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Dialogic Reading: An Effective Way to Read to Preschoolers

By: [Grover J. \(Russ\) Whitehurst](#)

Dialogic reading works. Children who have been read to dialogically are substantially ahead of children who have been read to traditionally on tests of language development. Children can jump ahead by several months in just a few weeks of dialogic reading.

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Over a third of children in the U.S. enter school unprepared to learn. They lack the vocabulary, sentence structure, and other basic skills that are required to do well in school. Children who start behind generally stay behind – they drop out, they turn off. Their lives are at risk.

Why are so many children deficient in the skills that are critical to school readiness?

Children's experience with books plays an important role. Many children enter school with thousands of hours of experience with books. Their homes contain hundreds of

picture books. They see their parents and brothers and sisters reading for pleasure. Other children enter school with fewer than 25 hours of shared book reading. There are few if any children's books in their homes. Their parents and siblings aren't readers.

Picture book reading provides children with many of the skills that are necessary for school readiness: vocabulary, sound structure, the meaning of print, the structure of stories and language, sustained attention, the pleasure of learning, and on and on. Preschoolers need food, shelter, love; they also need the nourishment of books.

It is important to read frequently with your preschooler. Children who are read to three times per week or more do much better in later development than children who are read to less than three times per week. It is important to begin reading to your child at an early age. By nine months of age, infants can appreciate books that are interesting to touch or that make sounds.

What is dialogic reading?

How we read to preschoolers is as important as how frequently we read to them. The Stony Brook Reading and Language Project has developed a method of reading to preschoolers that we call *dialogic reading*.

When most adults share a book with a preschooler, they read and the child listens. In dialogic reading, the adult helps the child become the teller of the story. The adult becomes the listener, the questioner, the audience for the child. No one can learn to play the piano just by listening to someone else play. Likewise, no one can learn to read just by listening to someone else read. Children learn most from books when they are actively involved.

The fundamental reading technique in dialogic reading is the PEER sequence. This is a short interaction between a child and the adult. The adult:

- **P**rompts the child to say something about the book,
- **E**valuates the child's response,
- **E**xpands the child's response by rephrasing and adding information to it, and
- **R**epeats the prompt to make sure the child has learned from the expansion.

Imagine that the parent and the child are looking at the page of a book that has a picture of a fire engine on it. The parent says, "What is this?" (the prompt) while pointing to the fire truck. The child says, *truck*, and the parent follows with "That's right (the evaluation); it's a red fire truck (the expansion); can you say *fire truck*?" (the repetition).

Except for the first reading of a book to children, PEER sequences should occur on nearly every page. Sometimes you can read the written words on the page and then prompt the child to say something. For many books, you should do less and less reading of the written words in the book each time you read it. Leave more to the child.

How to prompt children

There are five types of prompts that are used in dialogic reading to begin PEER sequences. You can remember these prompts with the word CROWD.

- **C**ompletion prompts

You leave a blank at the end of a sentence and get the child to fill it in. These are typically used in books with rhyme or books with repetitive phrases. For example, you might say, "I think I'd be a glossy cat. A little plump but not too _____," letting the child fill in the blank with the word *fat*. Completion prompts provide children with information about the structure of language that is critical to later reading.

- **R**ecall prompts

These are questions about what happened in a book a child has already read. Recall prompts work for nearly everything except alphabet books. For example, you might say, "Can you tell me what happened to the little blue engine in this story?" Recall prompts help children in understanding story plot and in describing sequences of events. Recall prompts can be used not only at the end of a book, but also at the beginning of a book when a child has been read that book before.

- **O**pen-ended prompts

These prompts focus on the pictures in books. They work best for books that have rich, detailed illustrations. For example, while looking at a page in a book that the child is familiar with, you might say, "Tell me what's happening in this picture." Open-ended prompts help children increase their expressive fluency and attend to detail.

- **W**h- prompts

These prompts usually begin with what, where, when, why, and how questions. Like open-ended prompts, wh- prompts focus on the pictures in books. For example, you might say, "What's the name of this?" while pointing to an object in the book. Wh-questions teach children new vocabulary.

- **D**istancing prompts

These ask children to relate the pictures or words in the book they are reading to experiences outside the book. For example, while looking at a book with a picture of animals on a farm, you might say something like, "Remember when we went to the animal park last week. Which of these animals did we see there?" Distancing prompts help children form a bridge between books and the real world, as well as helping with verbal fluency, conversational abilities, and narrative skills.

Distancing prompts and recall prompts are more difficult for children than completion,

open-ended, and wh- prompts. Frequent use of distancing and recall prompts should be limited to four- and five-year-olds.

Virtually all children's books are appropriate for dialogic reading. The best books have rich detailed pictures, or are interesting to your child. Always follow your child's interest when sharing books with your child.

A technique that works

Dialogic reading works. Children who have been read to dialogically are substantially ahead of children who have been read to traditionally on tests of language development. Children can jump ahead by several months in just a few weeks of dialogic reading. We have found these effects with hundreds of children in areas as geographically different as New York, Tennessee, and Mexico, in settings as varied as homes, preschools, and daycare centers, and with children from economic backgrounds ranging from poverty to affluence.

Dialogic reading is just children and adults having a conversation about a book. Children will enjoy dialogic reading more than traditional reading as long as you mix-up your prompts with straight reading, vary what you do from reading to reading, and follow the child's interest. Keep it light. Don't push children with more prompts than they can handle happily. *Keep it fun.*

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Permission for this article was provided by Grover J. (Russ) Whitehurst, Ph.D., Director, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

Tags: [Early Literacy Development](#)

Comments

Dialogic reading is an excellent approach putting fun into reading. By making reading enjoyable children are more likely to learn and retain information and want to continue reading. In addition dialogic reading encourages the child's involvement in the reading process. Children like to be involved. Through participation children learn that their thoughts, feelings, and opinions really do matter.

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on September 23, 2009 - 12:04pm

[reply](#)

I found this article to be very interesting. Such a simple technique to make a difference. One I will be trying with my class.

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on February 21, 2011 - 5:15pm

[reply](#)

I've been using this technique unconsciously and kept it as one that works. Now that I know the finer details, I'm going to encourage my class with dialogic reading.

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on February 22, 2011 - 12:11pm

[reply](#)

This is very simple and one I can use. I'm happy I read about this technique.

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on March 11, 2011 - 12:03am

[reply](#)

This is an interesting article. I am an ESL educator and in second language acquisition we also encourage learners to interact with the story teller through content, instead of being a passive receiver. Dialogic reading in that sense also encourages kids to interact and promotes language production.

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on July 9, 2011 - 9:02am

[reply](#)

Great information for parents and teachers alike. One has to be careful that you aren't making them "test" questions though. So you might word it differently such as, " I'm wondering if you remember what happened from the last time we read this book?"

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on December 10, 2011 - 9:09am

[reply](#)

I was very happy to discover this website as I am doing some research work on dialogic reading with my Nursery class. So far so good. I will post my results as soon as I am done

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on January 17, 2012 - 2:47am

[reply](#)

I love this strategy/ I have used this strategy for years; I just didn't have a name for it. Thank you for bringing this to my attention.

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on February 8, 2012 - 9:05pm

[reply](#)

Though this technique is always used in my classroom, it is important, as stated by Jane Nelson, the "I was wondering" technique when working with children. The responses are phenomenal!!!!

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on February 15, 2012 - 10:26pm

[reply](#)

This year we are focusing on Reading for our preschoolers -Great I got lot of information from this -- we will put it into use.

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on June 4, 2013 - 4:24am

[reply](#)

This explanation on dialogic reading is very clear. Thank you for the helpful information.

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on September 30, 2013 - 9:18pm

[reply](#)

Isn't this what parents naturally do when they are reading to their children? It didn't need a researcher to come up with a system and a name for this

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on February 21, 2014 - 6:40pm

[reply](#)

I teach transitional kindergarten in California. I would really love to share this information via a parent information flyer in English and Spanish. My families could really benefit from this information and the techniques. Is a parent letter available?

Submitted by Colette (not verified) on February 28, 2014 - 6:50pm

[reply](#)

I 'VE TAUGHT ENGLISH FOR SEVERAL YEARS ,ITHINK IT'S ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING WAY TO TEMPT THE STUDENTS BY PUTTING ON THE ROLES

Submitted by Masoumeh Rayani (not verified) on May 6, 2014 - 6:01pm

[reply](#)

I have always shared books with children in this way. I didn't realise it was a special technique or had a special name. It thought it was just sharing books with children, a natural approach. I definitely agree, though, that it does not come naturally to all parents or teachers and should be promoted and encouraged. Your article is a great place to start.

Submitted by Norah Colvin (not verified) on July 11, 2014 - 7:33am

[reply](#)

As a teacher, I did these strategies with my students. Now, as an administrator, I am modeling it for my pre-school and early grade teachers. We are loving it and our students are getting better with their language development. We plan to share Dialogic Reading strategies with our parents also.

Submitted by Cheryl Ault-Barker (not verified) on October 6, 2014 - 12:03pm

[reply](#)

Does anyone have a problem with the statement that children come to school not ready to learn? To use the author's example, is someone learning to play the piano expected to know either the notes or how to play prior to sitting down with the trained professional who is going to teach them? It is an absurd premise designed to blame children and their parents, usually poor and/or brown, for the failures of their teachers.

Submitted by Reginald Hickman (not verified) on February 3, 2015 - 7:22am

[reply](#)

A great deal of research is showing that children on the verge of starting school who lack alphabet knowledge and phonemic awareness, have considerable difficulties lying ahead of them when they start to learn to read (Joshi & Aaron, 2006). Teaching children letter-sound correspondences substantially benefit them.

Submitted by Erice (not verified) on March 1, 2015 - 5:03pm

[reply](#)

Very helpful information about PEER.

Submitted by Jodi Laughlin (not verified) on April 4, 2015 - 11:49am

[reply](#)

this is what my peers and I have always called extension activities. more and more, teaching reading involves these activities throughout the story. young people have given me the feed-back that this interrupts(or fragments) the overall story. they lose the images in their minds, lose the author's message and the continuity of the story-line. I would suggest letting them get 'into' the story without too much interruption. extension activities are great after a story has been read. for younger children, that may mean several readings (not just the first), before they can grasp the story and relate their own life and thoughts to it.

Submitted by jess (not verified) on May 4, 2015 - 7:58pm

[reply](#)

very useful information.

Submitted by Mandy (not verified) on June 10, 2016 - 1:52am

[reply](#)

I love the list of prompts.

Submitted by Karen miller (not verified) on August 1, 2016 - 1:53pm

[reply](#)

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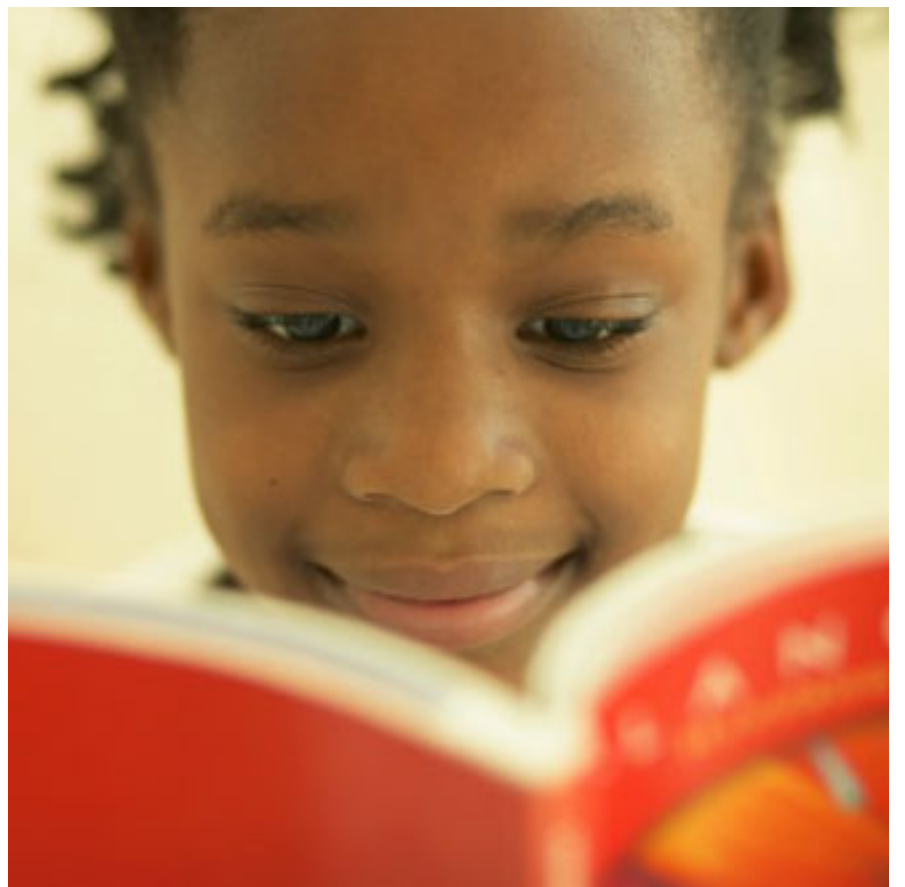
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