

CHAPTER 1

Using Read-Alouds to Build Early Literacy and Language Success

Read-alouds set up children for literacy success. Research and practice show that reading aloud to young children is the best way to prepare children for learning to read and to keep them reading as they learn and grow. Reading aloud helps children develop the critical literacy and language skills that they will use in school and throughout their lives.

Why Read-Alouds Are the Perfect Context

Reading aloud is often children's first entrance into discovering the wonderful world of literacy. It creates a unique bonding experience between the reader and the listener only shared through the pages of a book. As parents, caregivers, and teachers read aloud they nurture children's love of both the written and spoken word. Read-alouds stimulate children's imagination and curiosity as they follow the twists and turns of a plot or discover new facts and ideas. It also helps children develop the important oral language skills that will help them learn to read and write on their own. See Figure 1.1 for additional benefits of read-alouds. Ultimately, read-alouds develop children's lifelong appreciation for reading.

Read-alouds are also the common thread that ties all early childhood classrooms together. There's a good reason for this. Research is especially rich on the impact and effectiveness of reading aloud and the research is abundantly clear: young children who are read to on a consistent basis are provided the tools for future literacy and language success (e.g., Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1995; Wells, 1986). The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (IRA/NAEYC) concur and state, "The single most important activity for

- Provide exposure to rich, authentic literature.
- Develop children’s motivation and appreciation for reading.
- Provide authentic opportunities for parents and teachers to model what good readers do.
- Develop children’s understandings of the forms and functions of print.
- Provide opportunities for language and vocabulary expansion.
- Develop children’s imagination, curiosity, and comprehension of text.

FIGURE 1.1. Benefits of read-alouds.

building these understandings and skills essential for reading success appears to be reading aloud to children” (1998, p. 198).

Key Targets to Develop through Read-Alouds

The research literature argues that read-alouds can enhance essential emergent literacy and language skills. It also suggests that early childhood educators can maximize the potential of read-alouds when they realize the gains that can be made through targeted instruction of these skills during the read-aloud experience. These include read-alouds as a rich context for fostering children’s oral language and vocabulary development, comprehension development, and print and alphabet awareness, as well as phonological awareness. See Figure 1.2 for the literacy and language target skills that can be developed in read-alouds. In the following sections we provide a brief overview on each of these key language and literacy skills and the rationale for enhancing them in the read-aloud experience.

Developing Oral Language and Vocabulary

Oral language and vocabulary lay the foundation for young children’s literacy and language development. Language development is natural. Young children are

- Oral language development
- Vocabulary development
- Comprehension development
- Print awareness
- Alphabet awareness
- Phonological awareness

FIGURE 1.2. Skills developed through read-alouds.

naturally hardwired to learn the language they hear in their environment, and they tend to progress through predictable stages and milestones of language development fairly consistently across all populations. However, the quantity and quality of children's language and vocabulary is not natural. A landmark research study by Hart and Risley (1995) found that children are exposed to vastly different language and vocabulary experiences and that these experiences and exposures are highly connected to socioeconomic status. In effect, children from low-income homes remain well behind their more economically advantaged peers when they enter school and as they progress through school. By grade 1 the gap between less and more economically advantaged students is approximately 1,200 words; however, by grade 3 the gap increases to approximately 2,500 words. The good news is that if teachers make concerted and conscientious efforts to bolster children's language and vocabulary, this gap can be narrowed early.

A well-documented practice that holds much potential for accomplishing this goal is reading aloud. Research suggests that read-alouds that occur frequently and contain high levels of adult-child discussion surrounding the story and the vocabulary words targeted within the book can increase children's listening and speaking vocabulary (e.g., Aram, 2006; Elley, 1989; Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005; Robbins & Ehri, 1994).

Early childhood educators who are aware of the rich and meaningful potential to build language and vocabulary during the read-aloud experience engage in a number of activities that can support vocabulary growth. These educators can be observed asking open-ended questions, repeating, expanding, and recasting children's utterances, and taking on the role of listener so that the child becomes the storyteller (e.g., Whitehurst et al., 1994). They also seize the vocabulary potential within the read-alouds, conducting rich and meaningful discussions about words that they have chosen from the book so that children can add these words to their vocabulary stores (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 2007; Walsh & Blewitt, 2006; Wasik & Bond, 2001).

These collective practices are important for early childhood educators, particularly those who work with a language- and vocabulary-disadvantaged population. However, such practices do require thoughtful planning. Read-alouds should be carefully planned and structured with the goal to increase the amount of talk surrounding the events of the read-aloud and the words within the book so that children are provided consistent opportunities to grow their language and vocabulary.

Developing Print and Alphabetic Awareness

Another essential component of young children's literacy development lies in the area of print and alphabetic knowledge (e.g., Justice, Bowles, & Skibbe, 2006; Lovelace & Stewart, 2007; Morris, Bloodgood, & Perney, 2003). In order for children to move into literacy and reading development they must possess critical skills such as print- and book-reading knowledge (e.g., left-to-right directionality of print), concept

of word (ability to match the written word with the spoken word), and alphabetic knowledge (knowing the features and names of the letters of the alphabet). The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) found that in addition to phonological awareness, print knowledge was one of the strongest predictors of a child's early success in reading (2007). However, growth in print awareness is highly dependent upon exposure to and engagement with various print functions and forms (Neuman, 1999).

The role of early childhood educators is critical for the development of this component of literacy as well. Early childhood educators can optimize the potential of read-alouds and provide these multiple exposures to written language, specifically in the area of print and alphabet awareness. Early childhood educators who are aware of the potential to target print and alphabet awareness during the read-aloud experience can be observed modeling concepts such as left-to-right and top-to-bottom progression, tracking print, differentiating between a letter and a word, and drawing attention to specific letters of the alphabet (IRA/NAEYC, 1998; Pullen & Justice, 2003; Uhry, 2002). They also optimize the powerful potential of read-alouds and encourage children to become active, rather than passive, in the event. In this respect, children can often be observed coming up to the book, most often big books, to point out and display their print and alphabet awareness knowledge. These experiences not only develop children's sense of accomplishment and pride but they help to pave the road toward becoming a successful reader.

Developing Phonological Awareness

Read-alouds provide rich and playful opportunities for children to focus attention on the sound structure of language—phonological awareness. Phonological awareness refers to a child's ability to reflect on and manipulate the sounds in our language, including rhymes, syllables, initial sounds, onset–rimes, and, finally, individual phonemes in words (Adams, 1990; Vellutino & Scanlon, 1987). This awareness requires children to switch attention from the meanings of words to the sounds of words. As children move through these elements of phonological awareness they realize that language is made up of words, words are made up of sounds, or phonemes, and these sounds are connected to letters and letter patterns. Phonological awareness lays this critical foundational for children to learn spelling–sound correspondences (Adams, 1990). Essentially, phonological awareness helps children to learn to read and spell.

Many children become aware of early forms of phonological awareness incidentally through daily experiences with nursery rhymes, rhyming poems and books, and word play (Lonigan, Burgess, Anthony, & Barker, 1998). However, because phonological awareness exerts such a strong impact on children's short- and long-term reading development, it's best not to leave exposures to this skill to chance (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Research findings on phonological awareness suggest that children in the emergent literacy stage with the strongest phonological awareness are most likely to become the strongest and most successful readers. Conversely, children in

this stage with the poorest phonological awareness are likely to become the poorest readers (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Juel, 1988; Stanovich, 1986). The heartening news is that if phonological deficits are targeted early in children's reading career, they are amenable to instruction (Adams, 1990; NAEYC/IRA, 1998; National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000).

Read-alouds are an ideal context in which to develop these critical phonological awareness skills. Early childhood educators who are aware of the potential to target phonological awareness during the read-aloud experience can be observed calling children's attention to rhymes, syllables, and beginning sounds and alliteration, as well as letter-sound correspondences in words. These consistent exposures to phonological awareness go a long way in developing children's awareness of the sound structure of language. Taken together, these findings indicate that targeted attention during the context of the read-aloud experience provides multiple opportunities for children to develop phonological awareness, a necessary precursor to unlocking the code in their first reading and spelling attempts (NRP, 2000; Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

Developing Comprehension

Comprehension is the reason for reading. Children's reading success and achievements will be measured according to whether they can derive meaning from print (Snow, 2002). The read-aloud experience presents the perfect place to foster children's comprehension development. It provides a time for meaningful adult-child and peer-peer exchanges and active participation surrounding the reading event. These discussions occur before, during, and after reading the book and work toward enhancing children's comprehension and sense of text structure (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007; Pressley & Hilden, 2002). Young children may not have the capability to read complex books independently but they can certainly listen to a book with a complex plot and engage in thoughtful discussion.

It's important to keep in mind that rich adult-child and peer-peer discussion doesn't happen by accident. Early childhood educators who optimize the potential for discussion that targets children's comprehension model analytical thinking and ask questions that reflect children's interest and have many potential responses, rather than just one correct answer. They carefully plan the read-aloud to include predictions, open-ended questions, questions that connect to children's lives and experiences, questions that make connections between characters and acts of different books, and require children to reflect on what was read to construct meaning before, during, and after the reading event (Pressley & Hilden, 2002). In effect, they model that reading is thinking. They also require children to be actively engaged in the read-aloud so that children learn that reading is thinking.

Another technique for developing children's comprehension is through repeated readings of the same book. It's certainly true that children love to have their favorite book read time and time again. This practice is assumed to build a sense of comfort and familiarity. This love of repetition also has its advantages in the context of

storybook reading—it fosters comprehension. Children who have been exposed to repeated readings of one book gradually increase the sophistication of their responses after each subsequent reading (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). They can be observed providing responses that are more interpretive and elaborative and making more judgments about the characters, events, and resolutions (e.g., Bus, 2001). Also, planned repeated readings engage children in rich discussions that increase their expressive and oral language (Trachtenburg & Ferruggia, 1989). Truly, carefully planned read-alouds are one of the best ways to develop young children’s comprehension of text. Engaging in multiple or repeated readings of one book may be the most effective way to ensure children are provided with consistent opportunities to derive meaning from print.

Final Thoughts

Read-alouds are a highly valued adult–child literacy experience—shared both at home and in the classroom. It’s often children’s first experience with literacy and fosters positive attitudes and motivation toward wanting to be a reader. We also know that read-alouds hold the potential to build children’s literacy and language skills. These skills, including oral language and vocabulary development, print and alphabet awareness, phonological awareness, and comprehension have asserted themselves as critical areas needed for children’s literacy success. Ensuring that children are provided with targeted instruction of these skills in read-alouds require educators to plan and reflect. In the remaining chapters of this book, we provide you with the necessary knowledge and tools to assist you in making the most out of your very next read-aloud.