

Promoting Young Children’s Early Language and Prereading Skills with Dialogic Reading

Amy R. Napoli, Early Childhood Extension Specialist

Victoria J. Johnson, Graduate Student

Reading aloud to children has been identified as the single most important activity for preparing children to become readers. Reading to children at a young age has many benefits. There are different styles of reading that can encourage children’s early language and prereading skills. This NebGuide introduces a specific strategy—dialogic reading—that caregivers (i.e., parents and teachers) can use to promote children’s prereading and language skills.

School readiness: skills that help prepare children for kindergarten. School readiness includes skills such as sustaining attention for at least 5 minutes, speaking in complete sentences, and reciting the alphabet.

The Importance of Early Reading

Reading with children early in life benefits them in many ways, including promoting their school readiness skills. In fact, children who are read to at home at least three times per week are nearly twice as likely to score in the top 25% of reading scores compared with children who are read to less than that. Reading aloud to children helps them develop a variety of skills. It helps them learn new words, exposes them to new ideas, helps develop language skills, strengthens their reading comprehension, and encourages their imagination. Each of these skills is important as children develop more advanced skills and become readers. Reading with children promotes important language and prereading skills while also supporting the bond caregivers share with children.



Prereading skills: skills that help children prepare for reading. This includes things like knowing how to hold a book, knowing the names of letters, and being able to identify rhyming words.

Encouraging Prereading Skills

Positive experiences with books help children develop prereading skills. An important way to support children’s participation when reading aloud to them is by choosing books that children find interesting and then using shared, interactive reading practices. There are many ways to encourage these reading experiences, including:

- shared reading (reading out loud to children and exploring books together),
- labeling pictures in books,

- allowing children to play with the books and “read” them,
- responding positively to children’s interests, and
- demonstrating how to interact with books (e.g., the direction we read, telling the difference between words and pictures, holding a book, turning the pages).

Young children are developing skills for reading long before reading actually begins. These read-aloud experiences encourage the development of those skills as caregivers share stories with them.

What is Dialogic Reading?

One way to enhance reading experiences with young readers and encourage prereading skills is by using dialogic reading. **Dialogic reading is a style of reading in which the child takes the lead and becomes the storyteller.** The caregiver listens, asks questions, and follows the child’s interests. Having the child lead may feel unnatural at first, but with some practice, it can easily be incorporated into reading routines. Dialogic reading promotes vocabulary and prereading skills and may help engage children who have a hard time sitting down and listening to a book. The caregiver engages in dialogic reading by encouraging the child to talk, and using modeling and expanding strategies. When used while considering the child’s abilities and interests, dialogic reading can assist in the development of prereading skills.

Encouraging children to be the storyteller. Perhaps the most unnatural aspect of this type of book reading is encouraging children who cannot yet read to be “readers.” In dialogic reading, adults support children in taking the lead instead of the adult leading. Allowing young children to be in charge during storybook reading can foster their interest in books. This may feel more natural if a familiar book is used. Dialogic reading emphasizes repeated readings of the same book. Children can take the lead more with each reading as they become more familiar and comfortable with a book. More challenging prompts can also be introduced with each reading.

When children become the storytellers, it provides a unique opportunity for caregivers to engage with children on their level. Whether children are hesitant or confident in telling the story, showing an interest in their version of the story reinforces their ability to take an active role. Following children’s lead in this process is an important way of encouraging them—if children want to take the story in a particular direction, going along with it and asking

questions can maintain their interest. Taking the lead can happen in simple ways, such as the child pointing to and naming pictures or telling their version of the story using their own words. Allowing children to interact with books in this way can increase their positive association with reading and give them a feeling of accomplishment.

Caregiver as an active listener. Playing the role of listener looks very different when the roles of adults and children are switched. Although the adult’s most important job becomes listening, this listening role is a very active one. It includes asking questions and responding in ways that encourage children to continue engaging with the story. It also includes providing feedback to introduce or reinforce vocabulary or to help the child to think deeper about the story. Active listening facilitates the interaction and models skills that can promote reading comprehension.

The most important part of being an active listener is making the reading experience fun. Interacting with the book as the storyteller should be an enjoyable experience for the child. For instance, taking turns where the adult reads one page and the child the next can be a fun activity. Active listening can also mean offering help when needed, such as suggesting the right word if the child seems stuck or leading the child with a question such as, “Where do you think they will go?”

Active listening can also be a great way to expand children’s vocabulary. When children name an object or have an idea, repeating what they say reinforces the correct use of the word and builds their confidence in using it again. After repeating the child’s word, caregivers can offer new vocabulary, such as, “Yes, that is a lion. He is looking at the elephant. Can you say *elephant*?”

Repeating, expanding, and modeling. Repeating and expanding on what children say during reading not only shows them that the adult is interested, it also exposes them to more words. Essentially, it is all about responding to children in meaningful ways. Repeating the idea is a good way to introduce new vocabulary. For example, if the child says, “He climbed all the way to the top of the mountain,” replying with, “You are right. He climbed all the way to the *peak*” reinforces what the child said and also demonstrates the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Providing additional description is also a good way to expand. The child might say, “They climbed up the tree” and the adult can expand by replying, “Yes, two children climbed up the tall, green tree.”

When a child says something, the caregiver can take it a step further by modeling language, introducing new vocabulary, or expanding on what the child has said. This promotes language development and helps children learn

Table 1. Reading Prompts for Different Ages

Age	Recommended Prompts	Example
6 to 12 months	“Where” questions that children can answer by pointing encourage engagement before children can speak	Where is the cow? Can you touch the cow?
1 to 2 years	Prompts that require simple, spoken responses	What does the cow say?
2 to 3 years	Simple questions about the story	What did the cow do next?
3 to 4 years	Open-ended questions and prompts that encourage children to think and explain	How do you think the cow feels? Why do you think it feels that way?
4 to 5 years	Dialogic reading prompts (discussed below)	Have you ever seen a cow? That’s right, we saw a spotted cow on Grandma’s farm. What was it doing when we saw it?

new words. For example, if a child identifies a picture of a dog, the caregiver can respond in several ways:

- Repeat the word (“Yes, that is a dog!”)
- Offer new words (“That kind of dog is a Labrador”)
- Add information (“He looks like he is hungry for that bone”)
- Connect to the child’s experience (“We saw a dog like that at the park last week”)
- Highlight differences (“This dog is black. Where is the white dog?”)

Asking questions is another great way of expanding and modeling. Questions not only show interest in children’s comments, they also give examples of how to dive deeper into the story and help the child make meaningful connections (e.g., “I see the dog! Do you think he is going to eat that bone?”).

Asking questions. Asking questions can be a powerful tool for skill development. Questions can provide a way to guide and encourage the child through storytelling, naming objects, increasing vocabulary, and developing prereading skills. It might be a little tricky at first to know what kinds of questions to ask, how to structure them, and when to use them. With some practice, coming up with and asking questions will get easier and feel more natural. In fact, dialogic reading is easiest when interacting naturally and following children’s cues.

Caregivers can ask more complex questions as the child’s ability to respond increases. For instance, younger children respond well to “what” questions, such as asking them to name pictures in the book (“What is this?”) or simple questions about the story (“What will the boy do next?”). Simple questions focused on the pictures or the story can help increase vocabulary and thinking skills that build foundations for reading. As children mature, more challenging questions and prompts to promote comprehension can be asked. Examples of dialogic reading prompts

and age-appropriate questions are provided in *Table 1*. The provided ages are general guidelines. Caregivers should be aware that some children benefit from certain prompts at ages other than those recommended.

Providing feedback. Feedback is an important way to encourage children and can be given throughout the reading activity in different ways. Feedback can reinforce children’s correct answers and gently redirect their incorrect responses. Caregivers can provide feedback by asking questions that guide children in the right direction, repeating the child’s words, and providing encouragement.

Positively responding to a child’s attempts encourages the child to participate in the activity with greater motivation and confidence. Specific praise and encouragement can help children associate accomplishment with the activity. For example, praise like, “Pterodactyl is a big word! I’m impressed you can say it so well!” may encourage children to try to say other new words. While specific praise is especially helpful for learning, general praise can also be appropriate. “That was a great story you just shared—I loved it!” is simple but encourages children’s engagement.

What about when the child is incorrect or does not know the answer? A response to an incorrect response, such as misnaming a picture in the book, does not need to feel discouraging. Caregivers can correct the child while still praising their efforts. For example, “That does look like a cat with its pointy ears, but this is actually a dog. It’s a funny looking dog, isn’t it?” If a child is not sure how to respond to a question, the caregiver can offer an answer, ask the child to repeat it, and ask a follow-up question. For example, “This is a hippopotamus. Can you say *hippopotamus*? What does the hippopotamus look like?”

Another thing to keep in mind is that children vary in their creativity, often increasing their use of imagination as they get older. Following the child’s version of the story without judgment or redirecting is important. The main purpose of feedback is to offer positive guidance while keeping the experience fun and satisfying.

Sensitivity to children’s developmental level. Being

sensitive to children's developmental needs means keeping their attention span and interest in mind. Keeping the experience positive is always the most important goal. Dialogic reading can be matched with children's interests by choosing books about things that they like (or even letting them pick the books themselves!). Often, keeping children's abilities in mind means modeling the activity first and then encouraging children to take the lead as they are interested and able.

Questions should encourage children to engage and should not make them feel like they are being quizzed or evaluated. If a child begins to act frustrated, disinterested, or tired, there are a few things caregivers can do. The caregiver can offer to take turns reading or offer additional support by prompting with simple questions. Tailoring the length of the reading to the interest and developmental level of the child keeps it fun and exciting. The goal is to encourage the child's involvement, not necessarily to get through the entire book.

Another option might be to try a different book. Even at early ages, children demonstrate preferences and are more likely to engage with books that match their interests. It may be necessary to try the activity several different times with different books before it feels like a natural experience.

Dialogic Reading Prompts

Prompts are another way to actively involve children in storytelling. Prompts are ways of encouraging children to use language and to become involved in telling the story. The prompts are not intended to be quizzes with right or wrong answers. Instead, they should be questions that encourage children to become active participants. The prompts listed below are appropriate for most 4- and 5-year-old children.

Completion prompts. To use completion prompts, an adult begins a sentence and leaves it open for the child to complete. For example, the adult might say, "I do not like green eggs and ham . . ." and the child finishes with ". . . I do not like them, Sam-I-Am." Stories that repeat the same sentence throughout the book make this prompt especially effective and fun. Some other examples of these picture books are *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin Jr. and *Silly Sally* by Audrey Wood. Completion prompts are also great for repeated readings after the child is familiar with a particular story.

Recall prompts. Recall prompts ask the child to remember something that happened in the story. Sometimes it is helpful to turn the pages back and look at that part of

the story together. Some good opportunities to use recall prompts are:

- At the beginning of a book that has previously been read. For example, "We read this book at Grandma's last week! Do you remember what happened to the bear?"
- During a reading, such as, "What did the caterpillar eat to give him a stomachache?"
- After reading a story. For instance, "What happened to the cat in that story?"

Open-ended questions. Open-ended questions are prompts that do not have a simple one- or two-word answer. They encourage the child to explain something or provide a more in-depth response. Simple yes/no questions can be expanded by following up with "why?" or "how?" These types of questions encourage children to explain their thinking. Open-ended prompts often focus on illustrations or the plot. Some examples are, "What is happening here?" and "Tell me about what the rabbit is doing."

Wh- prompts. Wh- questions usually begin with *what*, *when*, *why*, *where*, or *how*. Similar to open-ended prompts, wh- prompts usually (but not always) require an in-depth response. *What* questions help build children's vocabulary (e.g., "What is this called?"). *How* and *why* questions help develop critical thinking skills (e.g., "How do you think he can fix it?" or "Why is she feeling sad?").

Distancing prompts. Distancing prompts help children relate the story to their own life and experiences. Caregivers might ask children if they have experienced something that the character is experiencing (e.g., "The bear is sad that she can't find her mom. When is a time that you were sad?" or "This is a silly zoo! Do you remember when we went to the zoo? What did you see there?").

Books for Dialogic Reading

Any picture book can be read with these techniques, but some books make it easier. *Table 2* includes a list of recommended books. When finding books on their own, caregivers should try to find books that:

- are developmentally appropriate, considering the age and abilities of the child,
- contain rich, detailed illustrations,
- have limited text, and
- are predictable and repetitive.

Table 2. Recommended Books for Dialogic Reading

Title	Author	Recommended Ages
<i>The Treasure Bath</i>	Dan Andreasen	0 to 6 years
<i>Have You Seen My Duckling?</i>	Nancy Tafuri	0 to 6 years
<i>Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?</i>	Bill Martin Jr.	0 to 6 years
<i>Fourteen Animals (That Are Definitely Not an Octopus)</i>	Gabe Pyle	0 to 6 years
<i>Good Night, Gorilla</i>	Peggy Rathmann	0 to 6 years
<i>We're Going on a Bear Hunt</i>	Michael Rosen	1 to 6 years
<i>The Wonky Donkey</i>	Craig Smith	1 to 6 years
<i>Is That Wise, Pig?</i>	Jan Thomas	1 to 6 years
<i>They All Saw a Cat</i>	Brendan Wenzel	1 to 6 years
<i>Silly Sally</i>	Audrey Wood	1 to 6 years
<i>How to Hide a Lion</i>	Helen Stephens	2 to 6 years
<i>Rain!</i>	Linda Ashman	2 to 6 years
<i>Ella Sarah Gets Dressed</i>	Margaret Chodos-Irvine	2 to 6 years
<i>We Don't Eat Our Classmates</i>	Ryan T. Higgins	2 to 6 years

Conclusion

Engaging in dialogic reading is one of the ways children can learn new vocabulary and practice important prereading skills. It can also be a fun way to engage children to actively participate. Try it out and see how children respond. If a caregiver has not used this style before, dialogic reading may feel awkward and unnatural at first. With some practice, however, it will feel more comfortable. Try starting with a few simple questions and see where it leads.

Additional Information from Nebraska Extension

Download additional resources from: https://go.unl.edu/dialogic_reading

Resources

- Denton, K., & West, J. (2002). Children's reading and mathematics achievement in kindergarten and first grade. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002125.pdf>
- Ferst Readers. (2019). Fifty top literacy statistics. <https://ferstreaders.org/resources/fifty-top-literacy-statistics>
- Flynn, K. S. (2011). Developing children's oral language skills through dialogic reading: Guidelines for implementation. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/004005991104400201>
- Folsom, J. S. (2017). Dialogic reading: Having a conversation about books. <https://iowareadingresearch.org/blog/dialogic-reading-having-a-conversation-about-books>
- Great Ready to Read! Video series. <http://www.getreadytoread.org/early-learning-childhood-basics/early-literacy/dialogic-reading-video-series>
- Parklian, R., Lerner, C., & Im, J. (2008). Getting ready to read: Helping your child become a confident reader and writer starting from birth. <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/213-helping-your-child-become-a-confident-reader-and-writer-starting-from-birth#downloads>
- Whitehurst, G. J. (2002). Dialogic reading: An effective way to read aloud with young children. <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/dialogic-reading-effective-way-read-aloud-young-children>
- Zevenbergen, A. A., & Whitehurst, G. J. (2008). Dialogic reading: A shared picture book reading intervention for preschoolers. In A. van Kleeck, S. A. Stahl, & E. B. Bauer (Eds.) *On reading books to children* (pp. 170–192).

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