

Evidence Briefing

How does shared book reading help boost child language development?



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This briefing summarises the evidence for the role of shared book reading in children's language development in the early years (0-5 years). It covers, quite broadly, book reading situations in which an adult and child (or group of children) sit down to share books together.

Benefits for language development

Studies show that children who read regularly with an adult in the preschool years (0-5 years) learn language faster, enter school with a larger vocabulary and become more successful readers in school (Mol et al, 2008). Although some of the studies that make these claims are correlational, which means that we cannot be certain that it is the reading that has the effect (it could be some other factor that influences both reading and language), there are increasing numbers of intervention studies that directly manipulate the amount or type of shared reading that children receive. These demonstrate robust effects of shared reading on children's language development (see e.g. Jordan et al, 2000). Thus, the evidence-base for the effect of reading on children's early language, and subsequent literacy, development is strong.

Maximising the effectiveness of shared book reading

i. Start early and read often

The age at which mothers start to read with their children is a good predictor of later language. This tells us that there may be a lasting effect of starting to read early in life (Debaryshe, 1993). One intervention study showed that infants who were being read to at 8 months old had better spoken vocabulary at 12 and 16 months (though reading with 4 month olds did not have a similar positive effect; Karrass & Braungart-Rieker, 2005). It is also worth reading frequently, as this seems to have a good effect; "frequency of reading [is] more important than socio-economic class in predicting children's language growth" (Dickinson et al, 2012). As a result, interventions that encourage early and frequent shared reading may be effective.

Book distribution or gifting schemes aim to encourage early and frequent reading by providing parents with free books to read with their children in their own time. The books are often accompanied by support mechanisms such as library subscription, support groups and training materials. There is some evidence that these programmes have a positive effect. The report on the pilot Bookstart project (www.bookstart.org.uk/about/history) found that Bookstart parents bought more books for their children, reported spending more time sharing books with their children and were more likely to give books as gifts (see also

Veldhuijzen van Zanten et al, 2012). Most importantly, Bookstart children were ahead of control group children in baseline assessments on school entry (especially in the categories of reading and number) and in SAT tests at 7.5 years. Book gifting schemes are also inexpensive compared to many intervention programmes.

However, the evidence for these programmes is not yet considered robust, because most studies do not adopt "gold standard" randomised control trial methodologies. This means that families are not randomly assigned to intervention and control groups at the start; so it may be that the parents who took part in the Book Start project were those who were, naturally, more interested in reading with their children anyway. In addition, since the programmes rely heavily on ongoing parental enthusiasm, there tend to be high attrition rates, with lots of parents dropping out before the end of the programme. To be successful, book distribution programmes need to be combined with good on-going advice, training and support for parents.

ii. Use a dialogic reading style

The reading style that adults adopt when reading with children is important; a dialogic reading style seems to be more effective at boosting children's language development than a simple, storytelling, narrative style. In dialogic reading, the adult and child are encouraged to talk about, and round, the book, rather than focus on the text. The adult encourages the child to play an active role in the reading session by asking questions and prompting them to talk about the story.

There is a robust evidence-base to support interventions based on dialogic reading styles. A large number of studies show that dialogic reading has a positive impact on young children's language skills, especially their expressive vocabulary (see Bus et al, 1995; Mol et al, 2008). Dialogic reading interventions are also cost-effective, since the intervention can be carried out by the parents at home, and/or by practitioners at early years settings with minimal training (Mol et al, 2008).

However, children with language impairment or children from disadvantaged backgrounds seem to benefit less from dialogic reading interventions than more affluent children (c.f. Mol et al, 2008). Younger children and children with low levels of language



also seem to benefit less from the dialogic style. Simpler reading systems such as systems that incorporate props or objects (Wasik & Bond, 2001) or pause reading (Colmar, 2014) may be more effective with some of these children. Using a technique called elaborative reminiscing (e.g. where the adult and child relate events in the book to events in the child's life) also seems effective with these children (Reece et al, 2010).

iii Read regularly and frequently

Reading interventions will only be effective if they are maintained to completion, and if the person reading with the child follows the instructions given faithfully. Perhaps because of this, there is some evidence that interventions administered by trained practitioners and researchers are more effective than those given by parents and carers (see the meta-analysis by Mauruli & Neuman, 2010).

However, this finding may not hold across the board. For example, the parents of children with a diagnosis of language impairment can administer interventions just as effectively as speech and language therapists (see Mauruli & Neuman, 2010). This may be because these parents are more likely to be high motivated, or more likely to be well-supported, since they are already receiving regular specialist help. Shared book-reading is likely to be more effective when adults work with individual children, rather than with groups of children; and sometimes parents have more time for regular one-to-one reading than practitioners.

Summary

Shared reading has the potential to be a very effective tool to boost children's language development in the pre-school years. For good results, it is best to start reading when children are very young, and to read regularly and frequently. In terms of reading style, the most robust evidence supports interventions based on a dialogic reading style, though characteristics of both adult and child can have a big impact on effectiveness. Importantly, the adult reading with the child must be trained to follow the procedure of the intervention faithfully and should read regularly and frequently.

Further Reading

For more information, see Dickinson, D. K., Julie A. Griffith, J. A., Golinkoff, R. M. & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2012). How Reading Books Fosters Language Development around the World. *Child Development Research*, vol. 2012.

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