How can teachers and families work together to build young children’s emergent literacy skills? One important strategy is to intentionally focus on various aspects of print knowledge while reading children’s books together.

Reading books aloud to children is a delightful experience that has long been practiced by both families and early childhood teachers. Read-alouds can serve a variety of purposes, such as:

- provide entertainment,
- help children understand the purpose of reading,
- foster a love and value for reading, and
- teach children new concepts and skills (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 2002).

If the purpose of reading is to build emergent literacy skills, such as print knowledge, simply reading the story aloud is just the beginning. The manner in which books are shared with children plays a role in their development of important emergent literacy skills (Justice, Kadcarev, Fan, Sofka, & Hunt, 2009; Lovelace & Stewart, 2007; Phillips, Norris, & Anderson, 2008). See Table 1 for an example on interactive shared reading.

The children in Mrs. Miller’s class are building emergent literacy skills during interactive shared reading. Emergent literacy is defined as “the reading and writing behaviors of children that occur before and develop into conventional literacy” (Heilman, et al., 2002, p. 93). Children who are familiar with a variety of print such as signs, labels, logos, newspapers, magazines, and books (Heilman, et al., 2002) are engaged in emergent literacy learning.

What is emergent literacy?

“The reading and writing behaviors of children that occur before and develop into conventional literacy” (Heilman, et al., 2002, p. 93).

Table 1. Interactive Shared Reading

A big book copy of Commotion in the Ocean, written by Giles Andreae and illustrated by David Wojtowycz, is on display on an easel in Mrs. Miller’s kindergarten classroom. The children eagerly help her read each page as she points to the words with her magic wand pointer.

Mrs. Miller stops on a page showing turtles crawling across the beach. She says, “Look, the illustrator put the words pitter patter around the turtles on this page. I wonder why he did that? I think that pitter patter might be the sound of turtle flippers as they crawl through the sand.”

As she continues with the story, the children begin to notice more sound words included with the illustrations and point them out to her. Mrs. Miller pauses on another page and says, “The author chose more sound words to show with the lobsters on this page. The words are snippety snap, clippety clap. What do you think is making those sounds? Turn and tell your buzz partner.”

Mrs. Miller stops to listen as the children excitedly respond to their partners about the text. Sophia says, “I think the sounds are coming from the lobster’s claws. They open and close like this (child demonstrates with her hands).”

Her partner, Aiden, responds with, “Yeah…the claws make a snapping sound.”

One important emergent literacy skill is print knowledge. Print knowledge includes

- awareness of how print is organized,
- functions of print,
- the names and features of alphabet letters, and
- understanding that writing conveys meaning.

Young children who understand these basic concepts of print will be far more successful when more traditional, formal reading instruction begins. Adults can help young children build print knowledge through interactive shared reading sessions (Justice, et al., 2009).
Teachers and families both can make the most out of reading with children. This article explains how to transform traditional read-alouds into interactive shared reading sessions. These topics will be addressed—new findings from research and how they enhance literacy practices, procedures for scaffolding interactive shared reading, scaffolding for English language learners, recommended books for print-referencing, and ways to engage families in interactive shared reading—so teachers can balance early literacy strategies.

**Why Enhance Literacy Practices?**

A review of recent research makes it clear that children do not master emergent literacy skills simply by having an adult read to them. The quality of interactions that occur during reading influence the acquisition of such skills (Justice, et al., 2009; Lovelace & Stewart, 2007; Phillips, et al., 2008). While read-alouds facilitate oral language development, they do not promote print knowledge, which is an important emergent literacy skill (Phillips, et al., 2008).

Read-alouds that are supplemented with specific print-referencing provide a strong literacy foundation for emergent readers by exposing children to the forms and functions of print (Justice, et al., 2009; Lovelace & Stewart, 2007; Phillips, et al., 2008).

Children’s print knowledge has been associated with later achievement in word recognition and spelling, both of which directly correlate with reading success (Justice, et al., 2009). Traditional read-aloud practices that embed print-referencing will maximize the development of emergent literacy skills.

With new advancements in technology, researchers are able to track children’s rapid eye movements and determine the amount of time children spend focused on print. In one study, children ages 4 and 5 watched as an adult read a picture-salient or print-salient book to them (Justice, Skibbe, Canning, & Lankford 2005).

- During the reading of a picture-salient book, the preschoolers spent only 2.7% of their eye fixations on the print and 2.5% in regions near the print.
- These percentages increased slightly with a print-salient book: 7% of the time on print and 6% in regions near the print.

While print-salient books seem to increase the likelihood that children will focus more of their time on print, this research suggests that pre-literate children are unlikely to focus on print on their own. As a result, informed adults make a conscious effort to direct children’s attention to print while reading to them.

Two types of storybooks

**Picture-salient**—Illustrations are so bold that they focus children’s attention on the pictures. Examples are touch-and-feel books, books with flaps, pop-up books, books with pictures that move, shiny or sparkly books, and “I spy” books.

**Print-salient**—Illustration and design focus children’s attention on the print.

In a similar study of children ages 3 to 5, while the percentage of time spent looking at print increased as children got older, all age groups spent more time looking at illustrations than print (Evans, Williamson, & Pursoo, 2008). This also suggests that young children focus little attention to print without the help of an adult.

**Build early literacy skills by focusing on the print and pointing to text.**

The researchers also found that the percentage of time looking at print was significantly higher when an adult pointed to the text as it was read: 25% with print-referencing compared to less than 6% without. Research supports the need for adults to specifically point to text as they read books to young children (Evans, et al., 2008; Justice, et al., 2005).

Print-referencing also makes an impact on children’s emergent literacy skills. The use of print referencing by preschool teachers was compared to traditional storybook reading (Justice, et al., 2009). The children in both groups participated in reading sessions with their teacher four times a week throughout the school year. The two groups were then compared on their progress in alphabetic knowledge, print concepts, and name writing. While the children from the print-referencing group scored only slightly higher on alphabetic knowledge and name writing, their scores were significantly higher on their knowledge of print concepts. This research shows that print referencing can have positive effects on building early literacy skills, especially print concepts.
Explicitly referencing print has also been shown to increase print awareness in preschool children with language impairments. Two researchers studied the effects of explicitly referencing print concepts during shared book reading among 4- and 5-year-old children with language impairments (Lovelace & Stewart, 2007). While the children increased their knowledge somewhat with shared reading alone, their scores dramatically increased when adults specifically referenced print concepts, such as identifying

- the front and back of the book,
- top and bottom of a page,
- where to begin reading,
- the title/author/illustrator,
- how to distinguish a letter from a word, and
- the difference between pictures/text.

Knowledge of these print concepts, among many others, dramatically increased with direct teaching during 10-minute shared reading sessions twice a week. Such results suggest that print-referencing by adults is beneficial to all learners, including those with special needs.

Preschool children can grasp concepts about print, along with the many forms and functions of print. As a result of engaging in print-referencing strategies, children become aware of letter shapes, names, sounds, and words. These skills serve as foundational literacy knowledge when they begin formal reading instruction (International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998).

When children's eye fixations are focused on print during read-alouds, they develop necessary early literacy skills (Evans, et al., 2008; Justice, et al., 2005). In order to build the literacy skills young children need, it is important for adults to focus children's attention on print in appropriate ways (Evans, et al., 2008; Justice, et al., 2009; Justice, et al., 2005; Lovelace & Stewart, 2007). This goal can be accomplished through interactive shared book reading.

**Ways to Scaffold Interactive Shared Reading**

When explicit teaching about print is implemented during shared book reading, there are research-based benefits for children's future reading ability (Phillips, et al., 2008). While read-aloud sessions typically consist of an adult reading text to children, interactive shared reading involves purposeful talk among the adult and children. Children are engaged in the text through a variety of interactive techniques that often involve adult modeling (What Works Clearinghouse, 2007). These strategies include point to print, highlight text, model reading skills, ask questions about print, comment about print, and track print when reading (Justice, et al., 2005).

**Use Pointers**

During shared book reading, adults can scaffold understanding about concepts of print by asking children to point to
• the title of the book or author,
• where to begin reading,
• where to go when finished reading a page,
• the first and last word on a page, and
• various punctuation marks.

Many common items can be used as pointers. For example, stuff a garden glove and tie it off at the bottom with string. Glue down all of the fingers except for the index finger, which children can use as a pointer. Glue the glove to the end of a wooden rod or stick. Other alternatives for pointers include pretend witch fingers, the end of an artificial flower, craft stick, wooden spoon, stir stick, baton, or bubble wand. Using pointers to refer to print gives children the opportunity to identify important features of the print.

Children can also be asked to “finger frame” specific parts of text. Children put their index fingers around a specified letter, word, or phrase. For example, children can finger frame one word or letter (versus two), one sentence, or the first and last letters of a word. This helps children to focus on one part of the text.

Highlight Text

In addition to using pointers, adults can help children build alphabetic knowledge by highlighting specific text. Ask children to find items such as
• a capital/lowercase letter,
• the letter a child’s name begins with,
• the letter with the “b” sound,
• the letter before “g” in the alphabet, and
• a one-, two-, or three-letter word.

Materials that can be used to identify text include highlighting tape that can easily be removed, bendable wax strips, a new plastic fly swatter with a small rectangle cut in the middle, and colored plastic dividers cut into different sizes of rectangles to highlight letters or words. Each of these materials help focus children’s attention to print.

Model Reading Skills

Modeling is an important part of teaching children to read. Adults can model what reading looks like by pointing to the words in the text as the book is read. After watching an adult, children can practice doing the same. This type of modeling helps children understand the directionality of print and that each word has meaning.

One way to check for the understanding of print concepts is to have children play the Stop Sign game. In this game, the adult intentionally reads a familiar story incorrectly, either starting in the wrong spot, reading and pointing in the wrong direction, or misreading a word. When a child notices this, he or she holds out a hand or a stop sign and calls “Stop!” When playing this game, choose a skill that the children are fairly confident about.

Identify punctuation and use character voices

Another strategy consists of modeling and discussing the purpose of quotation marks. Explain the meaning of a quotation mark, point it out in text, decide which character is talking, and read the words inside the quotation marks with an appropriate character voice. The child repeats the sentence using the same voice.

An appropriate introduction to quotation marks might sound something like the teacher’s rendition
Learning about punctuation is an emergent literacy skill. Even if children are too young to read words, they can easily repeat a phrase modeled by an adult. The purpose of this activity is not mastery but introduction to basic print concepts.

Children can also learn punctuation using a simple matching game. They can make their own cards showing various types of punctuation, based on the ages and skill levels of the children, such as period, question mark, exclamation point, and quotation marks. Ask them to write one form of punctuation on each card.

As the book is read, point to the words. Stop at various punctuation in the text. Ask children to hold up the card that matches the punctuation in the book. Children can be introduced to the names of punctuation marks, and depending on the child, the function they have in text.

Each of these strategies is a way to intentionally engage children in interactive shared reading. While these strategies can be used with all young children, there are several additional things to consider when teaching English language learners.

### Scaffold Experiences for English Language Learners

Many strategies that are used for shared book reading are also effective with English language learners (ELLs). Additional support can be offered in several ways.

- **Read the text slowly and clearly to give children time to process what is being read.**
- **Limit shared reading sessions to approximately 10 minutes to ensure that children are able to effectively listen and absorb the information.**
- **Screen for books that stretch children’s language, content, or developmental levels. Edit or rephrase the story, so children can better comprehend it. Or retell the story with the pictures or puppets.**
- **Ask children to repeat phrases of text to build their awareness of speech sounds.**
- **Read the text repeatedly. Children might take the book home, read with peers, or listen to the story on tape (Smallwood, 2002).**

There are many different strategies to direct children’s attention to print and help build emergent literacy skills. Some types of books are better for print-referencing than others.

### Recommended Books for Print-Referencing

When choosing children’s books for interactive shared book reading, choose those that best support print-referencing.

- **Consider the size of the text and the amount of text per page** (What Works Clearinghouse, 2007). For preschool and kindergarten children, make sure the size of the text is large enough for them to see from the reading area, and that there are no more than five sentences on each page (Justice, et al., 2005).
- **Choose print-salient books.** The illustration and design of the print are presented in such a way that they focus children’s attention to print. These types of books are best for interactive shared reading (Justice, et al., 2005).

There are several features to look for when determining if a book is...
print-salient. See Table 3 for a list of a few recommended print-salient books by feature.

Print-salient books often have print included with the illustrations. One example is pictures that are labeled with letters or words, as in an alphabet book (Zucker, Justice, & Piasta, 2009).

- In *Eating the Alphabet: Fruits and Vegetables From A to Z* (Ehlert, 1993), each page has a picture of fruits and vegetables that begin with that letter and are labeled with the name of the item. Labels can also be in the form of illustrations with headings and captions, as often seen in nonfiction books.
- Another example is visible sound written in the illustrations, such as “oink” beside a pig (Zucker, et al., 2009). In *The Pout-Pout Fish* (Diesen, 2008), the fish makes a blub sound throughout the book to express his unhappiness.
- A third example is visible speech, such as speech bubbles, to show that a character is talking (Zucker, et al., 2009). In *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* (Willems, 2003), speech bubbles are used to express the characters’ conversations.

Each of these features draw children’s attention to the print and provide opportunities for discussion.

Print-salient books also commonly have changes of font in the body of the text. These are a few examples:
- A change in font style so that the words stand out (Zucker, et al., 2009). Font style might go from Times New Roman to Comic Sans. This change is clearly visible to children and focuses their attention on the text.
- Change of formatting of words, so that some are **bold**, in *italics*, **underlined**, or in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS (Zucker, et al., 2009).
- Changing from standard black to red for the word *red* (Zucker, et al., 2009).

Changes in the body of text not only direct children’s attention to the print, but also provide opportunities for discussion. In *Bear Wants More* (Wilson, 2003) the text “Bear wants more” is written various ways, including bold and larger text, to express the bear’s lingering hunger.

When reading this book to children, a teacher might say, “Who can see that the style of these words is different from the rest of the words. How are they different? (Children respond.) I wonder why the author changed these words? What do you think?” Inviting children to discuss changes in text further extends their knowledge of the functions of print.

Choosing books with one or more of these features can help focus children’s attention on print. Teachers who know how to choose books and how to conduct an interactive shared book reading can ensure that children are learning the emergent literacy skills they need to become successful readers. This information is not only valuable to teachers, but also families and other caregivers (Hiatt-Michael, 2001).

### Features of print-salient books

- labels
- visible sound
- visible speech
- change of font style
- change of formatting
- change of font size
- change of font color

Ways to Engage Families

Parents’ knowledge and skills about how to help their child learn
have direct effects on their children’s academic achievement (Hiatt-Michael, 2001).

“Studies of individual families show that what the family does is more important to student success than family income or education. This is true whether the family is rich or poor, whether the parents finished high school or not, or whether the child is in preschool or in the upper grades.” (U.S. Department of Education, 1994, p. 6)

Teachers of young children are urged to communicate with families about how early literacy skills can be supported at home (Martin & Emfinger, 2008). With each of these strategies, it is critical to exchange information using children’s home languages, so that communication is clear.

**Family Workshops**

In parent education workshops, families learn from teachers or other experts in the field (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). During these workshops, teachers usually model specific ways that families can help their children at home. Ways to scaffold read-alouds can be modeled with pointers, highlighting text, and using character voices. Teachers can also show video clips of an interactive shared reading experience in the classroom.

During workshops, it is helpful to provide families with handouts describing each of the strategies discussed. Workshops can be held several times a year so that families can stay updated with new skills for children.

**Family Literacy Night**

Hosting a Family Literacy Night is another way to involve families in early childhood literacy. After families learn about specific literacy activities they can do at home, the adults and children practice them together (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). Providing time to practice helps the adults become more comfortable with the activities.

At Family Literacy Night, families use materials such as books and pointers to complete the suggested activities. This is especially beneficial to families who may not have the resources at home to complete some activities. By hosting a Family Literacy Night several times throughout the year, families have numerous opportunities to get involved in their children’s educations and have access to a variety of resources.

**Online Videos and Discussion**

Families can also be reached through on-line videos, discussion, and Websites (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). *Moodle* is a free Web application that can be used by teachers to design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Print-Salient Feature</th>
<th>Books</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Labels                | *Eating the Alphabet: Fruits & Vegetables From A to Z* by Lois Ehlert  
*Mouse Mess* by Linnea Riley |
| Visible sound         | *Commotion in the Ocean* by Giles Andreae  
*Dinosaurumpus* by Tony Mitton  
*Dooby Dooby Moo* by Doreen Cronin  
*Red Sled* by Lita Judge  
*Rumble in the Jungle* by Giles Andreae  
*The Pout-Pout Fish* by Deborah Diesen |
| Visible speech        | *Can I Play Too?* by Mo Willems  
*Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* by Mo Willems  
*The Pigeon Wants a Puppy* by Mo Willems  
*There Is a Bird on Your Head!* by Mo Willems  
*We Are in a Book* by Mo Willems |
| Change of font style  | *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* by Doreen Cronin  
*Mommy Mine* by Tim Warnes  
*No, David!* by David Shannon  
*The Way I Feel* by Janan Cain |
| Change of formatting  | *Aaron’s Hair* by Robert Munsch  
*Don’t Eat the Babysitter* by Nick Ward  
*Down by the Pond* by Margrit Cruickshank  
*Mmm, Cookies!* by Robert Munsch  
*Stephanie’s Ponytail* by Robert Munsch |
| Change of font size   | *Bear Snores On* by Karma Wilson  
*Bear Wants More* by Karma Wilson  
*I Ain’t Gonna Paint No More!* by Karen Beaumont  
*The Pout-Pout Fish in the Big-Big Dark* by Deborah Diesen |
| Change of font color  | *Llama Llama Mad at Mama* by Anna Dewdney  
*Rain* by Robert Kalan |

Table 3. Selected Print-Salient Books by Feature
online courses for families (Moodle, n.d.). Teachers can record themselves modeling literacy activities for families to try at home with their children. Teachers can also post PowerPoint® slideshows of information to share with families. With Moodle, teachers can create discussion boards in which families can post comments or questions.

Teacher-created Websites are also a great tool for disseminating information to families. There are many free Website builders for teachers, such as EducatorPages.com (2012), EZ Class Sites (Randall, 2005), and TeacherWebsite.com (Merlino, Merlino, Merlino, & Merlino, 2000). Through these Web applications, teachers can build a class site to post weekly ideas for families to use at home with their children. Like Moodle, teachers can upload PowerPoint® slideshows and videos to demonstrate specific teaching practices.

These interactive environments, in which families and teachers engage in e-learning, are beneficial because families can access the information on their own time. Encourage families to use computers in public libraries or at home.

**Family Literacy Bags**

Family Literacy Bags are another method to build early literacy skills. Children can choose high-quality books (fiction and nonfiction), read the books at home with an adult, and complete related literacy activities (Dever & Burts, 2002).

In order to encourage scaffolding of children’s skills, Family Literacy Bags often include a guide that explains how to use the contents. The guide suggests interactive questions for the adult to ask the child during the shared reading session.

The bags may also contain other materials to support literacy skills development, such as puppets or highlighting tape. Family Literacy Bags provide families with all of the materials they need to conduct an interactive read-aloud with their children.

Teachers are urged to create numerous Family Literacy Bags with different types of books so several families can benefit at any one time. Devise an easy system to keep track of the bags and their contents, and update the materials often.

**Handouts and Newsletters**

Some families prefer to be informed about how to help their children with handouts and newsletters, either in print or electronically (Hiatt-Michael, 2001, Sanchez, Walsh, & Rose, 2011). These educational tips can be shared at the beginning of the year, when teachers explain the recommended activities and demonstrate if necessary. As teachers observe specific skills that children are developing during the year, suggest ways for families to practice them at home. Weekly or monthly newsletters can offer tips specific to the skills children are currently learning. Suggest only one or two activities per newsletter.

* * *

Interactive shared book reading provides opportunities for adults to explicitly reference print to help young children build emergent literacy skills. When children enjoy their early literature experiences, they are learning to love reading. Families and teachers are encouraged to find a balance between teaching children important literacy skills and simply sharing good books with them. Together, families and teachers can establish an early literacy partnership.

**References**


Print Referencing: A Key to Interactive Shared Reading


About the Author

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Find more resources on topics related to this article in the current issue of Dimensions Extra!
Connect Print-Referencing During Read-Alouds
With a Children’s Book
Anita McLeod

Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!
Written and illustrated by Mo Willems.

When a bus driver takes a break and leaves his bus, he gives readers one warning, “Don’t let the pigeon drive the bus.” However, the pigeon is convinced he should be allowed to do the very thing he isn’t supposed to do. So, he begs, pleads, and throws a huge temper tantrum, scattering feathers everywhere. He MUST drive the bus. When the driver returns, the pigeon leaves the bus in a huff. The pigeon spots a tractor-trailer and suddenly he has a new opportunity. He’ll drive the truck!

Classroom Ideas!
Teachers can easily adapt the features of this book to read-aloud experiences. The author’s use of “bubbles,” in which the pigeon speaks to readers, draws young learners into the text. Children are excited to answer the pigeon as he begs to drive.

LITERACY (Large or Small Group): During a second or third reading of the book, draw children’s attention to book elements (title, author, front & back of book). Point to the pigeon’s speech bubbles. Children can “frame” bubbles with their fingers, practice reading the pigeon’s speech, locate words that are repeated, and reply to the pigeon. The teacher can use a separate chart to write each child’s reply. Materials: chart paper, marker, or white board.

LITERACY: Children dictate words as adults write what they say (or children use their own inventive spelling) in speech bubbles. “Publish” and display books for all children to read. Materials: Cut-out speech bubbles, child-made books, glue sticks, markers, pencils, crayons.

MOVEMENT & MUSIC: Children sing “Wheels on the Bus” using hand motions or drama to act out the words. Children create new verses to this old favorite. Materials: CD player, recording.

ART: Children construct a bus or other vehicle with a variety of boxes. This project can progress over time. Children first plan their construction by sketching the vehicle they plan to make and then create their own vehicle. Materials: boxes, tape, paint, markers, other creative materials.

PRETEND PLAY: Add transportation props such as chairs, recycled seat buckles, and a steering wheel. Children act out the story, taking the role of the bus driver, pigeon, and riders on the bus. Materials: Transportation props donated by children’s families or found at garage sales.

FIELD RESEARCH: Children visit a nearby bus, equipped with sketchpads and their prepared questions to ask a bus driver. If possible, they get on a bus, put on seat belts, and even sit in the driver’s seat. After children return to the classroom, they draw what they sketched and recall answers to their questions. Children go from “what they remember” to “what we have learned.” Materials: field trip requirements, sketch pads, pencils, chart paper, markers.

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