaborating *with* others (as opposed to being directed *by* others), they demonstrate increased self-regulation and self-confidence in performing a task.

Adults reading books with young children tend to maintain high levels of verbal and nonverbal control (Kaderavek & Sulzby, 1998a). Adults' use of directive behavior may well be encouraged by the nature of the book-reading context.

For example, most of us are familiar with the following routine: The adult reads a book to the child and embeds a series of questions into the routine (e.g., "What's that?" "What's he doing?"). Simultaneously, the adult holds the books and turns the pages at the appropriate time. The child sits quietly looking on (presumably listening), answering the questions that are asked. In this particular scenario, the adult (who is doing what many of us do when we read with children) obviously maintains high levels of both verbal and nonverbal

### **What Does the Literature Say About Emergent Literacy and Children with Disabilities?**

**Children at Risk.** Certain groups of children are at increased risk for difficulties in emergent literacy attainment (for discussion, see Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). For instance, recent studies have shown that children with disabilities tend to acquire emergent literacy skills at a rate slower than their same-age peers (e.g., Boudreau & Hedberg, 1999; Saint-Laurent, Giasson, & Couture, 1998). In particular, emergent-literacy delays are prevalent in children exhibiting language impairment—either as a primary disability or secondary to other conditions, such as autism or mental retardation (Snow et al.). For these youngsters, *delayed emergent literacy typically includes all key areas of emergent literacy, including print awareness, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and metalinguistic awareness* (e.g., Boudreau & Hedberg). Other children who, by the nature of belonging to a particular group, are viewed as at risk for difficulties with emergent literacy include children reared in poverty, children with limited English proficiency, and children who have limited access to early literacy materials (Snow et al.).

**Consequences of Delays.** Delays in emergent literacy development occur for a variety of reasons, with an important factor being less frequent exposure to and participation in literacy events (Marvin & Miranda, 1993). This is particularly problematic, because exposure to and participation in literacy events stimulates children's emergent literacy development. In turn, emergent literacy knowledge provides the foundation for children's development of conventional literacy skills, including reading and writing. Such circumstances may directly contribute to later difficulties with conventional literacy achievement for children with disabilities (Katims, 1996).

**What Can We Do?** What can be done to enhance emergent literacy development in young children with disabilities? One practical means is by promoting the frequency with which children participate in informal literacy activities, particularly adult-child shared storybook reading. Indeed, many scientists and educators have asserted that adult-child, shared storybook reading is a powerful way to promote emergent literacy development in young children, including youngsters with disabilities. (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Kaderavek & Sulzby, 1998b; Rabidoux & MacDonald, 2000; Whitehurst et al., 1994).

**What About Shared Storybook Reading?** Several recent studies have shown that participation in shared storybook reading interactions with parents and teachers can positively influence young children's emergent literacy knowledge in several key areas, such as alphabet knowledge and print awareness (Box & Aldridge, 1993; Ezell, Justice, & Parsons, 2000; Justice & Ezell, 2000). The power of storybook reading for facilitating emergent literacy growth can be attributed to two key factors:

- Storybook reading provides an interactive context that can be highly appealing and engaging for the child.
- Storybook reading, by its nature, provides a rich context in which print and other literacy conventions figure prominently.

control. This is different from the control dynamics that occur in other adult-child activities, such as play. During play, children tend to direct and control both the verbal and nonverbal elements of the activity. Some evidence shows that adults reading to young children

***Children amass considerable knowledge about written language within the period from birth to about age 6.***

with disabilities use more control strategies and directive behavior as compared to adults reading to children without disabilities (Conti-Ramsden & Friel-Patti, 1983; Evans & Schmidt, 1991). This may occur because children with disabilities may require more assistance and direction from adults to participate in the book-reading task. Nevertheless, a lack of control on the part of the child may actually serve to reduce the appeal of the book-reading interaction (Rabidoux & MacDonald, 2000).

To increase a child's motivation toward book-reading interactions, we need to take a broadened view of the shared-reading experience. We need to explicitly and implicitly encourage children to take a more collaborative and active role in shared reading. Accordingly, we need to decrease our use of both verbal and nonverbal control strategies. Storytime should be a pleasurable, positive experience for the child, one in which the child is able to exert some control.

The collaborative potential of shared book reading is increased when we are highly sensitive to the child's level of engagement, interest, and language competence. Though some children enjoy answering questions and naming objects during book reading, other children do not. Limit your use of questions with children who do not appear to enjoy being asked questions. If a child appears more interested in the pictures versus listening to the story, or if the language demands of the story appear too difficult for the child, modify the interaction to match the child's interests and skills. Table 1 shows other ways to increase the collaborative potential of shared book reading.

### Increasing Active Engagement

When reading storybooks with young children—especially when the goal is to promote emergent literacy development—we must actively involve the children in the activity. Some studies have suggested that children with disabilities, particularly children exhibiting language impairment, are less likely to be actively engaged during shared book-reading interactions, as compared to their peers without disabilities (Marvin

**Table 1. Techniques for Increasing the Collaborative Potential of Shared Storybook Reading**

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Description</i>
<b>Pausing</b>	Pause occasionally during reading and wait for the child's comments. Pause after turning to a new page so the child can look at the picture and spontaneously comment or question. Pause after reading each page so the child can comment on story or pictures.
<b>Let child pick the reading location</b>	Children enjoy reading in different places: on the floor, in a favorite chair, on the back steps. Allow the child to pick the reading location.
<b>Increase child's opportunities to physically manipulate the book</b>	Allow the child to hold the book. Encourage the child to freely turn the pages. Use books featuring manipulable features (e.g., slot books, flap books).
<b>Match the interaction to child's abilities and interests</b>	Adapt the story, the words, or the discussion in any way that makes the book more enjoyable for the child. As children mature and develop, they will be more interested in the "real" story.
<b>Ask child to "read" the book to you</b>	Children enjoy "reading" a familiar book. It's fine to say, "Wow, I like the way you read that book," even if they are not really reading.

& Miranda, 1983; Rabidoux & MacDonald, 2000). A practical technique for encouraging active involvement for all children is by selecting books featuring interactive components, such as the following:

- *Lift-the-flap books*: The child lifts flaps on each page to reveal print or pictures hidden underneath.
- *Slot books*: In these books, the child pushes a character cut-out through a slot on each page.
- *Predictable books*: These books have a narrative sequence with a repetitive nature that permits children to produce some of the narrative text on their own.

Using books with features like these can positively influence the child's nonverbal and verbal involvement in the activity. In turn, this active involvement on the part of the child may encourage feelings of control, thereby lessening counterproductive feelings of lack or loss of control. Table 2 provides titles of children's storybooks displaying these

features, all of which we have found to be highly appealing to children of preschool and early school age.

### Promoting Children's Awareness of Print and Literacy Conventions

By their very nature, storybooks provide a rich context for encouraging children's awareness of print and other important literacy conventions (e.g., how books are handled, how speech and print are related). For children who are motivated toward and actively engaged in the shared reading experience, we can structure our book-reading interactions in ways that positively influence children's development of emergent literacy knowledge. We can (a) select books that explicitly promote children's attention to print, and (b) use nonverbal and verbal behavior that encourages children to engage with print.

### Storybook Selection

Choose storybooks carefully when the goal of book reading is to encourage

**Table 2. Storybooks Exhibiting Features That Encourage Children's Active Participation**

Title	Feature(s)	Author (Year)
<i>A Squirrel's Tale</i>	slot	Fowler (1983a)
<i>Big Pig on a Dig</i>	lift-the-flap	Cox (1999)
<i>Dear Zoo</i>	predictable	Campbell (1982)
<i>Little Bear</i>	predictable	Namm (1996)
<i>Quiet Bear, Noisy Bear</i>	lift-the-flap	Bogdanowicz (1997)
<i>Spot Bakes a Cake</i>	lift-the-flap	Hill (1984)
<i>Ted and Dolly's Magic Carpet Ride</i>	slot	Fowler (1983b)
<i>The Blue Balloon</i>	lift-the-flap	Inkpen (1989)
<i>There's a Mouse About the House</i>	slot	Fowler (1982)

**Adult-child, shared storybook reading is a powerful way to promote emergent literacy development in young children, including youngsters with disabilities.**

*Feathers for Lunch* and *Five Little Piggies*).

### Adult Shared-Reading Behavior

Many adults reading books with young children pay little attention to their own behavior. We are often surprised to find out that we consistently do certain things when reading with children, such as asking questions about pictures. It is also surprising for adults to find that we rarely ask questions about the print on a page, even when reading storybooks in which print is a very salient feature (e.g., Ezell & Justice, 1998). Only when adults talk about and point to print, however, will children also talk about and look at print (Ezell & Justice, 2000). Children's visual and verbal interactions with print help stimulate and shape their emergent knowledge about written language.

As teachers and parents, we can use several techniques during shared-storybook reading to encourage children's emergent literacy development. Specific techniques include talking about print

children's attention to and interactions with print. A particularly important feature to consider is the size and amount of print occurring in the book. There is, in fact, considerable variation across children's storybooks in the size of narrative print and the number of words occurring on pages. A cursory examination of the storybooks present in any classroom will quickly reveal that not all children's books are equal with respect to the salience of print.

Recent studies have suggested that books featuring large, bold narrative print can encourage children to attend to and interact with print during book-reading interactions (Ezell & Justice, 2000; Justice & Ezell, 2000). Also, books featuring few words per page can help children attend to distinguishing features of words and letters. Look for books with these characteristics:

- *Few words per page* (averaging 5 words or fewer).
- *Large, bold narrative print* (corresponding to 20-point font or greater).
- *Redundant print* (certain words appear multiple times in text).

In addition, pay attention to illustrations. The pictures in storybooks help children make sense of the storyline and can motivate children's participation in the book-reading interaction. Make sure the pictures are large, appealing, and engaging.

Storybook illustrations can play an important role in directly encouraging children's emergent literacy development. Many popular children's storybooks feature print that is embedded in the illustrations. The "Spot" books (e.g.,

*Spot Bakes a Cake*), for instance, feature print directly embedded within the pictures. Embedded print encourages children to engage with written language even when their attention is drawn to the illustrations.

A recent study of children's eye movements showed that 4-year-old children often fixate on print embedded within illustrations, but rarely (if ever) look at narrative print—even when looking at storybooks featuring large and bold narrative print (Justice, 2001). Also, embedded print appears particularly powerful for encouraging children's spontaneous verbalizations about print (Ezell & Justice, 2000). For example, looking at the word *party* embedded within a picture, a child might point to the word and ask, "What's this say?" Table 3 provides the titles of several storybooks that feature print embedded in the illustrations (e.g.,

**Table 3. Storybooks Featuring Print Embedded in the Illustrations**

Title	Author (Year)
<i>Spot's First Walk</i>	Hill (1981)
<i>Spot Bakes a Cake</i>	Hill (1984)
<i>Feathers for Lunch</i>	Ehlert (1990)
<i>Five Little Piggies</i>	Martin (1998)
<i>Freight Train</i>	Crews (1978)
<i>Nine Ducks Nine</i>	Hayes (1990)
<i>School Bus</i>	Crews (1984)
<i>The Awful Aardvarks Go to School</i>	Lindbergh (1997)
<i>This Is the Bear</i>	Hayes (1986)
<i>This Is the Bear and the Scary Night</i>	Hayes (1991)
<i>Where's Tim's Ted?</i>	Whybrow (2000)

(verbal references to print) and pointing to print (nonverbal references to print). Taken together, these techniques are referred to as *print-referencing strategies*. Studies have shown that by incorporating these strategies into shared-reading interactions, we can stimulate young children's emergent literacy knowledge (Ezell et al., 2000; Justice & Ezell, in press).

1. *Verbal references to print.* Ask questions and make comments about the book's print, as well as its illustrations. Verbal references to print encourage children to interact with and attend to print during reading. Also, when adults talk about print, this encourages children to do the same. Here are some sample questions and comments:

- *Questions about print:* Is this letter an A? Where should I begin to read? What do you think this says here? Do you see any letters in your name on this page?
- *Comments about print:* This says "bear." This letter is an A. This letter's in my name. I'm going to start reading here.

2. *Nonverbal references to print.* Point out and track the book's print during the shared reading. Such nonverbal behavior may help children gain an awareness of important emergent literacy conventions, such as the left-to-right directionality of print.

### Final Thoughts

Teachers, other professionals, and parents can use specific shared-reading techniques to create positive social interactions centered on storybooks. In turn, these positive shared-reading experiences can help develop motivated, engaged, and highly knowledgeable emergent readers.

***If the language demands of the story appear too difficult for the child, modify the interaction to match the child's interests and skills.***

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TEACHING Exceptional Children, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp. 8-13.

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