

## Encouraging young children to retell stories enhances their language and literacy development

*What does research tell us about story retelling as a strategy for developing early language and literacy?*

Once isn't enough when it comes to storytelling—and that's a good thing! Research shows that encouraging toddlers and preschoolers to retell stories they've heard is an activity that benefits their language and early literacy development in a number of ways.

Researchers at the Center for Early Literacy Learning (CELL) examined 11 studies that included 687 children participating in various story-retelling interventions. The effectiveness of the story-retelling interventions was determined by evaluating child outcomes including comprehension, expressive vocabulary, receptive language, and aspects of early literacy such as phonological awareness and print awareness.

The intervention practices varied. Their characteristics in terms of the adult reading included: introducing the story before beginning to read; reading the story multiple times; giving an oral review of the story's characters and events; pointing out a relationship between the child and an event or character in the story; prompting the child to respond to the story by asking open-ended questions and/or encouraging the child to ask questions; asking the child for predictions about what will happen in the story; using props or toys to more deeply involve the child in the story; and telling the story using book illustrations or sequencing picture cards as aids. In terms of the child's retelling, the practice characteristics included: adult prompting to encourage the child's retelling; elaborating on



***“Now it’s my turn to tell the story. Mommy and Tiger can listen!”***

the retelling with specific questions about story structure and details; letting the child hold the book to use for cues during the retelling; using pictures or picture-sequence cards to assist the child's retelling; and having the child use manipulatives like toys to assist with the retelling.









The study analysis showed that a combination of these characteristics had the greatest benefit for child literacy and language learning. The research findings also confirmed what educators who favor story retelling as a learning strategy have asserted—that the practice is especially effective in promoting children's expressive vocabulary and comprehension.

This *CELLnotes* summarizes findings reported in Dunst, C. J., Simkus, A., & Hamby, D. W. (2012). Children's story retelling as a language enhancement strategy. *CELLreviews* 5(2), 1-14.

# Acting on the Evidence

Download free, two-page *CELL* practices guides in versions for parents or practitioners at [www.earlyliteracylearning.org](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org)

Staff of CELL have created a number of practice guides especially for parents and early childhood practitioners to encourage putting this research evidence to use in home, community, and classroom settings. All of the two-page guides listed below are available for free download on the CELL project web site: [www.earlyliteracylearning.org](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org). At this web address you can also find interactive posters called *CELL* pops and multimedia practice guides such as videos that illustrate practices supported by this research.

<p><i>Especially for parents of toddlers!</i></p> <h3>Let Me Tell the Story</h3> <p><i>Storytelling and Listening</i></p> <p>Long before children read on their own, they can engage in shared book reading activities with grown-ups. Shared reading is a powerful way to learn new words and create a love of books and reading. This handout describes ways to make these early literacy skills.</p> <p><b>What is the practice?</b></p> <p>Toddlers learn about reading while listening to, looking at, and talking about the story in a book. Asking questions that encourage a child to talk with you about a story helps expand his listening and speaking skills.</p> <p><b>What does the practice look like?</b></p> <p>Snuggling together in an armchair with your toddler's favorite book creates a great opportunity to "read" together. As you read the story, stop frequently and ask your toddler who, questions about the pictures or story. Encourage him to talk about what he sees and understands. Ask who questions like "What do you see in the picture?" or "Where did the boy go?" This helps him talk about the story, be patient while he tells you about what he thinks is happening.</p> <p><b>How do you do the practice?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Start by asking your toddler which book he wants to read.</li><li>Ask your toddler to tell you what the story is about if it is an old favorite. If it is a new book, look at the pictures with him. Then ask what he thinks the book is about.</li><li>As you look through the book together, ask your child to hold it and turn the pages. Don't worry if it takes a while. When reading with a toddler, saving every word is not necessary. Just let him tell the story as you go along. Encourage your child to talk with you about the story. Ask questions like "What do you think will happen next?" or "Why is the bear all crazy?" This will encourage your toddler to give answers longer than one word. Who and what questions encourage children to talk more than questions that can be answered with a "Yes" or "No." "Is the dog brown?" is an example of a yes/no question.</li><li>Show your interest in what your toddler says by following his answer with another question. For example, "You think she is crying because she is scared? Why do you think she is scared?"</li><li>Smiling and commenting on his attempts to answer your questions shows your interest and keeps him involved in reading.</li></ul> 	<p><i>Especially for practitioners working with toddlers!</i></p> <h3>Creating Young Storytellers</h3> <p><i>Storytelling and Listening</i></p> <p>Introduce children early to the time-honored practice of storytelling. It is a great way for them to learn the basic structure of stories and to gain and practice new vocabulary. This practice guide suggests ways to promote a toddler's ability to enjoy storytelling and related activities.</p> <p><b>What is the practice?</b></p> <p>Toddlers above all love to hear stories about themselves or other family members. This is a great opportunity to learn to listen and tell stories with and about important people in their lives. By sharing with the focus of interest, toddlers become active participants in the development, telling, and retelling of stories.</p> <p><b>What does the practice look like?</b></p> <p>Repeated storytelling occurs only if a toddler repeats a story he heard from someone else or a story partly made up by the toddler and an adult. A toddler might retell a story about what happened when playing with a friend. Retelling a story about a family trip to the beach is another example of repeated storytelling. Repeated storytelling expands a toddler's knowledge of how to put thoughts in order to form a story. It also increases the number of words they know how to use and their enjoyment of the art of storytelling.</p> <p><b>How do you do the practice?</b></p> <p>Many opportunities to take part in storytelling and repeated storytelling happen every day. They might occur when children are busy with favorite toys, engaged in a book, or looking out a window. Try some of these ideas for promoting storytelling.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Start by picking out topics that are interesting to the child. If a toddler is interested in trains or a favorite pet, make up a story about one of those interests. The toddler is more likely to participate in the storytelling moment if she finds the topic interesting. Remember that toddlers often like to have stories about themselves or about the important adults in their lives. The story of the day the child was born is a favorite for many children.</li><li>Choose times and places for storytelling that are most likely to make it easy for the toddler to take part. A place where you can hear the toddler and she can easily hear you is helpful. The attention span of a toddler is limited. However, it helps to have some time when there are few interruptions.</li><li>Start the story, but quickly encourage the child to add information to the story. If this is a made-up story, ask the toddler to add details for the story. For instance, you could ask the toddler, "What's the dog's name?" The story may be about a real person or event. If so, ask the toddler for some information the knows about the person or event.</li><li>Retell the same story during different storytelling sessions. With each retelling, ask the toddler to supply more and more of the story, focus on doing this until the toddler has told the basic story on her own.</li><li>The child might have trouble adding the ideas to design an entire story. By providing two possible choices and let him decide how to continue. "Does Papa Bear like his teeth to stay or to fall out?"</li><li>Smile and respond to the toddler's efforts to keep her interested in the story.</li></ul> <p><b>How do you know the practice worked?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>The toddler repeating more stories.</li><li>The toddler seems to enjoy telling stories or helping you tell them.</li><li>The toddler tried to tell new stories when asked.</li></ul> 	<p><i>Especially for practitioners working with toddlers!</i></p> <h3>Look at More Shared Book Reading</h3> <p><i>Questions</i></p> <p>Look at more shared book reading questions.</p> 	<p><i>Especially for practitioners working with toddlers!</i></p> <h3>Look at More Learning to Tell Stories</h3> <p><i>Telling Stories</i></p> <p>Look at more learning to tell stories.</p> 
<p><i>Especially for parents of toddlers!</i></p> <h3>Selecting Books at the Library</h3> <p>Every few weeks, 2-year-old Kellan and her mother browse new books from the library. While they choose books, they play or game together. They take turns making guesses about a book just by looking at the pictures. Kellan's mother starts the game by asking Kellan what she thinks the names of the characters are. Or Mom asks what Kellan thinks is happening in a certain picture. Mom can tell Kellan like a book by how long she wants to look at it.</p> 	<p><i>Especially for practitioners working with toddlers!</i></p> <h3>Touch-and-Feel Books</h3> <p>It is a social impairment. Good storybooks often have tactile features that are fun for children to explore. One of Kellan's favorites is a touch-and-feel book titled "The Bunnies" by Dorothy Kunhardt. Each time they read it, Mom asks her questions like "How does the bunny feel?" She encourages Kellan to touch the bunny illustration with his palm or left hand. To expand their conversation about the book, Kellan's mother asks what sounds the animals would make. They talk about which pages are favorites, and why they like them.</p> 	<p><i>Especially for practitioners working with toddlers!</i></p> <h3>Interest-Focused Stories</h3> <p>Interest-focused stories.</p> 	<p><i>Especially for practitioners working with toddlers!</i></p> <h3>Visual Cues</h3> <p>Visual cues.</p> 

## Especially for PARENTS

**Infants:**  
*Baby's First Picture Book  
Tell Me More, Tell Me More  
The Right Touch*

**Toddlers:**  
*Book Reading Made Fun for All  
I Wanna Be a Storyteller  
Let Me Tell the Story*

**Preschoolers:**  
*Read It Again  
Let's Read Together  
Read with Me*

## Especially for PRACTITIONERS

**Infants:**  
*Repeated Storytelling  
Touch-and-Feel Books  
First Picture Books*

**Toddlers:**  
*Creating Young Storytellers  
Reading Together Out Loud  
Letters and Books*

**Preschoolers:**  
*Read and Repeat  
One for the Books  
Tales for Talking*