

Enhancing the Early Reading Experience: Books, Strategies, and Concepts

Michael Strickland, Laura Abbott

Emergent literacy begins at birth and continues throughout adulthood. Frequent collaboration between two voices, an author and a public librarian, has produced valuable insights about how to begin reading with very young children.

Selecting books for young children can be a fun and rewarding experience, but years working with parents at the library have shown that it can also be a little daunting, considering the number of books available. With limited funding and time, how can parents and educators carefully choose books that will encourage and motivate lifelong readers?

The Every Child Ready to Read @ your library program (Association for Library Service to Children & Public Library Association [PLA], n.d.) has defined six research-based layers. A framework is offered to help children learn to become better readers and can be used by adults as a guideline for choosing worthwhile children's books.

Two decades of author visits and literacy instruction have fostered examination of many models for enhancing young children's reading. One of the best approaches came from the PLA, according to which, there are six basic areas that children can start developing from birth: (1) vocabulary (i.e., knowing the names of things), (2) narrative connections (i.e., being able to describe things and events and tell stories), (3) print motivation (i.e., being interested in and enjoying books), (4) print awareness (i.e., noticing print, knowing how to handle a book and follow the words on a page), (5) letter knowledge (i.e., knowing letters are different from each other, knowing their names and sounds, recognizing letters everywhere),

and (6) phonological awareness (i.e., being able to hear and play with the smaller sounds in words).

Parents and teachers can evaluate various books based on this model. The following sections list some of our favorites.

Vocabulary

To work on vocabulary enhancement, evaluative questions could be the following: Does this book introduce new or challenging vocabulary words? Will my child learn a word for an unfamiliar concept, object, or feeling?

Are You a Horse? by Andy Rash (2009) is a good choice for introducing new vocabulary to children. A cowboy named Roy receives a saddle for a birthday present, but despite his Western appearance, he does not know what a horse is. The comical story consists of Roy asking different objects and animals if they are, indeed, a horse. The satisfying conclusion will have children giggling and becoming familiar with new words.

In *Jamal's Busy Day*, Wade Hudson (1991) shows parallels between the daily labors of Jamal, an African American only child, and his professional parents. His father is an architect, and his mother is an accountant. Jamal works with numbers in math class, does research in the library, attends meetings in the school auditorium, and occasionally settles schoolyard disagreements between his peers. The book is ideal for exploring new words through

shared writing and discussion about each student's own "busy day."

Narrative Connections

To determine children's narrative connections to books adults may choose, questions could include the following: Does the book tell a story that a child can easily retell or act out? Is there a character, idea, or story line that lends itself to description or discussion?

A book that children will enjoy retelling is Ken Geist's (2007) *The Three Little Fish and the Big Bad Shark*. Based on the classic fairy tale "The Three Little Pigs," three colorfully expressive fish try to outwit a hungry shark while they find new places to live on the ocean floor. Children will laugh at the enjoyable conclusion.

In *Space Cat*, by Jeffrey Dinardo (2010), Cat has always wanted to go into space. Dog doesn't think Cat can do it, but Cat keeps pursuing her dream and teaches Dog a lesson. Children will learn through a humorous story to persevere and not give up on their dreams. Parents and teachers can ask children if they think it's important to keep trying even if they fail at something the first time. Children should think about something they would like to learn to do or a place they would like to visit, similar to Cat's dream of going into space, then write about the topic using both words and pictures.

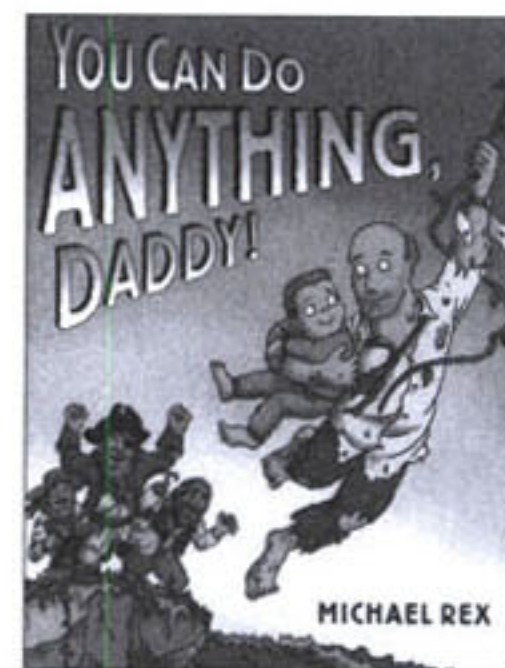
Print Motivation

With print motivation, a parent or teacher can relate the book's subject matter or illustrations to the interests of the child. Children listen better to stories, pictures, and sounds that excite them. A question to consider is, would my child be interested in this subject or these pictures? An animal lover may like books on dinosaurs and horses, and a cartoon enthusiast may like books with their favorite character or drawings illustrated in a similar fashion.

Michael Rex (2007), in his book *You Can Do Anything, Daddy!*, has written a winner, with a father starring as a superhero, saving his son from robot gorilla pirates from Mars. The comical cartoon illustrations and the exaggerated rescue scenarios will motivate children to read this action-packed

tall tale. The zany heroic exploit leads into a heartwarming message about the bond between parents and children.

Consider Cynthia Leitich Smith's (2007) *Jingle Dancer*. Jenna is determined to dance at an upcoming powwow, but she lacks the cone-shaped, tin jingles that are sewn onto dancers' dresses. The girl walks down a small-town sidewalk as she sets out to visit her great-aunt, a neighbor, a cousin, and Grandma Wolfe, all of whom lend her jingles. Smith's language consciously evokes the natural world. For example, "As Sun caught a glimpse of the Moon" (p. 13) indicates the time of day; and Jenna is careful to borrow only a limited number of jingles, "not wanting to take so many that [another's] dress would lose its voice" (p. 9, and repeated on pp. 12, 15, and 20). The illustrations gracefully complement Smith's heartening portrait of a harmonious meshing of old and new.



Print Awareness

For print awareness, evaluative questions can include the following: Is the book sturdy enough for my child to hold and turn the pages? Is the print clear, bold, and large enough to be easily viewed? Books created for teaching letter knowledge highlight the alphabet and the sounds of the letters. Exceptional letter-knowledge books clearly show the alphabet in both lower and upper case. A question to ask oneself is, Will this book teach my child the shapes of the letters of the alphabet and introduce him or her to the corresponding letter sounds?

Concerning phonological awareness, some helpful questions include the following: Does this book rhyme or somehow creatively play with the sounds in words? Is it possible to sing the words in this book? Does this book contain poems or language that is pleasing to the ear?

Ginger Foglesong Guy (2005) wrote *Siesta*, a bilingual picture book that introduces simple English and Spanish words and helps children learn about the concept of colors. A brother and sister work and play together as they prepare for naptime. By running

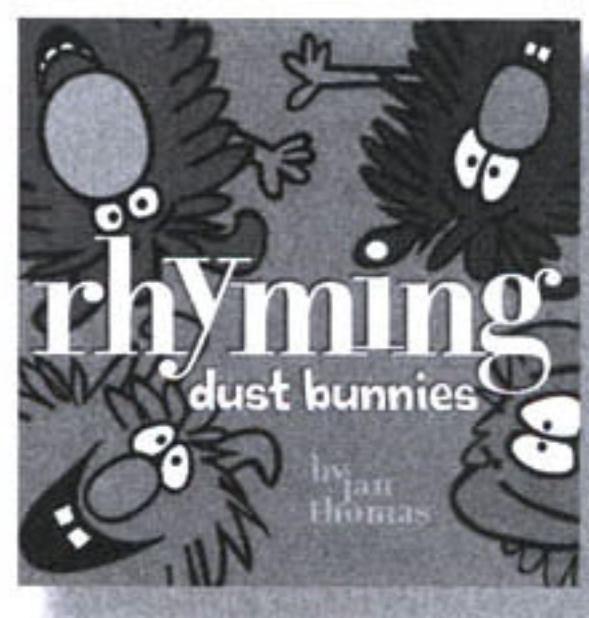
a finger along the lines of text, children can learn basic print awareness skills, such as words flowing from top to bottom and left to right.

Letter Knowledge

An ideal read-aloud for youngsters learning their letters is Judy Sierra's (2009) book *The Sleepy Little Alphabet*. Both upper- and lowercase letters share the rhyming pages as the letters prepare for bedtime. Children will enjoy the pencil and watercolor illustrations that highlight the familiar nightly routines.

In *The Dinosaur Alphabet Book* by Jerry Pallotta (1991), children can explore the letters in long names, such as *Ankylosaurus* and *Zephyrosaurus*. With *Diplodocus*, *Iguanodon*, *Rhamphorhynchus*, *Velociraptor*, and a wealth of others, acrostic charts and graphs can be made and shared along with the text. Assign each student a letter and have them draw their version of a dinosaur from the book and copy the letters in the name.

Phonological Awareness



In *Rhyming Dust Bunnies*, Jan Thomas (2008) delightfully introduces the concept of phonological awareness in her book, *Rhyming Dust Bunnies*. Four colorful dust bunnies—Ed, Ned, Ted, and Bob—have a love of rhyming.

Bob, however, can never rhyme correctly because he is too concerned about keeping them safe from the ever-looming broomstick that is trying to attack

them. Children will be able to hear and manipulate the smaller sounds in words.

It is gratifying to hear from parents and teachers who have shared such literature with children and to know that these practices impact the lives of young learners. Additionally, teachers have a repertoire of stories to share concerning the early reading process. For all participants, the Every Child Ready to Read @ your library program takes on a new dimension, adding additional, necessary ingredients to enrich lives through literacy practices and bring the world into our communities.

Reference

Association for Library Service to Children & Public Library Association. (n.d.). *Every child ready to read @ your library program*. Chicago: Authors. Retrieved April 6, 2010, from www.pla.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/ecrr/index.cfm

Literature Cited

- Dinardo, J. (2010). *Space cat*. Concord, MA: Red Chair.
- Geist, K. (2007). *The three little fish and the big bad shark*. New York: Scholastic.
- Guy, G.F. (2005). *Siesta*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Hudson, W. (1991). *Jamal's busy day*. Orange, NJ: Just Us.
- Pallotta, J. (1991). *The dinosaur alphabet book*. New York: Scholastic.
- Rash, A. (2009). *Are you a horse?* New York: Arthur A. Levine.
- Rex, M. (2007). *You can do anything, daddy!* New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Sierra, J. (2009). *The sleepy little alphabet: A bedtime story from Alphabet Town*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Smith, C.L. (2007). *Jingle dancer*. New York: Morrow Junior.
- Thomas, J. (2008). *Rhyming dust bunnies*. New York: Beach Lane.

Strickland is an author and educator and the founder of the Literacy Project of the Intermountain West; e-mail strick@michaelstrickland.com. Abbott is the public services associate and storytime coordinator for the Nampa Public Library, Idaho, USA; e-mail labbott@nampalibrary.org.

The department editors welcome reader comments. Materials for review can be sent to Violet J. Harris, Curriculum and Instruction, University of Illinois, 1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61821, USA; e-mail vjharris@uiuc.edu. They may also be sent to Michael Strickland, 5210 Cleveland Boulevard, Suite 140 Unit 145, Caldwell, ID 83607, USA; e-mail strick@michaelstrickland.com.