
Early literacy: The essentials

Part 2. Sharing books and asking questions



Editor's note: This is the second of a four-part series on emergent literacy: supporting children as they learn to read and write. Part one addresses language and conversation skills. It is available online at www.childcarequarterly.com/fall05_story1.html. Part 3 will examine phonological awareness and alphabet activities; the final piece will review tools for supporting emergent reading and writing, and assessment.



You've been to the library and chosen a book. The children are gathered and comfortable, and you begin to read, "Little brothers can be a lot of trouble...." You're thrilled when you glance up from the text. The children are focused, attentive, and eager. And Jeremy and Jessica, twins with a challenging younger brother, are engrossed.



You know it's important to read aloud—often and with enthusiasm. But what's the difference between reading a book and using quality children's literature to promote literacy? The impact of book sharing—and the key to early literacy development—depends on how you prepare before, during, and after you read.

Four fundamentals

Lilian Katz (1988) identified four learning fundamentals for children: knowledge, skills, dispositions, and feelings. Each connects directly to a child's experiences with literature, and a single book—like *My Little Brother* referenced above—can strengthen all four.

- **Knowledge** is acquired through the senses, personal experiences, and skillful direction from a caring adult. Example: knowledge of a banana.
- **Skills** are gained through practice—first under someone's direction and then independently. Example: peeling a banana.

- **Dispositions** are "habits of the mind" that can become lifelong traits like curiosity, neatness, and perseverance. Example: a banana whose peel is placed in a garbage can.
- **Feelings** are an emotional response to an experience. Example: the enjoyment of eating a banana.

GIVE CHILDREN A PURPOSE FOR LISTENING.

Consider how these fundamentals apply to reading. Background knowledge, the skill of decoding and understanding words, wanting to read, and feeling proud of the ability to read—these fundamentals are the hallmarks of literacy success. "Emphasizing knowledge and skills to the exclusion of dispositions and feelings results in an illiterate population" (Jalongo 2004). Similarly, emphasizing dispositions and feelings over knowledge and skill can hamper reading fluency.



Choosing books

The quality of the books you share will affect how well you bridge a book's entertainment and educational qualities. Because more children's picture books are published today than ever before, it can be harder to choose the best.

Be sure to include a variety of types, or *genres*, of books—fiction and nonfiction. Each offers unique ways to examine and learn all kinds of things. For your classroom library, include books from each of the categories listed below. The examples are traditional favorites from each genre. Don't forget about books in translation for children whose home language is one other than English.

Board books

- *Dressing* by Helen Oxenbury
- *I Make Music* by Eloise Greenfield
- *Moo Baa La La La* by Sandra Boynton

Wordless picture books

- *A Boy, a Dog, and a Frog* by Mercer Mayer
- *Good Dog, Carl* by Alexandra Day
- *Picnic* by Emily Arnold McCully
- *Do Not Disturb* by Nancy Tafuri

Fiction picture books

- *The Old Woman Who Named Things* by Cynthia Rylant
- *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter
- *Three Days on a River in a Red Canoe* by Vera Williams
- *Blueberries for Sal* by Robert McCloskey
- *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen

ABC books

- *On Market Street* by Anita and Arnold Lobel
- *B Is for Bulldozer* by M. Iwai
- *There's a Zoo in Room 22* by Judy Sierra

Counting books

- *Moja Means One* by Muriel and Tom Feelings
- *Ten, Nine, Eight* by Molly Bang
- *The Doorbell Rang* by Pat Hutchins
- *Counting Crocodiles* by Judy Sierra

Biographies and autobiographies

- *Hattie and the Wild Waves* by Barbara Cooney
- *My Name Is Georgia: A Portrait* by Jeanette Winter
- *Shaka: King of the Zulus* by Diane Stanley
- *Susana of the Alamo: A True Story* by John Jakes

Concept or information books

- *Fire Trucks* by Hope Irvin Marston
- *My Dentist* by Anne and Harlow Rockwell
- *They Call Me Woolly* by Keith Duquette

- The Magic School Bus series by Joanna Cole
- *I'll See You When the Moon Is Full* by Susi Gregg Fowler
- *The Best Word Book Ever* by Richard Scarry
- *Bugs* by N.W. Parker and Joan R. Wright
- *The Random House Children's Encyclopedia*
- *DK Merriam-Webster Children's Dictionary*

Rebus and recipe books

- *Pretend Soup* by Mollie Katzen
- *The House That Jack Built: A Rebus Book* by Elizabeth Falconer

Response and prediction books

- *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen
- *Where's Spot?* by Eric Hill
- *Sheep in a Jeep* by Nancy Shaw
- *The Napping House* by Audrey Wood

Beginning reader picture books

- *Three Up a Tree* by James Marshall
- *Frog and Toad Are Friends* by Arnold Lobel
- *Oliver Pig at School* by Jean Van Leeuwen

Traditional fantasy, fairy tales, and folk tales

- *American Tall Tales* by Mary Osborne
- *Frederick's Fables* by Leo Lionni
- *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* by John Steptoe
- *The Mitten: A Ukrainian Folktale* by Jan Brett

Poetry books

- *Barn Dance* by Bill Martin and John Archambault
- *A House Is a House for Me* by Mary Ann Hoberman
- *Read-Along Rhymes for the Very Young* by Jack Prelutsky



Sharing books

Whatever the genre, you can strengthen each of the four learning fundamentals and prepare children to be successful independent readers by following these guidelines:

- Prepare for reading. Make sure you're familiar with the book and can introduce it in a way that creates interest. Preparation will allow you to read the text while establishing eye contact with your listeners.

Practice new vocabulary—especially words in an unfamiliar language. Remember your voice is an important tool. Practice character voices, if appropriate, but avoid becoming overly dramatic. Let the book—not you—create the drama. Make sure the children can hear pleasure in your voice as you share information, a great story, or a rhyme.

- Position yourself so all children can see the book and your face. They will be eager to see the pictures and watch your expressions. Typically, the teacher sits in a chair while children sit on the floor. Practice holding the book in different ways until you can steady the book and turn pages smoothly.
- When the children (and you) are comfortable, show the book's cover. If the book is new to the children, take the time for a conversation about the cover art. Share the title of the book as well as the author's and illustrator's names. Ask: "What does the cover tell us about what's inside?"
- Read the pictures as you go through the book. Pictures in themselves tell a story, providing a sequence of images to absorb and follow. Pictures

allow children to bridge from familiar to unfamiliar objects.

- Give children a purpose for listening, to help them connect what they already know to the new information in the book. One way to do this is to invite children to predict what will happen next in the book. Another way is to ask: "Do you think this book is fiction or nonfiction?" Follow up with "How can you tell?"
- Make sure their background knowledge is solid enough to follow this new story. For example, a child in Texas may respond immediately to the Spanish and English of *Spicy Hot Colores/Colores Picantes*, but a child in Kentucky might need supportive information about iguanas and piñatas. Define key vocabulary and provide props—samples, pictures, or recordings—if necessary. This supportive information expands children's knowledge. According to the National Research Council, "Children who have a wide body of background knowledge and life experiences are more likely to succeed in reading" (1999).
- As you read the text, stop at strategic points to ask questions, make observations, and invite conversation. Encourage observations that reflect how children feel as they listen. Does the text make them eager to learn more about skyscrapers, wrap an orange *serape* around their shoulders, or eat a juicy apple?

Draw children's attention to the text. Use your finger to track text from left to right. If you are sharing a big book, use a pointer.



- Invite children to fill in the blanks and tell the story with you. This technique works particularly well with a predictable story like *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain* or *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See*. Focus attention on refrain text by applying removable highlighting tape.
- After reading, take the time to let children savor the ending. Then invite them to state their conclusions, describe new learning, test new vocabulary, or relate the story to their personal experiences.

Continue the conversation

If children are still interested, continue conversations about a book's theme. Use the PEER sequence (described on page 6) to move children toward an expanded vocabulary and increasingly complex sentences.

Invite the children to follow the pictures in the book and retell the story in their own words. Offer art supplies and encourage reflection and new representations. Let children act out the story, retell it with flannel-board characters, or recreate it with blocks.

Find ways to connect the book to the environment. For example, after reading *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, share three stuffed bears, three chairs, and three bowls. Encourage children to investigate the props and the mathematical theme in the story.

Invite children to tell, dictate, and then write their own endings to a book. Or encourage children to create a follow-up adventure for characters from a favorite book. What happens to baby bear on his first day at school, for example?

Finding quality books

When choosing quality literature for children, check these sources for guidance:

www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/. The Children's Literature Web Guide includes categories and tools for sharing books with children.

www.ala.org. The American Library Association Web site includes book lists and activities.

"Read it again: Choosing and using children's books," *Texas Child Care*, Spring 2002. This article describes different kinds of books and offers guidelines for choosing them.

Take simple field trips or plan classroom activities that reinforce a book's themes. For example, after reading *How a House Is Built*, visit a construction site. Or after sharing *Bunny Cakes*, plan a cooking activity. Use these experiences to invite questions, make observations, and expand vocabulary.

Asking questions

Experienced teachers know they can strengthen literacy skills by occasionally asking questions about the story's action. The best questions are open-ended and asked at appropriate times.

Open-ended questions don't have simple yes or no answers. Instead, they broaden cognitive, language, and social skills by encouraging children to consider the story line, descriptive vocabulary, and relationships as they respond.





Open-ended questions invite children to share their insights and reflections. For example, in Anna Dewdney’s book *Llama Llama Red Pajama*, you might ask questions such as these: “Why do you think baby llama had red pajamas?” “What do you do when you have to be *patient*?” “Tell us why you think baby llama had a stuffed friend to sleep with?”

Questions like these help children relate a book to their own experiences—home life, fears, adventures, and friendships. While few U.S. children have seen a llama, most know and can describe the ways in which the baby llama character is like themselves. Every child will want to describe bedtime rituals in their own homes—and probably share a funny story about having to wait for a parent. They know the frustration of feeling ignored and the fear of being alone. They also know the satisfaction of using new, powerful words like *fret*, *moan*, *whimper*, *pout*, *weep*, *wail*, *tizzy*, *drama*, and *snuggle*.

In addition to making questions open-ended, consider when to ask them. Ideally, you will stop no more than two or three times in a story. Any more than that is overly disruptive and can become tedious.

Typically, you will read a favorite book several times. If so, vary the stopping point and the questions you ask.

Asking questions enables you to evaluate and expand children’s understanding of a book. *Starting Out Right* (Burns 1999) describes an easy-to-remember method known as **PEER**. Here’s how the method works:

A **P**arent or other adult asks a question while sharing a book with a child. The adult then **E**valuates the child’s response and **E**xpands on what the child has said. The adult **R**epeats the questions, continuing to assess and extend the child’s understanding.

Consider the PEER sequence in reading *Llama Llama Red Pajama*.

First reading:

Adult: What is baby llama doing?

Child: Calling for his mama.

Adult: Yes, the mama is washing dishes and baby llama hums a tune while he waits for her.

Second reading:

Adult: What is baby llama doing? Do you remember what baby llama does when he’s in his bed?

Child: Baby llama calls his mama and hums a tune while he waits.

Adult: Right. Do you remember what baby llama does next?

The conversation gives you some insight into what a child knows and remembers. It also stretches the child’s memory, vocabulary, social awareness, and background knowledge.

Reading for enjoyment

In a time when many schools emphasize drills and testing, it’s easy to overlook the fourth of Katz’s fundamentals—feelings. Let us never forget that good children’s literature is to be enjoyed. Children who enjoy their early literacy experiences will be more likely to succeed in building their reading skills and knowledge.

Talking about books

Consider the wealth of conversation topics and open-ended questions offered by *Llama Llama Red Pajama*.

- clothing
- color
- emotions
- vocabulary
- emotional needs
- chores
- rituals
- communication style
- animals
- humor
- living spaces

For this reason, avoid asking questions with right/wrong answers. Keep interruptions to a minimum so the story moves along. You might occasionally call attention to the letter *M*, but don't turn the story into a repetitive examination of letters and sounds.

Enjoyment, however, doesn't come at the expense of learning. A good book can be expanded into activities that give children information about themselves and the world. A good book gives you a window into children's knowledge, experiences, skills, feelings, and needs.

Resources

- Aarmeda, Verna. 1992. *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*. New York: Penguin.
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- Wells, Rosemary. 1997. *Bunny Cakes*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

Not using the library?

Mary R. Jalongo (2004) reports that many families are reluctant to borrow books from public libraries. As you encourage families to use libraries, consider and address these concerns:

- Worry over fees incurred by damage or loss of materials and overdue returns.
- Lack of experience and basic familiarity with library policies. For example, most libraries don't charge for services, most host story times, and few demand QUIET.
- Fear that ID requirements will alert authorities to immigration status or unpaid traffic fines.
- Lack of understanding of library services. Many people don't know about the many materials and services beyond books that libraries offer. Materials can include audio and video tapes, materials in languages other than English, captioned videos of picture books, and music recordings. Services may include summer reading clubs and language activities such as puppet shows.
- Transportation challenges. Larger cities have library branches in various neighborhoods, and some libraries have bookmobiles.
- Limited hours of operation. Funding shortages have forced many libraries to close on different days, open late, and close early.