EARLY INTERVENTION TO PROMOTE PRESCHOOLERS’ LANGUAGE SKILLS: DIALOGIC READING

Over a third of children in the United States enter school unprepared to learn. They lack the vocabulary, sentence structure, and other basic skills that are required to do well in school. Children who start behind generally stay behind—they drop out, they turn off. Their futures are at risk. Why do so many children struggle with the skills that are critical to school readiness? Children’s experience with books plays an important role.

Picture book reading provides children with many of the skills that are necessary for school readiness: vocabulary, sound structure, the meaning of print, the structure of stories and language, sustained attention, the pleasure of learning, and on and on. Children who are read to three times per week or more do much better in later development than children who are read to less than three times per week. It is important to begin reading to children at an early age. By nine months of age, infants can appreciate books that are interesting to touch or that make sounds. Preschoolers need food, shelter, love; they also need the nourishment of books.

Picture book reading also provides an ideal context for learning language. Adults often approach shared reading with an intent to teach language to their young children. A large set of studies suggests that the particular way that parents read to their children may have an impact on children’s language ability. Thus, it is not surprising that studies have shown that the frequency with which children are exposed to picture books is related to language skills. We must be careful, however, not to assume that just because exposure to books and language skills go together, that the one directly or uniquely causes the other. For instance, preschool experience with books may be a “side effect” of socioeconomic differences among children, and it may be the economic differences that carry the true weight in predicting academic readiness and success. Alternatively, the relations between early experience with books and language development may be due to the fact that children who are more interested in books during the preschool period may initiate more shared book reading with adults: “Mommy, will you read with me?” The same underlying abilities and inclinations that generate more interest in books may also foster rapid language development independently from the early book reading experience. Thus, experimental studies are necessary to establish the direction of effects in the relationship between shared book reading and language development.

The Stony Brook Reading and Language Project has developed a method of reading to preschoolers called dialogic reading which is aimed at increasing stimulation of children’s language skills through interactive picturebook reading. When most adults share a book with a preschooler, they read and the child listens. In dialogic reading, the adult helps the child become the teller of the story. The name of this intervention comes from the word “dialogue,” and establishing a dialogue between adults and children about fun, engaging stories is what this intervention is all about.

WHAT IS DIALOGIC READING?

The dialogic reading program is based on three general principles:

1. **Evocative techniques** are used to encourage the child to take an active role during story time. For example, asking the child a “what” question is preferable to straight text reading or asking the child to point. This principle is based on evidence that active learning is more effective than passive learning, and that language, like other skills, benefits from practice.

2. **Adult feedback** is encouraged in the form of expansions, modeling, corrections, and praise. There is an abundance of data demonstrating the importance of providing children examples of slightly more advanced language than their own.

3. **Progressive change** in adult standards for the child are encouraged so that the parent or teacher is constantly...
encouraging the child to do just a bit more than he or she normally would. For example, a child should know what an object is called before being asked about what the object does. Dialogic reading is based on the premise that language development may be accelerated if the boundaries of a child’s comfort zone are pushed further than they might be spontaneously.

The specific reading techniques of dialogic reading require that adults gradually reverse the typical pattern of storybook reading to permit the child to become the teller of the story and the adult the active listener— prompting, expanding, and rewarding the child’s efforts to talk. No one can learn to play the piano just by listening to someone else play. Likewise, no one can learn to read just by listening to someone else read. Children learn most from books when they are actively involved.

Using Dialogic Reading with Two and Three Year-Olds

The dialogic reading program for two and three-year-olds is presented in two segments. Training may occur one-on-one, in a group, or even by videotape. In any mode of training, the following topics are covered.

Dialogic Reading: Part One (Seven Elements)

1. Ask “what” questions. Practicing language helps children to learn, so asking “what” questions that evoke speech from a child encourages a greater use of language. For example, pointing to a fire truck and asking, “What is this?” Such questions are much more effective than questions, that do not require any speech from the child. Similarly, yes/no questions are not very effective at increasing the child’s language skills. Asking, “What is this?” while pointing to a fire truck encourages more speech from a child than asking, “Is this a fire truck?” or asking the child to point to the fire truck.

2. Follow answers with questions. Once the child knows the name of a picture object, adults are encouraged to ask further questions about the object. For example asking questions about aspects of the object itself, such as its shape, its color, or its parts. Asking what the object is being used for or who is using it also elicits greater use of language on the part of the child. Any question that asks the child to talk about the object, in other words, is helpful. If a child correctly labels a wagon, for example, the adult might point to its wheel and say, “Right, what is this part of the wagon called?”

3. Repeat what the child says. Reinforcing the child’s correct responses by repetition provides encouragement and lets the child know when he or she is correct. So if the child answered “frog,” the adult might say, “That’s right, it is a frog.”

4. Help the child as needed. A child’s inability to answer a question provides a good opportunity for teaching. Adults are asked to provide the child a model of a good answer, and to see if the child will repeat what they said. For instance, the adult might say, “Those are roller skates. Can you say roller skates?” Children eventually get into the habit of repeating without being asked.

5. Praise and encourage. There are many ways to provide feedback and praise when the child says something about the object. For example asking questions on a page. When the child says something about an object, adults are to provide a multiword description and try to get the child to repeat it: “The duck is swimming.” After a few days’ practice, the child should begin to offer multiword phrases spontaneously in response to the request, “Tell me about this.” After the child gets used to answering these types of questions, adults may be able to ask two or three such questions on a page. When the child says something about a page, he or she is to be praised, and then asked what else he or

7. Have fun. The most important thing to remember about this program is to make reading fun. We have found that children generally enjoy an active approach to story time, particularly when adults take a game-like, turn-taking approach. The child seems to be getting tired, adults are encouraged to read a few pages without questions, or take a break from reading. It is important to try to keep these two phases in proportion by simply reading to the child part of the time. One way is for the parent or teacher to read a page, and then for the child to read the next.

Dialogic Reading: Part Two (Three Elements)

1. Ask open-ended questions. In part one the child was asked specific questions about objects and their attributes. In part two, adults are to ask less structured questions—questions that ask the child to pick something on the page and tell about it. Examples of these open-ended questions are “What do you see on this page?” or “Tell me what’s going on here.” These questions are more difficult than specific questions. At first the child may be able to answer very little. It is important at this stage to encourage any attempts, and provide models of good answers. When the child doesn’t know anything else to say about a picture, adults are to provide a multiword description and try to get the child to repeat it: “The duck is swimming. Now you say, ‘the duck is swimming’.” After a few days’ practice, the child should begin to offer multiword phrases spontaneously in response to the request, “Tell me about this.”
she can say. When the child runs out of things to say, adults can add one more piece of information and try to get the child to repeat it.

2. **Expand what the child says.** When the child says something about the book, this language should be encouraged and used as an opportunity to model slightly more advanced language. This is done by repeating what the child says and adding a bit more information or one or two more words. For example, if the child says, “Duck swim,” the adult might say, “Right, the duck is swimming.” If the child says, “Wagon,” the adult might say “Yes, a red wagon.” Adults can expand on what the child has said by adding parts of speech or by supplying new information. Later, the child can be asked questions about the information provided, such as “What color is the wagon?” When the child’s utterances are expanded, it is important to make sure only a little information is added, so that the child will be able to imitate. If the expansions are too long, the child is unlikely to be able to repeat what is said. If the child is encouraged to repeat expansions, he or she is more likely to use longer phrases spontaneously.

3. **Have fun.** It is important to use one’s judgment in adjusting this program to make it fun for the child. The child can’t be expected to do all of the talking about a book. The adult should talk about some of the pages, or take turns describing a picture. Many children find turn-taking to be like a game. A transcript of a session of dialogic picture book reading is presented on page 11.

**THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR DIALOGIC READING**

The effects of the dialogic reading program were originally evaluated with a group of suburban mothers and their two-year-olds. Half of the families were randomly assigned to an experimental group and received training in the reading assignments described above. Mothers in this group received two half-hour training sessions two weeks apart. Each training session consisted of three components: (a) didactic instruction in which the techniques were described to the mother by the trainer; (b) modeling of the techniques in which the trainer gave a demonstration of the techniques and role-played a reading session with a trained research assistant; and (c) direct feedback in which the trainer pretended to be a child and had the mother practice the techniques, providing feedback about her performance. The other half of the families were assigned to a control group. These mothers read to their children as often as mothers in the dialogic reading group, but read in their typical manner. Mothers in both groups tape-recorded reading sessions across the four-week study.

Analyses of the audiotapes revealed that mothers who were trained in dialogic reading made use of the techniques, whereas control mothers primarily read the books’ text. Over the four-week intervention period, the dialogic reading program produced significant increases in how long children would talk during reading. Effects of the dialogic reading intervention were also found on measures of expressive vocabulary.

**EARLY INTERVENTION USING DIALOGIC READING WITH CHILDREN IN POVERTY**

**High Risks among Poor Families**

There are widely documented social economic differences in the language use of preschool children. Children who live in underprivileged conditions consistently perform more poorly than more privileged peers on standardized tests of verbal ability and on other diverse measures of verbal production. Furthermore, social class differences in language production are present from the early stages of language development: Differences in the size of children’s vocabularies are detectable as early as 18 months of age.

Children raised in poverty are also at very high risk for later illiteracy and school failure. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, an ongoing project of the Department of Education, has consistently documented substantial differences in the reading and writing ability of children as a function of the economic level of their parents. As research indicates, school achievement varies with socioeconomic status. These differences exist at the very beginning of school, and children’s school performance is relatively stable from kindergarten to high school. Without intervention, very often children from low-income families start school behind and stay behind.

One of the contributing factors to the early language deficits in many low-income children may be a lack of effective, early, shared reading experiences. In fact, children who live in poverty often receive very little exposure to literacy materials. By one estimate, a typical middle class child enters first grade with approximately 1,000 to 1,700 hours of one-on-one picture book reading, while a corresponding child from a low-income family averages just 25 such hours. Because reading with children is so important, and because children whose families suffer economic challenges are particularly at risk of poor reading and language outcomes, dialogic reading may be especially helpful for children who live in poverty.

The first replication study of the effects of dialogic reading was conducted in a setting that was not only economically distinct from the original suburban, middle-to-upper socioeconomic status families, but also culturally...
distinct. In this way, any results obtained could be said to be robust across several important contextual elements. The extension project was conducted with two year-old children attending a public day care in Tepic, Mexico. The families in this study had an average income of only $192 per month. The intervention consisted of dialogic reading as described above, using five books from the series, Teo Descubre el Mundo (Teo Discovers the World). The results of this project showed that compared to children who received arts and crafts instruction, children who participated in dialogic reading had improved scores on a variety of language measures—including expressive and receptive vocabulary.

Closer to home (in Suffolk County, New York), we began the work of extending dialogic reading to children in Head Start and their families. As in the Mexican study, the “home base” for dialogic reading was not the home, but was the preschool. This new work was of broader scope, including 167 four year olds across four Head Start centers in the first wave of evaluation. Half of the group received the regular Head Start curriculum, and half were involved in a yearlong, dialogic reading based emergent literacy curriculum. Children receiving the intervention engaged in regular small group dialogic reading with their teachers. These same children took home the book that was being used in the classroom each week for use at home. Given the more advanced developmental stage of the children in this project (four year olds vs. two year olds), an additional, whole class intervention component included a half year program focused on teaching letter sounds. At the end of the school year, results showed large and educationally significant effects of the intervention on writing and concepts of print. Effects on language depended on how involved the parents were, with children of very involved parents showing large improvements in language skills.

The next school year (1993-1994), we conducted a replication study with 153 children in four different Head Start centers, and obtained similarly impressive results at the end of the school year. Effects of dialogic reading have been found in at least five other studies as well, including projects in Nashville, Tennessee and Worcester, Massachusetts.

To date, children in the New York studies have been followed through second grade. Effects of the dialogic reading-based emergent literacy curriculum were observed through the end of kindergarten, but were not evident on word reading or word attack assessments at the end of first or second grades. Several explanations for the lack of continued observed effects are plausible. One is that the public school curriculum brought the children who did not receive our intervention “up to speed,” so that they were no longer different from the children who had participated in dialogic reading. Another possible explanation is that dialogic reading is about building a habit of shared reading, engaging children in the world of picture books, and enjoying the experience of stories—outcomes that are not captured in word attack tests, but may nonetheless be of some benefit to children. Future studies might include assessments of these more nuanced effects, such as attitudes toward learning and sense of mastery in storytelling.

CONCLUSION

Dialogic reading is innovative in that young children learn to become storytellers. Done well, dialogic reading not only improves emergent literacy, but it is fun, and among some children may foster a love of reading. By itself, dialogic reading with preschoolers will not produce a nation of readers. But it can be a valuable component in a family’s, school’s, or nation’s strategy to start moving in the right direction.

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REFERENCES

P: Just me and my little sister. (Shows cover, begins to turn pages) Who do you see in this picture?
C: Mama.
P: That’s right. What is the mom holding?
C: Broom.
P: The mom is holding a broom. What does she use it for?
C: The floor gets clean.
P: That’s right! Mom is using the broom to clean the floor. (Reading): My little sister wanted to go to the park. Mom was too busy, so I said, “I’ll take her.” So we went to the park, just me and my little sister. What do you see on this page?
C: Critter.
P: Critter is on the page. She is pulling a wagon. What color is it?
C: Red.
P: It’s a red wagon. What parts does it have?
C: Wheels. Sister.
P: The wagon has wheels, and yes—Sister is getting a ride in the wagon. What else is in the wagon?
C: Ball.
P: Sister is holding a basketball— that’s right. My little sister wanted to play basketball, but the hoop was too high. Look at all the animals! What kind of animal is this (points)?
C: Mousy.
P: That’s right. That is a mouse. Now I’ll find one. See, this is an alligator. What game are all these animals playing?
C: Basketball.
P: They are playing basketball. Good. She wanted to play jump rope, so I showed her how. What is Critter jumping over?
C: Jumper
P: He is jumping over a jump rope. Just like (child’s older sister) does. What happened to Critter and the jump rope over here?
C: (Laughs) Fell down and tangled.
P: That’s right! He got tangled up by the jump rope!
C: Funny Critter.
P: Critter does look funny. Look, even Sister is laughing.
Then she wanted to play hide-and-seek, but she got lost. Where is Sister?
C: Hiding in bush.
P: Sister is hiding in the bush—why is she hiding?
C: It’s a game!
P: That’s right—they are playing hide-and-seek! My little sister climbed to the top of the jungle gym. I had to help her get down. This jungle gym has two colors. What colors do you see?