

## Supporting your child's language skills when reading and exploring books



Below are activities and strategies to support your child's communication skills. These activities can target multiple skills, talk to your SLP about what your child is currently working on. Pick 1-2 to start with. If you speak a language other than English at home, you can try these activities in your home language. You will still be helping your child develop their overall language skills!

A few reminders when working on any language skill with your child:

- Get your child's attention before speaking.
- Provide a good language model, just above their language ability. If your child mostly speaks with 1-2 words ("Ball!"), model about 2-4 words ("You want the ball!")
- Use more statements than questions.
- Be patient! Give your child time to contribute: show them you are waiting with anticipation so they know it is their turn.
- Have fun!

### **WHY is reading/exploring books so important for promoting language and literacy development?**

- *Children need to hear many words often.* Reading to your child often exposes them to more words and builds his/her vocabulary.
- *Children learn words when they are interested.* Books motivate children to communicate and, when parents respond to what the child is interested in, it helps the child learn new words.
- *Reading builds vocabulary and meaning.* Children learn what words mean when parents read with them and explain what new words mean while pointing to the pictures.
- *Vocabulary and grammar are learned together.* Children need to hear new words in grammatically correct sentences in order to learn language efficiently. Reading books with your child exposes them to new words used in grammatical sentences.
- *Positive, extended conversations support cognitive and social development.* When parents read with their child this promotes a positive interaction and shared conversation.

### **WHAT are some general reminders when reading with your child?**

- *All books are good!...and some books are really great.* Choose books that are a good fit to your child's interests and their developmental level (e.g. younger children love simpler books with big, bright pictures and lift-the-flap books). Some kids love dinosaurs, others love space, and others gravitate toward silly characters like the Pigeon, Elephant, and Piggie in Mo Willems' books.
- *Choose real (printed) stories/books.* These facilitate better parent-child interaction than reading books on a device. While digital books are a great resource, reading a real book with your child where you turn the pages promotes more dialogue and parent-child interaction when compared with sharing an electronic book.

- *Sit face-to-face* with younger children, or side-by-side. Make sure your child can see the pictures.
- *Read it again and again.* Children often ask for parents to read books over and over. Books that are very familiar can be “read” by children who are not yet readers, giving them a chance to practise retelling stories.
- *Take Turns.* Ask your child to retell the story to you. If your child needs support, leave out parts of sentences for your child to fill in.
- *Use the pictures in the book.* Ask questions and have your child describe what they see. Even if a student is older, there is nothing wrong with using pictures in a book to help with comprehension.
- *Relate the information to something your child already knows or has experienced.* For example, if the book is about a shark, you can ask your child, “*Do you remember when we went to the aquarium?! We saw a big shark with lots of teeth, just like this one in the book! What do you remember about that shark?*”
- *Read books in your home language.* If you speak a language other than English at home, it is very beneficial to read books in your home language. You will be helping your child develop their overall language skills! Your local library has books in a variety of languages that you can explore.
- *Praise your child.* Celebrate your child participating with the book in any way!

## **HOW is it best to read/explore books to promote language learning with children at different ages and stages?**

### 1. If your child is building their vocabulary:

**Vocabulary:** Pick a vocabulary category that you are working on (e.g. vehicles). Label and point to the words. Repeat the words in order to emphasize. E.g. “*Look, I see a train, it’s Thomas the train, wow, a fast train, a train on the track.*” It’s good to emphasize not only object words, but also other categories of words like action words (e.g. the train *stops*, now it *goes*), and location words (the train is *on* the bridge and *over* the river). You don’t have to read all the words as written in a story; add words and language that matches the pictures and engages your child. Sometimes stories have too many words to keep your child engaged.

**Categorization:** Sort words, pictures, and objects into categories. Group similar vocabulary and objects together. Sort items/pictures from the stories into groups or ask what groups they could be in. This helps build your child’s comprehension, executive functioning, and ability to retrieve words.

**Articulation:** Find words or pictures in the book that contain the speech sounds your child is learning. For instance, if your child is learning the K sound, emphasize and repeat words like “cake” and “cookie”. You can choose books that happen to contain a lot of words with your child’s goal sounds. Seek consultation from your speech-language pathologist about sounds to work on.

### 2. If your child is using word combinations and building sentences:

**Description:** Model short grammatically correct sentences about what you see in the pictures and what is happening, for example “*The girl is swinging (on the swing).*” or “*The giraffe is eating (some carrots).*” This helps your child with learning the meaning of vocabulary words and with formulating grammatical sentences.

**Past Tense:** Discuss how the actions in the pictures change from page to page. Ask, “*What did they do on the last page?*” Emphasize the past tense action word and model sentences in the past tense about people did, e.g. “*The dog **ran** into the ocean.*” or “*The children **played** on the slide.*”

**Who, What, Where, When?:** While reading or talking about pictures, pause and ask simple wh-questions, e.g. “*Who is jumping? What do you see at the playground? Where did the Mommy go? When did they go to sleep?*” Help your child with answering the questions. The goal is to build language skills through modelling language and shared participation rather than testing for the child’s answers. Keep it successful!

3. If your child understands and answers wh-questions consistently and can express ideas in sentences:

**Add why and how to your wh-questions (who, what, where, when):** e.g. “*Why do you think the mom can’t find her purse?*” or “*How did the kids make the cookies?*” As your child becomes more capable of answering these questions independently, you can then expand on your child’s answers by adding vocabulary and ideas. e.g. “*Yes, the kids found all the ingredients and worked together to mix the batter.*”

**Encourage retelling/summarizing stories:** Help your child identify the *characters*, the *setting*, the *main problem*, the *solution*, and the *feelings* associated with the characters. Use sequencing words such as *first*, *then*, *next*, *last*, *before*, and *after* when retelling the story to emphasize the order in which things happened. Using sequencing words will help your child understand that time order matters when talking about events.

**Interpret Feelings:** Ask your child to interpret how characters are feeling and why, e.g. “*Why do you think the mom was frustrated?*” It’s helpful to encourage your child to take the perspective of different characters and to look at the cues in the story (the expression on a character’s face; events in the story, etc.) to make inferences about how the character is feeling. We may call these “smart guesses.” Make connections to your own lives and feelings and experiences. This builds emotional literacy, theory of mind (perspective-taking), and social thinking skills.

**Find the main idea:** Identifying the main idea is a challenging component of reading comprehension in general and especially for children who struggle with understanding the story. You can help your child explore the main idea by asking, “*What is this part of the book about?*” or “*What is the most important idea on this page?*” or “*What do you think the author’s most important message is in this story?*” If your child is struggling with this, give them some choices for what the main idea might be, e.g. “*Do you think this story is about trying your best or trying to always be the winner?*” Discuss with your child and remember there can be different interpretations. Also, it can be helpful to think about the main idea of smaller parts of the story, for instance of a single paragraph. It can be easier to find the main idea based on parts of the story instead of the whole story.

**Ask prediction questions:** After reading the story, ask questions like “*What do you think will happen next?*” and “*How might that character feel?*” Before reading, look at the book cover together. Ask your child what they think the book might be about just by thinking about the title or looking at the cover for clues. As you are reading, ask your child to predict what might happen next throughout the story.

### **Accessing Books**

Visit the library with your child and encourage them to choose books to take home. These could be fiction and/or non-fiction books. Many libraries also have story sessions and book clubs for children.

If you do not have access to books at home, contact your child's teacher, learning support teacher, or speech-language pathologist and they can provide copies of printed books or online tools to access books. Search on YouTube for videos where books have been read aloud. Pause the video frequently to stop and engage your child in talking about the book.

### **Links to lists of books that help stimulate language:**

1. Book share time: <https://booksharetime.com/books#>
  - list curated by an SLP
  - allows you to search for a book by language goals you are targeting
2. The Speech Bubble SLP: <https://www.thespeechbubbleslp.com/2018/02/books-need-speech-library.html>
  - list of suggested books organized by developmental age and stage
  - therapy ideas suggested under each age/stage
3. Crazy Speech World: <https://crazyspeechworld.com/2013/07/my-favorite-childrens-books-part-1.html>
  - list of suggested books by SLP

### **Sources used to gather information for this handout:**

1. <http://www.hanen.org/Helpful-Info/Articles/Promoting-Language-with-Books.aspx> (Promoting Language with Books)
2. <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/ta7018> (How Reading Helps Language Development)
3. <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/cdr/2012/602807/> (Review Article by David K. Dickinson et al: How Reading Books Fosters Language Development around the World – Feb 7, 2012)
4. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/143/4/e20182012> (Study by T. Muzer, A. Miller, H. Weeks, N. Kaciroti and J. Radesky in *Pediatrics – Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*: Differences in Parent-Toddler Interactions with Electronic Versus Print Books - April 2019)
5. <https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/play-learning/literacy-reading-stories/literacy-activities> (Literacy Activities for Children 0-8 years)
6. [https://www.superduperinc.com/handouts/pdf/407\\_ReadWithMe.pdf](https://www.superduperinc.com/handouts/pdf/407_ReadWithMe.pdf)