



Promoting Language with Books

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It's hard to find a website or pamphlet today about child development that doesn't say something about the importance of reading with young children. But what exactly is it about books that makes them such a powerful tool for promoting children's development? And why should families concerned with their child's language development ensure they are reading regularly with their child?

Books: The Perfect Language-learning Tool

A recent article by some American researchers who study early language development suggested that there are six conditions in a child's environment that promote language learning [1]. Furthermore, these six conditions for language-learning can be promoted while parents read with their child, which makes books a terrific language-learning tool.

The six conditions in a child's environment that promote language learning are:

1. Children need to hear many words often

The average child's vocabulary when he starts school is roughly 5000 words [1]. This means that between the ages of one and five, children learn (on average) approximately 3.5 words every day. In order for this to happen, children need lots of exposure to language. And it's not just *how much* children hear, but also *what* they hear that matters. Several studies have shown that children benefit from exposure to unfamiliar vocabulary (words they don't hear in everyday conversations, like "damp", "purchase", or "frightened") [1].

Books expose children to many new words because they:

- often include unfamiliar words
- repeat the same words in a variety of sentences throughout the book, which helps children understand the words

- offer opportunities for children to hear the same words over and over again with repeated readings [1]

It's no wonder that the extent to which parents read with their child is a good predictor of their child's vocabulary [1].

Read to your child often – it will build his vocabulary.

2. Children learn words when they are interested

Children learn language best when adults follow their lead by joining in their play and talking about their interests. Research has shown that parents who follow their child's lead and use language related to their child's interests tend to have children with more advanced vocabularies [1].

Books spark children's interest because they have illustrations with bold colours and topics of interest to young children. Many children's books offer imaginary topics (such as pirates, princesses, or dragons) that encourage conversation between parents and children. In addition, it's easy for children to show their parents what interests them in a book, both with and without words (by pointing, gesturing, or drawing attention to a picture).

Books motivate children to communicate and, when parents respond to what the child is interested in, it helps the child learn new words.

3. Children learn best when adults are responsive to them

The Hanen approach is based on this principle. Much research has shown that young children benefit from interactions with adults who do the following while interacting with them:

- continue children's topics by responding to what they say with a related comment or question
- express a positive attitude
- use a variety of words and sentences [1]

The effect of parents' responsiveness is so great that it has been linked to children's:

- cognitive (thinking) skills
- achievement of developmental milestones
- school readiness
- vocabulary
- math abilities [1]

Books promote adults' responsiveness because:

- it's easy to join focus during a book and notice what a child is looking at and talking about. The calm, visual nature of the activity focuses the child, and this makes it easier for the adult to follow the child's lead and respond to his or her interests.

When you read a book with your child, abandon your agenda. Let your child lead, and talk about whatever interests him or her.

4. Words are learned when meanings are made clear

It's not enough to simply use new words during conversation or read them in a book. Children need to learn what words mean, and this happens when parents:

- explain what a word means
- point to pictures
- use their voice or gestures to explain the meaning of the word (for example, using a quiet voice when reading "he **whispered** in her ear...")
- use a new word within a related context (e.g. talking about an "ankle" when having a conversation about body parts) [1]

Books can help parents teach children what words mean because:

- parents can use the illustrations to explain the meaning of new words
- the conversations that occur while looking at a book offer opportunities for parents to pause the story and explain what a new word means
- books often use the same new word on several pages of the book. This provides several opportunities to hear a new word used in a variety of sentences, and this helps children understand the word's meaning.

When you read with your child, explain what new words mean by providing explanations, having a brief conversation about the word and pointing to the pictures.

5. Vocabulary and grammar are learned together

Vocabulary (words) and grammar (rules about the structure of a language) are learned together and help each other develop [1]. Children need to hear new words in grammatically correct sentences in order to learn language efficiently.

Sometimes adults use simplified speech which lacks proper grammar (like "Jonny want cookie?" or "Mommy go bye bye") with young children or children with language delays, thinking that the simplified sentences are easier for the child to learn. But these types of sentences leave out important grammar which actually helps children learn new words and language rules. Instead,

short, grammatical sentences like “Do you want a cookie?” or “Mommy is going out” are more helpful for children.

Books promote this principle of language-learning because

- Children have the opportunity to hear new words within the grammatical sentences of the story

Reading books with your child exposes him to new words used in grammatical sentences.

Children need positive, extended conversations in order to support their development [1]. Conversations are “positive” when the adult acknowledges the child’s interests, expands on what the child has said, adds new ideas, and shows interest in the child.

Positive conversations and interactions are possible when sharing books together because:

- The shared focus of looking at a book together lets a child know that the parent is interested in what he or she has to say

When you read with your child, show your interest by engaging in positive conversations.

When? How? And How Often? Factors That Make a Difference

Studies have revealed specific factors related to book reading that are associated with better development:

When to start reading with your child

- Studies have shown that reading to babies starting at **eight months old** has a significant impact on early language development. Reading to four month old babies, however, does not appear to have as much of an impact [2,3].

How to read with your child

- Children benefit when adults:
 - encourage their child to participate by pausing and waiting
 - support their child’s understanding of new words and the story
 - ask questions and make comments
 - label actions and objects
 - have conversations about the child’s interests while looking at the book [1]

How often to read with your child

- While there's no magic number, the frequency of parents' reading with their children predicts children's later language development and school readiness [4, 5]. So, the more, the better!

Read, read, read!

We know that reading to children has many benefits, and that books can be used to promote children's language. This is even more important for children who struggle with language and who need even more exposure to language.

Your local library is a good place to access children's books. Librarians are a great source of information about books that might spark your child's interest and suit his or her developmental level. But your child is the best person to guide your book selection – your child will be most motivated by a book he has chosen himself.

Hanen helps parents learn ways to make the most of books

Each of the **Hanen guidebooks** has information about using books to stimulate a child's language development. For a sample page about sharing books from the *It Takes Two to Talk* guidebook [6] click here.

There are several **articles** on our website about how to share books with children and which types of books to share, including:

- [Sharing books with Toddlers, the Hanen Way](#)
- [Sharing books with Preschoolers, the Hanen Way](#)
- [Can Your Baby Really Learn to Read?](#)
- [Which Books are Best? How the Type of Book Affects Children's Language Learning](#)

Our newest resource for parents, ***I'm Ready!™ How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success*** [7] is aimed at helping parents promote their child's early literacy skills. Two of the best ways to encourage a child's early literacy skills are to stimulate his language abilities and to read to him. *I'm Ready!* includes many easy, practical ideas about how to read to children in ways that will stimulate their language development.

By reading to your child, you'll not only promote his language development, but also nurture an early love of books and reading – an interest that will serve him well for years to come.

References

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