The Bedtime Story and Language Development

Joy F. Moss, MA

In many homes, the "bedtime story" has been replaced by television viewing; children in these homes are deprived of valuable and enjoyable experiences with books. Longitudinal studies have provided impressive evidence pointing to the significant relationship between language experiences in the preschool years and subsequent learning and personality development. Dolores Durkin, for example, studied children who learned to read before entering first grade. She found that all of these children (i.e., early readers) had been read to regularly at home. She observed that a high regard for books and reading was a factor common to all the families of these early readers.

Reading to children contributes significantly to their language development in general and their reading growth in particular. From early infancy, the child is immersed in the process of learning to comprehend and produce oral language. Opportunities for verbal interactions offer the essential nourishment for oral language development. Similarly, the child who has sufficient opportunity to listen to and watch adults read to him becomes involved with written language and the reading process.

Parents who share with their children the vast riches of our literary heritage are not only contributing to their knowledge store but are providing a strong positive association with the world of books. Children who have been introduced to written language by an enthusiastic adult and have learned to love books tend to be highly motivated to learn to read.

In order to enrich their children's language experiences, parents can begin by incorporating a "story time" into their daily routine. A regular story time offers a cumulative experience that promotes increasing growth in ability to attend, capacity for sustained involvement, and deeper understandings, interests, and sensitivities. The stage is set for an ongoing dialogue between parent and child, who can explore these ideas and interests together. In addition, the regularity itself suggests to the child that this is an important and integral part of family life. When story time is valued as a priority in the family routine, children will learn to accept books and reading as significant dimensions of their total life experience.

The quality of this story time depends on the attitude of parents and the nature of the books they select. Ideally, the child will have the opportunity to share with a responsive adult a wide range and variety of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction: a balanced diet of literary experience.

Choice of Books

What types of books are appropriate for the young child? What
guidelines can parents use to select books that contribute to the growth of their children? First, let us start with the child. For the young child, a basic feature of language is sound. He plays and experiments with sounds and rhythm as he rocks, skips, swings, or chants himself to sleep. We can preserve and extend this delight in the sounds of language through poetry and literature. The child responds to the rhythmic sounds of Milne’s poems and the contrasting voice patterns of The Three Bears by incorporating them into his own flow of words during creative play monologues or dialogues. Beautiful editions of the Mother Goose rhymes are available and could be presented to the child to begin his own personal library. Soon, the young child will be ready to respond to the sounds, images, rhythm, humor, and emotion in the poetry of Robert Louis Stevenson, John Ciardi, Walter de la Mare, Myra Cohn Livingston, or Karla Kuskin—to name but a few.

The young child needs to practice hearing and using language. Most of the traditional nursery rhymes and stories provide the repetition children seek to help them grasp the words and recall the story idea as they listen to the flow of language. And the repetitive refrains in such tales as The Three Billy Goats Gruff, The Gingerbread Boy, and The House That Jack Built provide the child with additional language patterns to incorporate as his own and to produce for the pure joy of utterance! (There are many versions of the traditional nursery tales; it is important to look for those with the lyrical language of the original stories!)

Literature exposes the child to new words and sentence structures that are not part of usual oral language. Thus, as the child becomes involved in a story or poem or informational book, he is also involved in the process of learning to attend to and comprehend written language. This will be an important resource when he begins formal instruction in reading.

Children have a zest for knowing! Prose and poetry offer a delightful vehicle for expanding their knowledge of the natural and man-made world, for refining concepts and developing insights, and for exposing them to the vast realms of human experience and imagination.

Children’s interests, needs, and capacities change as they progress from one stage of development to the next. Characteristics of the preschool child suggest guidelines for selecting appropriate books. This is a period of rapid language development and a keen interest in words and concepts. Their love of nonsense verse and word play is a reflection of their intellectual growth. It is only when the child has fully grasped an idea that he can play with it, make it his toy. A firmly established genre in favorite children’s rhymes is the presentation of objects in deliberately incorrect juxtaposition. Korney Chukovsky writes eloquently on the “sense of nonsense verse” in his now classic book, From Two to Five (1925): “When we notice that a child has started to play with some newly acquired component of understanding, we may definitely conclude that he has become master of this item of understanding: only those ideas can become toys for him whose proper relation to reality is fully known to him.” (It is interesting to note that this is a critical characteristic of all humor: the capacity to comprehend puns, jokes, and other “word plays” indicates a level of intellectual maturation and a firm grasp of the “sense” imbedded in the “nonsense.”) Chukovsky concludes his discussion: “With the help of fantasies, tall tales, fairy tales, and topsyturvies of every type, children confirm their realistic orientation to actuality.”

The young child’s short attention span and sensory-motor orientation suggest the appropriateness of books that can be completed in one sitting and that provide ample opportunity for pointing, touching, naming, and repeating phrases, as well as for finger play and body movement. The preschool child is naturally egocentric and responds best to content that closely resembles his own experience. He can identify with the characters in books by such authors as Russell Hoban, Ezra Jack Keats, Lois Lenski, and Helen Buckley. As children gradually shift away from egocentricity, they develop the capacity to put themselves into the position of other people or situations. As they begin to enter into the experiences of others, they can appreciate more complicated fantasy and realistic stories. Literature assists the maturing process and allows the child to understand the feelings and concerns of people outside of his immediate experience. Thus, the urban child enters the world of the rural child, the seeing child begins to empathize with the blind child, the modern child learns about children of long ago.

The preschooler loves stories that personify the inanimate—such as Virginia Lee Burton’s Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel and stories with talking animals such as those created by Margaret Wise Brown, Leo Lionni, Margorie Flack, Don Freeman, and Brian Wildsmith.

Children’s books can serve as vehicles for concept development. Alphabet and counting books are available with widely varying formats, styles, humor, and appeal. Concepts such as shape and color are explored in other “concept books.” Millicent Selsam, Paul Showers, and Alvin Tresselt are competent authors of science books for young children. Their material is accurately, simply, and clearly presented. Children accommodating to such concepts as seriation or one-to-one correspondence respond to such stories as The Three Bears and The Three Billy Goats Gruff, which reinforce their expanding grasp of ordering from large to small and simple relationships.

Beauty is an important element in the lives of children; they need exposure to beautiful ideas as well as the aesthetic visual experiences provided by talented artists who have illustrated children’s books. Children learn to appreciate such creative expression as they experience a rich variety of style and media—from the exquisite representational art of Tasha Tudor to the bright, vivid colors of Brian Wildsmith’s expressionistic illustrations or the sensitive and humorous folk art of Uri Shulevitz or the photographic realism of Ylla’s animals.

The preschooler searches for the
security and warmth that story time can provide. He loves to sit close to an adult and share a story with a happy ending! At the same time that he needs this sense of security and the reassurance that the world is a good and happy place, he also has a growing need for independence. As he begins to venture out on his own little by little, he needs help in coping with the fears, anxieties, and concerns that accompany this independent exploring of reality. Joan Lexau's *Benjie on His Own,* Marjorie Flack's *Wait for William,* and Myra Brown's *First Night Away from Home* and *Benjie's Blanket* are just a few examples of realistic and personal stories that explore the feelings, conflicts, and situations the young child can understand. Such books can provide parents with a vehicle through which to explore and share sensitive problems involved in the process of growing up.

As children mature, their needs and interests change accordingly, and they tend to seek out those aspects in books that have particular meaning for them. Thus, as we select books with and for children, it is important to think of their special developmental needs in order to provide them with reading experiences that will meet their needs and stimulate their intellectual, emotional, and social growth as well.

**Quality of Children's Books**

In addition to knowing the particular child for whom a book is being selected, it is also essential to consider the quality of the book itself. Books that have received the Newbery or Caldecott awards have already been judged as beautiful and worthwhile contributions to children's literature. Those that have earned a place among the classics have stood the test of time because of their magnificent stories, superb characterizations, genuine emotions, and timeless themes of human experience. Hundreds of new books are being published yearly; a few will someday join the "classics." Books of quality are written with integrity, validity, simplicity, and beauty. They expose children to rich vocabulary and colorful language; they stimulate the mind, the imagination, and the spirit.

Since the ancient fables of Greece and India, moral and ethical values have been a significant feature of literature. Story time can introduce the child to models of courage, patience, kindness, empathy, loyalty, and inner beauty. Good literature can be differentiated from the mediocre in terms of its authentic and sensitive treatment of ethical and moral conflicts. The enrichment of a child's inner life is integrally related to the quality of the literature he reads.

In books for young children, pictures are a vital feature. The child begins with the pictures; they help him follow the narrative. Young children respond best to pictures that are clear and uncluttered and help "tell" the story. The child wants to "read" a favorite story again and again after he has heard it read aloud, and he uses the pictures to guide this creative process.

The skilled author of children's books knows the essentials of writing just as does the author of adult books. The pediatrician applies his knowledge of medicine to his young patients just as the author of children's books applies his knowledge and artistry to writing for his young audience. Like the pediatrician, the author of children's books must be sensitive to the experiences of childhood: the thoughts and dreams, the fears and concerns, the conflicts and problems, the joys, curiosities, and challenges, the emotions and insights, and the vast potential for imaginative and creative power.

**The School-Age Child**

Too often, parents decide to discontinue their regular story time when their child enters school and begins to learn to read on his own. This forces the child to regress from the rich language of artists such as Hans Christian Andersen to the extremely limited fare of "I can read" books. It will be years before he is ready to read, independently, meaningful material that will challenge his rapidly expanding intellectual and emotional capacity. It is especially important for parents and teachers to read aloud to these "beginning readers" to expose them to the literature that they have the capacity to grasp and enjoy but are not yet ready to read independently. They are ready to use their thinking skills to comprehend, evaluate, and interpret the authors' meanings and to explore ideas and concepts.

In essence, listening to books read aloud is the beginning reader's only opportunity for exposure to and involvement in good literature. Since many excellent stories are written to meet the needs of children at particular stages of cognitive, social, and emotional development, these stories would lose much of their value for the child who had to wait until he had the proficiency to read them on his own. Indeed, many children miss out on great chunks of their literary heritage because of the lack of exposure at the appropriate time.

A rich world of language, ideas, and human experience is available for elementary school children in the form of poetry, fable, myth, legend, folk tales, fairy tales, adventures, contemporary realism, biographies, mysteries, etc. Research into the nature of the reading process has provided significant evidence that a reader brings his thinking abilities, his knowledge of words and linguistic structures, his conceptual base, his total experience as well as affective factors to the act of reading. Mature reading is a dynamic interaction of language, thought, and motivation. It is the world of literature that can provide much of the linguistic, conceptual, and experiential background the child must have in order to read with understanding, to read thoughtfully, creatively, and critically. In addition, positive experiences with books promote the motivation essential for effective and regular reading.

Learning how to read is only a preliminary step in a child's development; becoming a "reader" who enjoys books and uses them to promote his own growth depends largely on the child's experiences in his early years. Parents who read regularly and widely to their child strengthen their potential as an effec-
tive, thoughtful, and motivated reader.

The Pediatrician's Role

My purpose in writing this is to encourage and inspire pediatricians to take the responsibility of communicating to parents the importance of the experiential background they build for their children and the long-term effects of these early experiences on their learning, growth, and total maturation.

Pediatricians are in a unique position to educate parents about child development in general and language acquisition in particular. They can play a critical role in helping parents help their children grow and maintain healthy minds as well as bodies. I believe that guiding parents in providing rich literary experiences for their children will contribute significantly to their intellectual, emotional-social, and physical growth.

A first step in this process of parent-education might well be to set an example by stocking waiting rooms with an excellent selection of high-quality children's books. Parents and children may discover the pleasures of a story time right in their doctor's waiting room! In addition to children's books, the waiting room "library" might include one or two of the excellent resources available, such as Nancy Larrick's A Parent's Guide to Children's Reading.19

Hopefully, this initial guidance will stimulate and encourage parents to take the next steps required to create a rich environment for their growing children.

References


Some Reflections on Research Training and Medical Education

How to use science to decide between alternate courses of action is only beginning to be explored. We have begun, however, to discover that it is no longer possible to maintain the sharp distinction between facts and values that Max Weber and others taught us to believe so desirable. To oversimplify the problem somewhat, it is simply impossible for a physician talking to a woman who has already had one child with Down's syndrome to give a purely factual account of the probability of her having another and to present the options to her in a completely objective way. No matter how flat his voice or how plainly drawn his diagrams, everything he says is emotionally loaded for his patient. Every "can" that he utters will be carefully scrutinized for the hidden "ought" within it.

Still another problem faces the scientifically trained physician confronted by the more complex aspects of the human condition. Although we have made much progress in the control of diseases, it still remains true that there are a great many human problems that may or may not be classified as illnesses and that simply have no complete solution. This is irksome to the technological activist; and he actually may have some difficulty admitting to the patient that they must cooperate together in making the best of a bad situation. This is what the former generation of horse and buggy doctors were very good at, because they had so much practice; and this is why we still feel such a nostalgia for those ineffective technologists who were such effective men.

ROBERT S. MORISON, MD