

# What Works

An Introductory Teacher  
Guide for Early Language  
and Emergent Literacy  
Instruction



Based on the National Early  
Literacy Panel Report



## → SHARED READING



### What Is Shared Reading?

**Shared reading** is a reading strategy where the adult involves a child or small group of children in reading a book that may or may not introduce conventions of print and new vocabulary, or encourage predictions, rhyming, discussion of pictures, and other interactive experiences.

Although shared reading is often recommended as the single most important thing adults can do to promote

the emergent literacy skills of young children, a summary of studies that examined the effect of shared reading on young children's emergent literacy skills called into question the positive effects often claimed for reading or sharing picture books with young children (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). Accordingly, the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) examined the effects of interventions that primarily or entirely focused on shared reading. The various approaches to shared reading in the studies reviewed by the NELP differed in their interactive focus. Shared reading can be as simple as an adult reading a book to a child, but can also be an opportunity for teachers to introduce new words in the context of the book content or story, explain

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the definition, and embed those same words in extended conversation about the book and in later conversations.

## What Are the Key Findings Regarding Shared Reading?

The NELP found that “sharing books with young children has a significant, substantial, and positive impact both on young children’s oral language skills and on young children’s print knowledge” (NELP, 2008, p. 155). Although a limited number of studies prevented the analysis of the impact of socio-economic status, ethnicity, or population density, the NELP concluded that shared reading is appropriate and effective for a very diverse group of young children. It worked equally well with children who were at risk of later reading difficulties and those who were not, as well as with younger and older children. Additionally, both parents and teachers can effectively implement shared reading when taught proven strategies.

Interventions that used a more interactive style of shared reading had a stronger impact on children’s oral language skills than did non-interactive approaches. In particular, dialogic reading, an approach where the adult tries to facilitate the child’s active role in telling the story, proved to be highly effective.

No studies provided evidence that shared reading by itself is sufficient for promoting children’s later conventional literacy skills, including their ability to read. Therefore, it is recommended that shared reading should be included with other early literacy instructional practices to provide the greatest impact for preparing children to be successful readers.

## Interactive Shared Reading

The overall evidence for shared reading supports approaches that are more intensive in frequency and interactive in their style. Interactive shared reading is a perfect example of the power of an integrated focus for learning – it’s a great way to intentionally include strategies for enhancing children’s oral language and print awareness. For example, teachers can use shared reading to introduce new concepts, boost vocabulary growth, and point out characteristics of print.

The shared reading process as described in effective studies included in the NELP Report were implemented one-on-one or in small groups. However, early childhood classroom teachers often read books aloud during circle time with the whole class. Until there is evidence of whether or not this is effective, it is recommended that teachers plan for and provide one-on-one and small group interactive shared reading opportunities in the early childhood classroom and incorporate similar strategies when reading to larger groups. While each child is less involved with the story in large group shared reading, teachers should continue to apply strategies that engage and hold children's interest, such as giving voices to the characters and reading with expression. Below is a description of types of things to do in an interactive shared reading experience.

### **Before reading:**

- Carefully select a book that has: rich narrative, interesting or novel content, rich detailed illustrations, appropriate and challenging vocabulary that includes new or unusual words, and the potential for different points of view.
- Read through the selection and identify places where you will introduce targeted vocabulary words. Plan how to define the words and identify objects or pictures that represent the words. Be sure to include unusual or infrequently used words.
- Before beginning to read, show objects and pictures as ways to introduce new words. Ask questions, such as “What is this?” and then “What can I do with this?” or “Tell me what you know about this?” Later, props that support the vocabulary words can be added to learning centers. For example, if reading *The Carrot Seed* by Ruth Krauss, the teacher might have available items such as seeds, a shovel, a rake, a watering can, and a carrot. An unusual word to teach could be *sprinkle*.

### **During reading:**

- Read expressively.
- Focus again on introduced vocabulary words, encouraging the children to identify the word and explain the word meaning within the context of the story.
- Ask questions to promote discussion about content to support listening

comprehension. The types of questions asked will depend on children's developmental skills. For example, some questions (such as "What is that?") elicit a brief response compared to questions that encourage a more narrative response (such as "Why do you think...?").

- Encourage participation by praising and supporting the child's response, "That's right. The puppy looks sad." and encourage more guided oral language practice with extension questions, such as "Why do you think he looks sad?"
- Follow this process at identified points during the shared reading. (Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992; Morrow, O'Connor, & Smith, 1990)

### **After reading:**

- Check listening comprehension with targeted questions and by having children retell elements of the story, remembering the sequence of events and important details. Allow children to use story props to re-enact the story.
- This is a great time for children to express opinions and make connections between events in the story and similar experiences they have had.
- To extend the concepts and themes in the book, provide related materials and activities. For example, with *The Carrot Seed*, children might look at a variety of seeds; make a book picturing seeds we eat, such as beans, corn, poppy seeds, nuts and peas; or do a planting or cooking activity. (Wasik & Bond, 2001)

Further ideas for actively engaging preschoolers in interactive shared book reading include repeated exposures to the same book; discussing new words and features of the book, such as the title, cover and pictures before book reading; and including experiences that extend the concepts and themes in the book after reading. For example, books related to food can suggest grocery shopping trips, cooking experiences or a meal at a restaurant, while books about animals might result in singing songs and saying animal rhymes or taking a walk in the neighborhood, a city park, or the zoo to observe a variety of animals.

## Dialogic Reading

One particularly effective form of interactive shared reading that showed significant results is dialogic reading (Whitehurst et al., 1988). Both teachers and parents can be trained with videotapes and practice reading experiences in short sessions to implement this strategy. The label “dialogic reading” implies a dialog or conversation while reading.

This strategy is based on three broad principles: (a) encourage the child to participate, (b) provide feedback to the child, and (c) adapt the reading style to the child’s growing linguistic abilities. An acronym to help adults remember the dialogic reading process is called **PEER**. **P**rompt the child with a question about the story, such as “What is that animal?” **E**valuate and **E**xpand on the child’s response. If the child says, “It’s a dog” you might say “Yes, it’s a dog called a dachshund.” **R**epeat the initial question to check that the child understands the new information. “So tell me what that animal is?” Finally, build upon the child’s interests and linguistic abilities by encouraging talk about other features of the book unfamiliar to the child, such as words, characters and concepts.

There are five basic types of prompts adults use to encourage dialog about a book. The word **CROWD** stands for the types of questions used in dialogic reading. This is not a quiz, but a way to engage the child in a conversation about the book. *Completion questions* encourage the child to finish a phrase or sentence in the story – “Brown bear, brown bear, \_\_\_\_?” *Recall questions* help check the child’s understanding of story content – “What did the brown bear see first?” *Open-ended questions* increase the amount of dialog about a book and focus on details encouraging a narrative response rather than a mere “yes” or “no” or nonverbal pointing. For example, you might ask a child to describe what is happening on a particular page. “*Wh*” *questions* (who, what, where, when and why) can help teach new vocabulary and stimulate a child’s use of language and novel speech. Finally, ask *distancing questions* that encourage children to connect the pictures and words in the book to experiences outside the story – “How is the puppy in this story like our dog, Spot?”

Books that are already familiar work well, since the dialogic reading strategy is not recommended for the first reading of a story. Storybooks with a rich

narrative and plenty of action work best, keeping in mind that the quantity of text needs to be less for a younger child. Books that include new words provide an opportunity to build vocabulary and the content supports learning about new information. Children are far more engaged if they find the book interesting and that is determined by topic as well as the use of rich detailed illustrations.

## Providing a Focus on Vocabulary through Shared Reading

A more intensive and intentional focus on vocabulary instruction can be included as part of shared reading routines in the early childhood classroom. The process for learning a new word typically includes several stages. The first stage for learning a word is when the word is totally new – “I never saw it before.” The next time a word is heard, the child might think, “I’ve heard it, but I don’t know what it means.” In the third stage, the child might recognize the word and know that it relates to information within a particular context. The final stage is when a word is solidly represented in the child’s vocabulary; when she has the feeling that “I know it!” Reaching this point is influenced by how many times a word is encountered, the type of word, and if the word is supported by visual or concrete associations. Some words are easier to learn and remember than others. Words that can be connected to something concrete are easier to understand and know than abstract words, so supporting the introduction of new words with visuals and concrete objects is important. This process for intentionally learning vocabulary can be incorporated into early childhood classrooms.

Definitional vocabulary – learning the meanings of words – is an essential part of the process for increasing children’s vocabulary. Specifically, teachers can explain, use simpler words, or provide a different context in order to help children understand the meaning of new words. Lower frequency words that are important for children to learn can be incorporated into instruction through conversations and interactive book reading where adults are modeling the use of words in more complex sentence structures. Within the shared reading experience, identify a word that is the focus for learning (note that there may be several words to focus upon). For instance, in Mo Willems book *Knuffle Bunny*, teachers might focus on the word *laundromat*. Talk about what the word means within the context of the story. In this

example, picture clues can help a child learn the meaning of *laundromat* if the child has no related prior experience. Encourage the child to understand this word within the broader context of prior knowledge or personal experiences. If the child has never been to a *laundromat*, the idea of doing laundry still may be familiar and spur discussion. Revisit the word within the shared reading experience, as it fits with the story, and also in discussion after the story. The word can be included while doing the family wash and a trip to a *laundromat* would be another way to establish clearer understanding.

New words that are learned in shared reading experiences can be extended into other activities occurring in the early childhood classroom. Repeated readings allow words to be heard and practiced. Then intentionally incorporate that word into conversations and other situations within the early childhood setting in order to provide the frequent use necessary for a child to “own” the new word.

## **Making Books Available in the Early Childhood Classroom**

To effectively promote children’s experiences with books in the early childhood classroom, a number and variety of books must be available for them to use. As a way for children to independently explore books and book-related materials, many classrooms have a library area. This area can include items, such as books, magazines, videos, audio-recorded stories, Big Books, view masters, felt board characters, and puppets. It also can include materials for creating books, such as paper, markers, glue, crayons, and pencils.

Because reading is generally a quiet activity, locate the library area where there is little traffic or noise. Make it comfortable with cushions, a sofa or soft chairs, or a rocker. Good lighting is important and an extra lamp might also provide a home-like atmosphere. If possible, display books with the covers showing, so children can see the selections without having to pull them off the shelf. Have an assortment of 25 – 30 picture books that represent a variety of types (stories, non-fiction, poetry, fairy tales, etc.) and levels, from wordless books or books with very few words to books with several sentences to a paragraph per page. Change the books in this area every few weeks so that children have time to revisit a favorite story as well as anticipate new books to explore. Local libraries typically allow teachers

to check out large numbers of books and often are willing to pull together a collection of specific titles or books related to a particular topic or theme. Notice books that seem to be child favorites and use that information to help with future selections. Bring in more books by the same authors, books that are similar in style or type, or that provide information about a topic of particular interest to you and the children.

Many classrooms have a lending library where parents and children can take books home for shared reading experiences. These can be library books, books that belong to your classroom, or purchased kits that include books with read-aloud suggestions and some kits that include materials to expand learning related to the book, such as a puppet, stuffed toy, or other related prop.

Books also can be integrated in other areas throughout the classroom. The block area might have a book with rich illustrations of buildings specific to your topic of learning. If you are studying transportation, you might include books with pictures of bridges, airports, garages, superhighways and railroads. Maybe you will want to include an instruction manual for building with Lego blocks. In the science area, you might have a book about animals or colors. If the dramatic play area has been turned into a beauty shop, you might include magazines with hairstyles. And for art, you might want books about famous artists that show their masterpieces, or books with illustrated directions for building a clay sculpture. These materials should all be introduced in order for children to know they are available.

As a way to reinforce book experiences, take five to ten minutes at the end of the day to discuss and summarize that day's story reading activities (Morrow, O'Connor, & Smith, 1990).

## Summary

Just reading aloud to children does not necessarily mean they will become successful readers. How a read-aloud is conducted is very important in developing young children's early language and literacy skills. Most importantly, reading aloud to children must be accompanied by other forms of intentional and effective instructional strategies.

Shared reading is a successful approach for advancing the development of young children’s oral language skills and print knowledge. It can be implemented with an individual child or with a small group of children. Both parents and teachers can provide shared reading experiences.

Interactive shared reading, an approach that attempts to engage the child in the reading experience, is more effective than a non-interactive approach. The adult plans in advance the best ways to engage the child, such as choosing specific words and skills to focus upon, pointing to elements of print, and including opportunities to check for listening comprehension.

An example of a highly effective interactive approach is called dialogic reading. To implement dialogic reading, adults encourage the child to participate in a conversation about a book by asking questions, thinking about the child’s response, and providing feedback that promotes and adapts to the child’s learning.

The limited number of studies in the shared reading category did not reveal if there are any other benefits to shared reading. The analysis of so few studies showed no evidence that shared reading promotes other early literacy skills or improves later conventional literacy skills. It is also important to note that learning about the impact of other factors on shared reading results, such as children’s age, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity; who implemented the shared reading strategies; if they are effective with large groups; and how long the programs lasted, will require more studies that monitor these characteristics. Based on current information, therefore, shared reading strategies are effective for a broad range of children.

## Resources for Strategies Supporting Shared Reading

### Publications:

- Ezell, H.K., & Justice, L.M. (2005). *Shared storybook reading: Building young children’s language and emergent literacy skills*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Fountas, I.C., & Pinnell, G.S. (1996). *Guided reading: Good first teaching for all children*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Morrow, L.M., & Gambrell, L.B. (2004). *Using children's literature in preschool: Comprehending and enjoying books*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Pearson Early Learning Group (2003). *Read together, talk together: A dialogic reading program for young children*. New York: Author.
- Weitzman, E., & Greenberg, J. (2002). *Learning language and loving it*. (2nd ed.). Toronto, Ontario: The Hanen Centre.

### **Trainings available through the National Center for Family Literacy:**

- Building Readers Academies
- Read Together, Reach for the Stars: Building Parents' Understanding of Dialogic Reading
- Preschool Parent Workshops to Go

### **Free online course(s):**

- *Building Readers: A Guide for Child Care Providers* – a free online course available from <http://literacynetwork.verizon.org/TLN/courses>
- *Selecting and Sharing Books with Young Children, Parts I and II* – a free online course available from <http://literacynetwork.verizon.org/TLN/courses>
- *Talking About Stories: A Technique to Build Young Children's Language and Literacy* – a free online course available from <http://literacynetwork.verizon.org/TLN/courses>