



Encourage Conversations with Wordless Books!

By Lauren Lowry
Hanan Certified SLP and Clinical Staff Writer

The following statement might surprise you:

Reading a book that doesn't have any words is great for a child's language development.

You might be wondering how a book without any words could possibly help a child learn about language. You might also be wondering about how to “read” a book if there aren't any words! Keep reading to find out...

When you read a children's storybook, the written words you read out loud expose the child to helpful things like new vocabulary and ideas. But many of the benefits of reading with young children don't happen because of the words written on the page; **they come from the conversations we have with children while sharing the book together.** These conversations help children:

- Understand the story
- Connect new ideas with what they already know
- Use thinking skills like problem-solving and using their imagination.

When you and your child have conversations about the story, it keeps them interested, engaged, and having fun!

A recent study compared how parents shared a picture book with words versus a wordless book with their children [1]. While both kinds of books encouraged helpful talk from parents, the wordless book encouraged more interaction and conversation. In fact, children said more than twice as much while looking at the wordless book, including offering their own comments and ideas (as opposed to just answering the adult's questions).

Why do wordless books encourage conversation?

When reading a traditional storybook with words, it's very tempting to read through the entire book while the child listens. While there is value in hearing stories read this way, it doesn't always encourage conversation. However, when a book doesn't have any words, it makes sharing the book a two-way activity as the adult and child tell the story by "reading" the pictures together. This puts the child in a much more active role because they are not just simply listening to the story. Talking about the pictures and telling the story together makes conversations take off!

Five tips for having conversations with wordless books (or with any book!)

- **Choose wordless books that are based on your child's interests** – Just like books with words, wordless books should appeal to your child's interests. For example, if your child loves animals, they might like *Goodnight Gorilla* by Peggy Rathmann, a wordless book about a mischievous gorilla who lets his fellow zoo animals out of their cages at night.
- **Read the book more than once** – During the first reading, talk about the picture on the front cover and help your child predict what the book might be about. Then browse through the pictures in the book together, noticing what the characters are doing and their facial expressions, and make some guesses together about what the story is about. Once you've finished this first look through the book, you can go back to the beginning. Now you're ready to start having conversations about the story. The more familiar your child becomes with the story, the more they'll have to say about it.
- **Observe, Wait, and Listen™ (OWL™)** – "OWLing" encourages conversations because it helps you figure out what your child wants to talk about. **Observe** your child as they look at the pictures to figure out what captures their attention. **Wait** by looking at your child without speaking, to give your child a chance to say or do something. You can wait after you turn the page, after you say something, or when your child notices something exciting in the story. Then **Listen** carefully to what your child says. This will give you clues about what you can say next to keep the conversation going.
- **Follow your child's lead** – After you OWL™, you'll know what your child wants to talk about, and you can respond with a comment or question based on their interest. This is known as "following your child's lead." If you stick with your child's interests and topic, your child will be motivated to share the book with you and talk about the story. This is likely to result in a longer conversation, which will give you both more opportunities to share ideas back-and-forth. This will expand your child's language and thinking.
- **Ask the right kind of questions** – Some questions tend to stop the conversation, such as questions that aren't based on your child's interests, questions that "test" your child, or

questions that are too complicated for your child to answer. Asking too many questions can also feel more like an interrogation than a conversation!

Questions that keep the conversation going back-and-forth are based on what your child is interested in or something they just noticed or said. Questions that relate to your child's experiences and encourage your child to share their ideas can keep your child engaged. Open-ended questions are great for encouraging conversation. These questions don't have a right or wrong answer and help your child think, share ideas, and use their imagination. Some examples of open-ended questions include "I wonder why they are...?", "What would happen if...?" or "What would you do if...?"

The take-home message...

Don't abandon your storybooks with words – these types of books are helpful because they expose your child to more complicated grammar and sentences, as well as words that aren't heard during everyday life. Books with words can also be used to have conversations by using the tips above. But consider giving wordless books a try – you might be surprised at the fun conversations you and your child have together!

Some great wordless books

In the [Hanan Book Nook](#), we feature these three great wordless books and offer lots of ideas for how to use them to encourage language and conversation:

- [Creating Conversation with *Good Night, Gorilla*](#)
- [Build Interaction in Children on the Autism Spectrum with *Good Dog, Carl*](#)
- [Building Perspective-taking Skills in Children on the Autism Spectrum with *One Frog Too Many*](#)

The tips and information in this article are based on content from [I'm Ready!™ How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success](#). You can find out more about this resource here.

References

1. Petrie, A., Mayr, R., Zhao, F., & Montanari, S. (2023). Parent-child interaction during storybook reading: wordless narrative books versus books with text. *Journal of Child Language*, 50, 104–131. doi:10.1017/S0305000921000763

2. Greenberg, J. & Weitzman, E. (2014). *I'm Ready!™ How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success*. Toronto: The Hanen Centre.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

The Hanen Centre is a Registered Charitable Organization (#11895 2357 RR0001)