Benefits of shared reading

Most educators already know how important shared reading is for young children. Children who are read to either in the home or by a caregiver are more likely to demonstrate skills necessary for learning to read. For example, a 1999 longitudinal study by the U.S. Department of Education found that children who were read to three times per week had significantly higher levels of phonological awareness and were twice as likely to score in the top 25% in reading (NCES, 2008). Through interactive book sharing, children learn concepts about print, vocabulary, and knowledge of the world (Ezell & Justice, 2005; Swanson et.al, 2011).

The language and literacy skills that children develop during their early childhood sets the stage for their learning once formal schooling begins. Several meta-analytic studies have documented the positive effects of parents reading aloud on early literacy skills. One early study, by Bus, van Ijzendorn, and Pelligrini (1995), reviewed the frequency of shared book reading with toddlers and preschool-aged children. They found that “parent-preschooler book reading is related to outcome measures such as language growth, emergent literacy, and reading achievement” (p. 15). The effects of shared book reading were strongest for language skills.

A more recent meta-analysis was completed by the National Early Literacy Panel (Lonigan, Shanahan, & Cunningham, 2008). This study examined home and parent programs to determine effects on children’s early literacy skills. They found that
increased shared reading in the home had a significant effect on general cognitive abilities and language development.

A supporting study, by Lindsay (2010), focused on children’s access to and ownership of printed materials on attitudes, motivation, and performance of reading, as well as academic outcomes, language development, and writing skills. The findings from this study indicated that increased access to printed materials produced improved attitudes toward reading and increased levels of reading behavior. Access to or ownership of printed materials was related to, but did not necessarily cause, increased motivation to read, higher levels of language development, and better academic outcomes.

Table 1 Benefits to children from read alouds adapted from Ezell & Justice(2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts of Print</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holds book right side up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies front of book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Points to title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turns pages in order, one at a time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks at pages from left to right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks at print from left to right</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept of Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knows that the print tells the story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows that letters make up words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies first letter of a word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies the space between words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increases awareness of sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases knowledge of sentence structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases knowledge of conversational skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>World Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide opportunities to explore the world through stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide opportunities to question and discuss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide imaginative rehearsals through play</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yet, it is not only measurable skills that students gain, but also the pleasures of reading. Author Steven Layne (2009) underscores the significance of interest, attitude, motivation and engagement as being equally important to reading skills.

### Table 2 Picture of a complete reader adapted from Layne (2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Skills</th>
<th>Reader Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decoding</td>
<td>Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Skills</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Factors that impede shared reading

Despite the overwhelming agreement among researchers and educators that reading aloud to young children is not just important, but imperative, there are also a substantial number of studies documenting a gap in the amount of reading aloud that occurs in households. Adams (1990) documented that middle class children heard an average of 1000-1600 hours of one-on-one picture book reading before entering first grade. Low-income students in the study heard an average of 25 such hours of reading. Risk factors for exposure to reading aloud include poverty, single parent households, low education levels for parents, and parents that speak languages other than English (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). A poll conducted for the Pearson Foundation has shown that many adults are unaware of the long-term disadvantages for those children who lack early reading skills (Bennett, 2009). Additionally, children from low-income homes have fewer books present in the home, have fewer books in the school and classroom library, and live farther from a public library than children from middle or higher-income households (Lindsay, 2010). A study by Kuo, et al. (2004) estimated that a lack of daily reading impacts more than two million low SES children within the United States.
Interventions in which parents receive training or print materials to facilitate early literacy activities in the home have been shown to be effective as long as the parents are engaged and motivated to raise their child’s literacy achievement levels (Bell & Westberg, 2009; Darling & Westberg, 2004). With information, materials, and training, interactive reading aloud can be encouraged in all households regardless of socio-economic standing or the presence of disabilities (Edwards, 1995; Dail & Payne, 2008; Duursma, Augustyn, & Zuckerman, 2008; Karrass, Van Deventer, & Braungart-Rieker, 2003; Lindsay, 2010). When parents are made aware of the benefits to their child and given information about how to read aloud, they are more likely to do so (Dail & Payne, 2008; Peifer & Perez, 2011).

**Role for early childhood professionals**

Since current estimates are that 60% of mothers with preschool-age children are in the workforce (Child and Family Statistics, 2006), it becomes even more important for caregivers and early childhood teachers to ensure that children are getting the optimal exposure to early literacy skills. We know that “instruction in the early primary grades is based on the presumption that children arrive with some understanding of print and sound” (Justice & Sofka, 2010, p. 14). We also know that children who begin school lagging behind in literacy skills tend to stay behind (Lonigan, et.al, 2008).

Research indicates the most important factor influencing children’s early literacy skill development is the quality of the interactions during shared reading (Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005). To be most effective, caregivers must scaffold the skill development through affective and interactive supports. Ezell & Justice (2005) outline
the five elements of shared reading: physical arrangement, social involvement, materials, reading style, and conversation.

**Physical arrangement.** Early childhood teachers and caregivers can pay attention to the physical arrangement for shared reading. Rooms should be quiet and free from distractions during shared reading and if possible, reading within the classroom library shows children the ‘use’ of that space. Rugs or mats can make it a special place to sit and listen. All children need to be able to see and access the print material, so reading in small groups can make this easier. If reading to a whole class, make sure than everyone can see and hear the story, and pause for conversation and to show pictures or refer to print.

**Social Involvement.** Especially when working with young children who might not have many experiences with printed material, keep in mind that part of the scaffolding is affective support. That means, it should be a positive experience for the child with many opportunities to engage in conversation and much positive feedback. Students may be stretching their knowledge or taking a risk in these interactions and they need to feel safe in doing so.

**Materials.** Young children are most successful with and engaged in shared reading when the materials are interesting to them, have outstanding illustrations, and contain less rather than more text on the page. Stories should be about topics children relate to and should include age-appropriate humor. A list of children’s books recommended by students is available at the end of the article.

**Reading Style.** Early childhood teachers or caregivers can make a shared reading experience more interesting to the students by varying their reading style and
incorporating parts of the story into their technique. Giving the characters different voices, following the style of the story to vary the tempo, or inserting sound effects that complement the text (yawning when a character yawns, for example) can all help hold the students’ attention and help them access the affective parts of the story.

**Conversation.** It is difficult when working with a group of children to allow conversation to flow through a shared reading experience. However, this is a key time for developing vocabulary, oral language skills, and knowledge of the world. One of the most important aspects of shared reading is praising and engaging in child-led discussions through and around the book. It helps to have more time allotted for the shared reading than it will actually take to read the words on the pages, so you don’t feel rushed. Plan one aspect of the print or the story or the illustrations that you will stop and draw attention to during reading, and then be open to stopping when the students want to bring something to your attention.

**Conclusion**

Research is very clear that shared reading in the years prior to formal instruction has beneficial effects on early literacy skills (Lindsay, 2010; Lonigan, et.al, 2008; and Swanson et.al, 2011). Caregivers, both at home and in daycare or preschool settings, have a great responsibility when it comes to developing early literacy skills and helping introduce children to print and stories. For those students whose families are at-risk for not reading aloud, the school or daycare setting may be the ideal place in which to gain information about the importance of reading aloud, tips about effective shared reading, and access to print materials. Through modeling effective shared reading, discussing
how early literacy skills are developed, and helping to provide access to books and stories, such settings may become the catalyst for change in the life of a child.

References


Pamela Sullivan is an Associate Professor in the Early, Elementary, and Reading department at James Madison University. She earned her Ph.D. in reading from the University of Virginia and her Ed.S. in school psychology from the University of South Florida. She has been a teacher for students with varying exceptionalities, a school psychologist, and a reading intervention coordinator in the United States and in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianna Islands. Her research interests include: early literacy, family literacy, and technology.
Putting these ideas into practice

What can your organization do?

• Send home a newsletter detailing the benefits children receive from shared reading and suggested titles.
• Send home handouts from organizations such as Zero to Three (zerotothree.org for free handouts).
• Establish a ‘lending library’ for weeks or weekends, with tips for interactive reading on a card in the book
• Partner with local library, see if they will come to your center to sign kids up for library cards and do storytimes.
• Establish family literacy nights, with print materials to give away and discussions/modeling of shared reading techniques.
• Partner with nonprofits such as Raising a Reader (www.raisingareader.org) or Imagination Library (http://imaginationlibrary.com) to increase shared reading in the home.
• Within class read aloud time, model interactive reading, with discussions and time for conversation.

What books should you recommend?

Virginia Readers Choice – Primary Level winners as selected by students (2006-2012) http://vsra.org/virginia-readers-choice/

• We are in a book! By Mo Willems
• Chester by Melanie Watt
• Library Mouse by Daniel Kirk
• Once I ate a pie by Patricia MacLachlan & Emily MacLachlan Charest
• He came with the couch by David Slonim
• Guji Gujiby Chi by Yuan Chen
• The monster who ate my peas by Danny Schnitzlein

What books should you read to add your knowledge base?
