Children’s active participation in reading and storytelling can enhance early literacy learning

Carol M. Trivette and Carl J. Dunst

What is the practice?

Actively involving a young child in reading opportunities can be accomplished by asking and answering questions about a story being read or told. Active participation in “story time” begins with the child selecting a story of particular interest to him or her. This participation continues as the child answers different “Wh__” questions asked by the adult where the child’s response is used by the adult to prompt elaborations and expansions.

During this reading time, the adult and the child switch roles so that the child learns to become the storyteller with the help of the adult who is both a listener and questioner. This interactive book reading or story telling style occurs before, during, and after book reading or story telling. These interactive techniques can be used with one child or several children and need not last more than 10 or 15 minutes at a time.

What does the research tell us?

Three types of early reading practices were the focus of a research synthesis conducted by Carol M. Trivette and Carl J. Dunst. These investigators examined 13 studies that had been reviewed in three separate What Works Clearinghouse research syntheses to determine the characteristics of the interventions that were most important in helping young children learn early skills for reading and writing.

Results from this synthesis showed that active reading experiences for young children were more likely to result in positive benefits for children in two areas: linguistic processes, which include listening comprehension, phonological awareness, and oral language; and print-related processes including alphabet knowledge, print awareness, written language, and text comprehension. The strategies for promoting active participation included elaboration, expansion, and use of “Wh__” questions to broaden both print and linguistic concepts. The results showed that these reading strategies were most effective with older children (3 and 4 years of age) though younger children also benefited from these experiences. Shorter (15 minutes or less) reading episodes were more effective than longer sessions.

This Cellnotes summarizes findings reported in Trivette, C. M., & Dunst, C. J. (2007). Relative effectiveness of dialogic, interactive, and shared reading interventions, Cellreviews 1(2), 1-12.
Preschool and childcare teachers can help young children develop early literacy skills by letting them be active participants in the reading session. These reading experiences can be effective with a small group of children including a child with a disability.

Lisa, a child care teacher, reads stories to small groups of children three or four times a day. Just now she sees three children standing in the book nook. She approaches them and asks if they would like to read a story. Ryan, Felicia, and Chyo all respond by saying, “Yes.” Lisa asks the children to decide which book they would like to read. After they select one, everyone begins to find a place to settle into. Lisa knows that Ryan has some visual problems, so she guides him to a spot where he’ll be able to sit and see the book most easily.

The children select a book about trains, a new book they’ve never heard read before. Lisa shows them the front cover, reads the title Trains, Trains, and More Trains, and asks the children what they know about trains. Felicia says, “Trains are loud and hurt my ears.” Ryan says, “Trains carry cars on them,” and laughs. Lisa follows Ryan’s lead and asks him what is so funny. He responds, “Cars can drive on roads.” Lisa explains that this is true, “but when a lot of cars ride on a train, you can get lots of them from one place to another quicker.” Chyo says that she wants to ride on a train and the other two children chime in, “Me too!”

Lisa begins to read the story, which is about a little girl, Danielle. All Danielle has to do is make a wish and she gets to ride on different kinds of trains—a freight train that hauls coal, cars, and food; a passenger train for people living in a city and for people taking long trips; and even an old-timey train. As Lisa reads the story, she asks questions, like the following, that promote the children’s engagement with the story:

“Here’s a picture of Danielle. Tell me something you notice about Danielle.”

“This is the word train. What letter does the word train start with?”

“Can each of you show me another ‘t’ on this page?”

“Why do you think Danielle wants to go visit the old-timey train in this picture?”

“What’s a difference between the old-timey train and the passenger train that takes people to work every day?”

“Why do you think the trains go down the tracks?”

Lisa is very careful that each child has the time he or she needs to respond to these types of questions. She follows up their answers by providing more information and asking additional questions. Each child is allowed to answer questions and interact with the printed material in ways that are appropriate for his or her skill level.

After about 10 minutes, Chyo and Ryan become restless, so Lisa finishes up the story and the children move on to another activity. She knows that she will be reading with them again later in the day.