No fairytale... The benefits of the bedtime story

Joanna Blake and Nicholas Maiese on the links with language and cognitive development

Today’s parents are inundated with new solutions to help young children improve their reading ability. For parents hoping to raise a literate child, the best option may be to start reading together as early as eight months, because this has long been described as a vocabulary acquisition device (Ninio, 1983). More recently, studies have shown that children who started school with a larger vocabulary have a distinct advantage; and vocabulary is the best predictor of later reading comprehension (Biemiller, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). In a long-term study, book reading in the home between the ages of one and three years was associated with reading comprehension at seven years (Wells, 1985). In a very large study of low-income families, frequent book reading by English-speaking mothers was related to children’s vocabulary at 14 and 24 months and to comprehension at 36 months, while the last was also true for Spanish-speaking mothers (Raikes et al., 2006).

Read to them early

Shared reading as early as eight months, but not as early as four months, has been found to predict later expressive language scores at 12 and 16 months (Karrass & Braungart-Ricker, 2005). This suggests that parents should bring out the books before their children can understand what is being read to them, but not before the infant can sit up. The fact that reading to a preverbal infant has a bearing on later language is surprising to many of us who would have thought that shared book reading should begin when we hear the infant’s first words, usually about one year of age.

Starting to read early (by eight or nine months) may also make parents more sensitive to their infants’ developing language abilities and specific vocabulary. They may then structure interactions so that they are at an appropriate level for the child (Fletcher & Reese, 2005).

Not all storytellers are equal

Most of us do read to our children. In a large American study of mostly middle-class families, 81 per cent of parents reported that they read to their two-year-olds four or more times a week (Huebner, 2000); and half of the mothers in a study of low-income families reported reading every day to their 14-month-olds (Raikes et al., 2006). But not all of us are born to be Hans Christian Andersen. Most of us need a little guidance to make our shared reading effective.

In a series of studies, Whitehurst and his colleagues (e.g. Whitehurst et al., 1985) have shown that parents should bring out the books before their children can understand what is being read.


Karrass, J., & Braungart-Rieker, J.M. (2005). Effects of shared parent-infant book reading on early vocabulary development. Tomasetto & Todd, 1983). We found (Blake et al., 1996) that more labelling occurred when parent and infant were both looking at the same picture in a book, so that parents understood that infants should be looking at the relevant picture to benefit from the label.

Attention-getting statements to infants were frequent (Blake et al., 2006); and pointing, itself, may serve to recruit attention (Sénéchal et al., 1995). An example of an attention-getting statement, followed by a label, is ‘OK, look. There’s a worm’. Game-like animating activities can also be used to keep infants’ attention on the book (Blake et al., 2006; Sénéchal et al., 1995). Such animating activities include animal noises to pictures in the book and other noises, such as ‘This is how airplanes fly – wooh, wooh’.

Interestingly, when young children’s eye movements are monitored while looking at the printed text and illustrations of books on a computer screen, they fixate on the pictures and not on the print. Furthermore, when the person reading the text highlights details, the children’s attention to these details in the illustration increases (Evans & Saint-Aubin, 2003).

With older infants and two-year-olds, labelling may cede its importance to positive feedback, questions, and relating the book events to the child’s experience as the child’s language develops. Positive feedback is simply the next logical step to effective labelling. Instead of pointing and labelling to a two-year-old, a mother points and asks for a label (‘What’s that?’). The child responds ‘Ernie’, and her mother says ‘Ernie, right’.

For the two-year-olds, parental questions about the book and imitations of the children’s statements are also related to their language (Blake et al., 2006). For example, a parent reading a book about monkeys may ask ‘What do monkeys do?’ An example of imitation is that the child says ‘A big boat, and father repeats ‘A big boat’. Since imitation is a form of feedback, these results are consistent with those of Whitehurst and his collaborators stressing the importance of open-ended questions and feedback.

Parental verbalisations that relate the events in the book to the child’s experience are also found to be important for their vocabulary and the complexity of their language (Blake et al., 2006). For example, a parent reading a story about a farm may relate the story to the child’s world by commenting ‘Chickens. Look, like Grandpa’s chickens’.

Creating a more literate child
Shared reading is not the only measure found to improve language scores. The age at which reading began, the number

What makes a good storyteller?
of picture books in the home, and the frequency of trips to the library with the child—in other words, the whole literacy environment—were also found to be key factors (Payne et al., 1994). A positive literacy environment was also more likely to encourage the initiation of shared reading by the child—interest in reading is an important variable that has not received a great deal of attention. Two-year-old children whose parents were given strategies to encourage their interest in reading (e.g., treating reading together as a special time or allowing the child to choose the book) were observed to choose more books and to ask to be read to more often than a comparison group not given these strategies (Ortiz et al., 2001). As a result, preschoolers who display greater interest are likely to be read to more frequently (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). Cross-cultural differences may be an area for further research: most Peruvian mothers when reading to their three-year-olds adopt a storytelling style in which they use informative narrative utterances, whereas most American mothers use a storybuilding style in which they co-construct the narrative with their child (Melzi & Caspe, 2005). The American children consequently talked more than the Peruvian children.

Moving beyond vocabulary

Shared book reading does more than improve language skills; it also provides a context for the development of narrative skills, that is, retelling the sequence of goal-directed actions. Also, when mothers read, they often focus on characters’ feelings. As the explanations of character actions increased with children’s age from two to three, so too did the focus of children’s utterances (McArthur et al., 2005).

Further, Spanish mothers’ use of cognitive or emotional mental state terms (such as ‘think’ and ‘angry’) during book reading has also been related to four- and five-year-olds’ understanding of the beliefs of others (Adrian et al., 2005). Cross-cultural differences may be an area for further research: most Peruvian mothers when reading to their three-year-olds adopt a storytelling style in which they use informative narrative utterances, whereas most American mothers use a storybuilding style in which they co-construct the narrative with their child (Melzi & Caspe, 2005). The American children consequently talked more than the Peruvian children.

Finally, sharing a bedtime story with a child may strengthen emotional bonds between parent and child, soothe an upset child, lengthen a child’s attention span, and make the child feel special after the birth of a sibling. These non-cognitive benefits need further investigation.

The verdict

The benefits of shared book reading with young children have been debated at length, and not all are convinced. Two meta-analyses of several studies have suggested that only 8 per cent of the range in preschoolers’ language and literacy skills is due to the frequency of parental reading (Bus et al., 1995; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). More recent work suggests, however, that shared book reading beginning in the preverbal months seems to have valuable benefits for young children’s language development.

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References