

Intentional Children's Book Readings for Powerful Purposes

Different children's books open windows on different kinds of learning for children. Ascertaining the qualities of a book helps in understanding how a particular book may best be used with children.

Many children's books are full of repeating language and rhyme. For children who notice these structures, the story and even the print itself becomes highly predictable. For example, in a story such as "Brown Bear, Brown Bear" children can use the repetition and rhyme to memorize the lines. As they become attuned to print they can use this knowledge to figure out the patterns of the print as well. Other books are full of rhymes and sound play, such as "Crocodile Beat." These books help children become attuned to the sounds of the English language. The best of these sort are lyrical in their rhythms and rhymes. We might call this first class of books "print and sound pattern books." Because of their rhythms and rhymes they can be quite useful in building phonological awareness. Due to their predictability they are often also valuable for supporting children's learning print awareness and alphabet knowledge.

However, these books are often rather shallow as stories. That is, they usually have little character development and a very straightforward plot if one at all. That means they are not necessarily engaging as literature and do not provide children with the opportunity to do deep thinking about complex situations. These texts have little call for background knowledge and seldom require a child to use comprehension strategies to make inferences. Once again "Brown Bear, Brown Bear" is a case in point. No "Brown Bear" reader is intrigued with the red bird or struggles to understand the children's motivation in noticing all the animals.

Other children's books do provide these opportunities. Stories such as "Peter's Chair" or "One Morning in Maine" are engaging because of the experience we have with nuanced characters in problems and situations that we enjoy thinking about, that may even puzzle us on first read. To fully understand these stories we often need to get inside the character, imagine the scene, compare the situation to one we have experienced, or in some other way do some deep thinking. These inferences are challenging for children but, once they begin to experience them, engaging in their own right. We might truly call this group "story books." These texts, used well, can deepen children's ability to comprehend stories. They are often also rich sources of new vocabulary and expanded background knowledge.

This dichotomy is not absolute. There are certainly some books with lyrical print and sound patterns that also have resonant stories. And some large numbers of children's books really aren't good at either of these things. Others, such as nonfiction books, are about other things entirely.

But if we recognize when this distinction applies, we can use it to make purposeful choices of books, making sure we have an appropriate balance of each. Children benefit from both the print and sound knowledge of "print and sound" books and from the more meaning-focused (comprehension and vocabulary) challenges of "story books." If we use these books in ways that highlight these qualities, we can create delightful and powerful book reading experiences for young children.

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Support for Vocabulary Learning in Book Readings

Help children learn words and what they mean through...

Explicit Strategies

- Directly define the word
- Sets up contrast with another word
- Links to another word or concept
- Uses analogy, notes similarity to another object or experience
- Show object or picture
- Encourage children to say the word

Implicit Techniques

- Point to the picture
- Employ facial expressions
- Make use of gestures
- Use tone of voice
- Say word slowly and clearly

Strategies that Support Story Comprehension

Summarizing

Summing up, going over the main points

- Asking children “what did you learn” questions, such as “What did you learn about what raccoons like to eat?”
- Helping children notice and identify key characters in a story
- Linking story event (i.e. what a character does) to character’s emotions or plans
- Identifying and reviewing a particular character’s plans and actions so far
- Making the sequence of the story explicit by describing overall story events; highlighting main events; or supporting children in recalling the story in sequence.

Clarifying

Making something in the story clear that might be confusing to a young child

- Clarifying setting (time of day, time of year, location) of story
- Helping children distinguish fact and fiction (e.g. what character really did as opposed to what character imagined self doing, or dreamed about) Clarifying story events (making sure children realize what happened)
- Identifying or reviewing change in situation/setting/time in story
- Identifying what story character sees (physical vantage point)
- Explain and clarify points of confusion
- Guide and inform – “story explication”

Using Prior Knowledge

Using information that children have learned elsewhere (in their own lives, in another story, etc) to help understand the story

- Relate children’s experiences (or your experiences, if you explain them) to story events and character motivations
- Comparing setting, event, or character’s actions in current book to a story with which children are already familiar. You might ask the children if a story reminds them of another story they have read or make the comparison yourself.
- Supplying background knowledge (knowledge about physical, biological and social worlds) to help children understand what happens in a story
- Use what you or what children know about the physical world to predict or understand events

Inferring

Reaching a conclusion about something that you are not directly told in the story but that you can make a guess at based on some information in the story

- “why do you think...
- “how do you think he felt?”
- “what might she have been doing?
- “what might have happened if...?”
- Identifying and/or reviewing character’s thoughts and feelings
- Linking story event (i.e. what a character does) to character’s emotions or plans
- Review what a character said to draw inference about character’s thoughts or motive.

Asking Questions

Approaching the story with questions in mind that help the reader focus on what they want to find out

- Generating questions (especially before reading something)
- Answering questions
 - “What was she doing?”
 - “What is happening here?”
 - “”what did the kittens and the puppy do next?”

Thinking Aloud

Sharing thoughts and questions to cue the children as to what they might think about, and also modeling being an engaged reader

- “I wonder...” “I’m thinking maybe...”
- ”Prompting children to think about what a character thinks or feels and to use this knowledge gained early in a story to judge character’s reaction to an event later in the story