Listening and Spoken Language as Building Blocks for Later Literacy

Mary Ellen Nevins Ed.D.
National Director, PPCI
@The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia
Conceptualizing Reading Development in Three Stages

Precursors to Literacy

Breaking the Code

Reading to Learn
There is much work that is done prior to formal reading instruction that will influence later reading achievement:

- Language competence is a good predictor of later reading achievement,
  - developing a rich language base can contribute directly to reading with comprehension
- Developing thinking skills that will be required in reading with comprehension before the introduction of print
- Building schemata through plentiful world experiences
Listening and Talking

• Children with auditory access have the potential to learn language in a manner more similar to their hearing agemates
• Language competence sets the stage for success in reading and school subjects
Oral Language as a Building Block for Literacy

• Listening and talking are the sensory partners of reading and writing
  – Listening and reading are subsets of receptive language ability
  – Talking and writing are subsets of expressive language ability
Skills Necessary to Become a Good Reader

• Ability to decode text
  – Match sounds with letter symbols

• Ability to read fluently
  – A function of decoding accuracy, text difficulty and general language ability

• Ability to *comprehend* what is written
  – Retrieving known vocabulary, anticipating storyline based on familiarity with topic, handling complex grammar

McGuinness, 2004
Language Comprehension as a Predictor of Reading Achievement

- Performance on a reading comprehension measure can be predicted with 50% accuracy from a language comprehension measure vs. 10% from a decoding measure.
- Combining the two allows for predicting reading comprehension ability with 70% accuracy.

McGuinness, 2004
Setting the Stage for Reading Achievement

- Language Comprehension involves
  - World knowledge
  - Understanding of time, sequence of events
  - Understanding causal relationships
  - Ability to make inferences, predictions
  - Taking another’s point of view
  - Vocabulary
Background/World Knowledge

• The experiences that a child has build his concept of
  – objects, equipment, people encountered in a particular situation and the vocabulary used to describe them
  – communication patterns particular to the situation
  – expectations for behavior in that situation/experience

• Experiences can be direct (field trips, museums, activities) or indirect (pictures, books, movies)
Understanding the concepts of time, sequence and causality begins with predictable life events.

Time becomes very specifically coded to indicate point in time, sequence, duration, frequency, and speed.

A child’s concept of action/reaction evolves into “because”, “so that”, “if-then”
Making Predictions and Inferences

• As routine events and play contribute to comprehension of cause and effect, children begin to predict consequences of actions.

• Expanding comprehension of time, sequence and possibility are coded by words such as “what if,” “I think,” “who knows,” “it could be,” “we might,” “but then.”

• Combining world knowledge with predictable events allows for the development of inference skills.
Taking Another’s Point of View

- From an early age, children monitor emotion/intention through body language, facial expression and tone of voice ("no, no")
- Around age 3, children begin to describe events and experiences that happen to others
- In the preschool years, understanding of emotion words matures and is applied to others: "sad," "angry," "disappointed," "sorry," "nervous"
Characteristics of Early Vocabulary

- Includes receptive and expressive forms
- Can be adult-based or idiosyncratic
- Has referential stability (imitative or spontaneous)
- Has phonetic stability

(Owens, 2007)
Parental Word Choice

• Lexical levels include:
  – Super-ordinate = furniture
  – Basic = chair
  – Subordinate = rocker

• Parents show a preference for the basic level as the most useful level of categorization for a child
Breadth of the Lexicon

• Degree of variety of words that one has:
  – Different functions (adjectives, adverbs, and other parts of speech)
  – Tier 2 lexical items (Beck, McKeown and Kucan, 2002)
    • “large” for big
    • “astonished” for surprised
    • “parched” for thirsty
Depth of the Lexicon

- Degree of understanding of lexical items:
  - the ability to think about words—
    metalinguistic ability
    - words are arbitrary
  - multiple meanings of words
    - “run”, “hit”, “drop”, “show”
  - Developing in-depth understanding of abstract concepts represented by words such as “freedom”, “courage”, “love”
Prerequisites for Learning New Vocabulary

• A good environment for listening
• Experiences that provide the opportunity to build the lexicon
  – Experiences don’t necessarily need to be direct in order to provide opportunity for new word learning
• Multiple contexts to broaden the meanings associated with various words
• A language expert to help the child access new concepts and the words to represent them and “file” the word in the appropriate place in the vocabulary network for later retrieval
Including Parents in Book Sharing & Reading
Begin with Book Sharing

- Use the first time a child is introduced to a particular book to “share” it at his pace
- Capitalize on what the child is interested in
- Don’t worry about “reading” the text or even looking at every page
Strategies for Book Sharing

• Read book title and guess what the book might be about based on title and cover
• Let the child control the pace of the activity
• Describe pictures and interesting details; avoid testing questions
• Make comments to encourage discussion, (e.g. “The bear is playing with his toes”)
• Use an interesting voice to engage the child
• Make connections between the new book and the child’s experiences or other books
Book Reading

• Benefits of reading aloud:
  – Introducing the mechanics of reading
  – Building vocabulary and world knowledge
  – Exposing them to richer language patterns than spoken language
  – Developing familiarity of story structure
  – Emphasizing that reading is pleasurable
Introducing the Mechanics of Reading

- Books are opened and pages are turned from right to left
- Sentences are read from top to bottom and left to right
- A reader continues with the next line or the next page when the end of a line of text is reached
Building Vocabulary

• Books often use more varied vocabulary than is used in spoken language
• Tier 2 lexical items are more often used
• Rhyming patterns and other word play are natural complements to illustrated text
Building World Knowledge

• Storybooks expose children to a range of experiences and cultures with which they may not have come in contact in daily life.

• Illustrations provide a jumping-off point for discussions about things outside of a child’s direct experience.
Exposing Children to Rich Language Patterns

• Storybooks are often written with more complex sentence structures than we use in talking to children
  – greater use of expanded phrases
  – greater use of embedded clauses
• Alternate sentence compositions are used in print whereas speakers tend to stick with one construction
• Grammar is more often correct
  – fewer run on sentences
  – more specific references
Building Familiarity with Story Structure

• Books have titles that give clues to or summarize the main ideas of the story
• Stories have characters that have different traits and personalities
• Each story has a setting (time and place)
• Typically, action revolves around conflict which is resolved before the story ends
• Language is used to describe these features and create a “mood” for the story
Emphasizing that Reading is Pleasurable

• Carving out sacred time for reading at home or school sends the message that reading is valued and enjoyed.
• Reading aloud while cuddling in bed or sitting with the child in our laps associates reading with positive emotion.
• Modeling reading as a worthwhile activity encourages children to view it in this way.
Benefits of Repeated Reading

(Sulzby & Teale, 1991)

- Multiple exposures to a favorite story set the stage for later storybook reading
  - Repeated reading allows for frequent pairing of the auditory and print representations of a story to reinforce the concept that print makes sense
  - Rereading familiar stories is complemented by growing interpretation of picture cues
  - Self-taught readers report “teaching themselves to read from favorite storybooks”
Final Thoughts

• It is never too early to begin building literacy skills

• Parents who do not have a “script” for reading at home need intentional guidance on the “how to” of book sharing and book reading

• Abundant experiences and an exuberant vocabulary contribute greatly to later ability to read with comprehension


Free Parent Resource

• Helping Your Child Become a Reader

www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/hyc.html