Teachers, families, and other caregivers often seek techniques to improve children's reading abilities. Classroom teachers frequently read to children, maintain libraries, and often are happy to have others help children with one-on-one reading experiences. Families are encouraged to take their children to local libraries and to read with them at home. One effective way to encourage students to read is to have them read with their peers, younger siblings, or younger readers.

Book buddy reading is a literacy activity that enhances children's literacy development. It is especially designed to increase emergent or less-able readers' literacy (Block & Dellamura, 2000/2001). Older children who are struggling readers typically read with younger children. While this activity helps younger children, it also is academically beneficial for older readers who learn to read more proficiently and master book levels that they would otherwise not read for fear that others will “laugh at them reading a baby book.”

What Is Book Buddy Reading?

Book buddy reading often involves pairing emerging readers with more advanced readers. The book buddy reading strategy may be implemented in several ways to help children at different ability levels.

- Students can form buddy reading groups in the same classroom with their peers.
- Younger children can be paired with advanced reading-level students in higher grade levels.
- Younger children can be paired with older students who are reading at a lower grade level.

Overall, the buddy reading activity seeks to develop interpersonal relationships between students, increase their reading level and ability, and foster positive self-esteem and confidence (Noll, 1997).

While buddy reading is often centered in a school, others outside of school, including parents, siblings, and the community also can help to shape young children's literacy (Williams and Gregory, 2001). Often, low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in their literacy skills inhibit children's ability to enjoy reading (Dean & Trent, 2002). Younger children, however, often benefit from their older siblings' school experiences as they share

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Book buddy reading enhances children's literacy.

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their academic activities at home, frequently modeling their teachers (Williams & Gregory, 2001).

When children form buddy reading groups, often the more advanced reader chooses a book or helps the younger reader to select a book to read. They then read together, the older reader guiding the reading process as the younger reader listens, tries to sound out familiar words, and/or describes illustrations. Books selected are usually intended for the younger reader’s level. Therefore, while the older readers may experience difficulties reading books at their grade levels, they are usually able to master the reading levels of the books they share with younger readers.

Buddy Reading Improves Students’ Learning

Researchers have identified many factors that can thwart students’ love of reading and emphasize that teachers can make the difference in their students’ abilities to read (Allington, 2001). When children’s learning appears to be stifled by factors such as socioeconomic status or disabilities, children are at risk for school failure (Leland & Fitzpatrick, 1993).

Educators can devise positive learning experiences, including book buddy reading, that will not only interest their students but also positively impact children’s learning outcomes such as these.

- When older children worked with younger children in buddy reading activities, both groups showed significant gains in academic achievement and improved attitudes toward schooling in general (Henriques, 1997, Heron, et al., 2000).
- Problematic behaviors decreased while positive social interactions increased in children involved in the buddy activity (Burrell, Woods, Pikes, & Holliday, 2001).
- Older children in buddy reading groups often took on the role of mentor. With the help of their teachers, they devised concrete ways to communicate difficult concepts to their younger buddies (Block & Dellamura, 2000/2001).
- Buddy activities boosted children’s confidence (Juel, 1991).
As older readers helped younger readers to experience success with books, both groups made significant gains in achievement and showed improved attitudes toward school (Beaty & Pratt, 2003). As older readers become more confident in the buddy reading activity, they purposefully seek out reading materials and teaching styles to help their younger buddies. Block and Dellamura (2000/2001) found that older readers often used vocal qualities to sustain their younger readers’ interest. “Book buddies activities enable tutors and tutees to reach new heights in their literacy abilities” (p. 370). The buddy reading activity becomes a valued learning experience for all participants.

Implementing Book Buddy Reading
A kindergarten teacher and a fifth grade teacher working in a northeastern Florida school district wanted to do something different with the students in their classrooms. The school serves mainly African American families of low socioeconomic status, many of whom live in public housing developments surrounding the school. The fifth grade teacher was concerned because at least 75% of her students were served in the Title I pull-out program where they received additional tutoring in reading and mathematics. She wanted to provide her students with a positive experience where they could help others, and which in turn would bolster their self-esteem and improve their reading skills. Visiting the kindergarten classroom and reading to the younger children in a buddy reading activity sounded like a grand idea. The fifth graders could read books at easier levels without embarrassment. The two teachers determined that their students could team up as book buddies twice a week for one hour.

Both classroom teachers monitored the activity. The kindergarten teacher walked about the reading groups observing how the students interacted with each other. Teachers also gave the fifth graders pointers on how to extend the reading activities with their younger buddies.

The teachers and school librarian worked together to select books to display on a cart to be kept in the kindergarten classroom. They chose books based on the younger children’s reading levels and interests, including various genres such as fairy tales, realistic fiction, and historical fiction. Popular authors such as Eve Bunting, Dr. Seuss, Eric Carle, Tomie dePaola, Mary Hoffman, Patricia Polacco, Allen Say,
and Faith Ringgold were included in the collection.

The plan was for fifth graders to visit the kindergarten classroom, help their kindergarten reading buddies select reading materials from the book cart, and find a comfortable reading space in or immediately outside the classroom to read.

As the buddy reading activity developed, the kindergartners sometimes selected books they wanted the fifth graders to read with them. Their selected titles were often books that the fifth graders or their classroom teacher had read to them before. After reading, many of the fifth graders asked the kindergartners basic recall comprehension questions about the books. Some buddy pairs then illustrated the stories they read.

Both classroom teachers monitored the activity. The kindergarten teacher walked about the reading groups, observing how the students interacted with each other. Teachers also gave the fifth graders pointers on how to extend the reading activities with their younger buddies.

As the children participated in the book buddy reading activity, three questions were asked to determine the effectiveness of the activity:

1. Do you enjoy reading with your book buddy?
2. Does working with your book buddy help you to understand the story?
3. Do you enjoy working with younger children?

Do you enjoy reading with your book buddy?

When asked if they enjoyed reading with their book buddies, both kindergarten and fifth grade students responded positively. When the kindergartners were asked to elaborate, two students said that they enjoyed reading with their buddies because they did not shout at them. One student declared, “She’s nice to me. Not like Marie [all names are pseudonyms] my [big] sister.” Another student shared, “I like when Janet reads books. She got a nice voice.”

As the students talked about their older buddies, four students compared the fifth graders to their kindergarten teacher. One student shared, “Carla points [our pictures] just like Mrs. Jones. I think she’s a good teacher.”

One kindergartner expressed concern that her fifth grade buddy did not read well. She thought the buddy was mispronouncing words to “see if I’m paying attention.” She shared further, “When he said a word wrong and I said it right he told me ‘Good, you’re paying attention.’ I liked that.” The fifth grader’s praise for the kindergartner was clearly important!

Fifth graders also expressed their appreciation for the buddy reading activity. One student shared, “I took a long time to [learn to] read so it’s good that we can help the babies so they don’t repeat a grade or nothing.” Another shared, “I have two younger sisters and a brother, so it’s like reading with them only Janice doesn’t give as much trouble as my brother and sisters.” Still another shared, “I like that I can share something they don’t know about…. I don’t remember if I got that in kindergarten.”

Does working with your book buddy help you to understand the story?

The kindergartners all expressed that reading with their book buddies helped them to better understand the story. Tamara, who was always excited when her fifth grade buddy came, stated, “Marian always says ‘That’s great’ when I give the right answer.” For her, giving the right answer meant she understood the book that was read to her.

Another student shared, “Carla always tell[s] me to choose the book I want. I like that.” John shared, “I like when we look at pictures and not the words, I can read real good then.” For John, being able to predict what each picture represented meant that he really understood the story.

As one fifth grader read about “crickets” with his buddy, the kindergartner pointed to the illustration and said “Grasshopper.” The older buddy replied, “No, cricket. Look, c-r-i-c-k-e-t. Cricket.” The kindergartner looked at the picture, looked at his buddy, and then continued, “Cricket.” He had just learned a new word.

Fifth graders took their role as older buddies seriously.

Just as they did in their classroom reading center, several kindergartners wanted to respond to their books after the buddy activity. For some, the response was to draw pictures on construction paper. The drawings often represented their favorite sections of the stories.

Throughout the experience, kindergartners would remind the fifth graders to ask “What is the title of this book? Who is the author?
of this book?” These questions were also reflective of the kindergarten teacher’s reading strategies. One kindergartner insisted that his buddy draw a picture with him after each reading. He always placed the pictures in his desk after the buddy reading session.

Several of the fifth graders were instrumental in helping kindergartners select their own reading materials. As the kindergartners selected books they could read, their fifth grade buddies would listen and offer encouraging praise as they read. After one such experience, one kindergartner declared, “I can read this book all by myself now. I can read just like you.”

Do you enjoy working with younger children?

The fifth grade buddies shared that they enjoyed working with the kindergartners. Several felt like teachers when they read to the kindergartners. One student said, “It makes me feel like I’m the teacher too…. I just try to do what Mrs. Brown do[es] with us in class.”

Carla felt that it was easy to work with the younger buddies. She stated, “They really want to hear us so I try to make them interested in whatever I would read.” Marian also felt that being a book buddy was a good thing to do with kindergartners. “They like it when you praise them so I just did it all the time…. I’m sure we’re like that, too.”

In their roles as big buddies, the fifth graders attended to the kindergartners’ needs as they selected books to read. When one kindergartner selected a difficult text and brought it to her buddy, the fifth grader skillfully pointed out another book saying, “How about this one?”

It was evident that several fifth graders modeled reading strategies used in their classroom.

- They encouraged their buddies to predict what they thought the story would be about, based on the title or cover illustration.
- Several would page through the picture books and ask their buddies to describe what was happening in the story.

Subjects & Predicates

The admiration kindergartners shared for fifth grade students was evident. They focused more intently on the reading materials, became more engaged in the text, and related the text to their personal experiences.
As they read, the fifth graders would point to the words and provide wait time for the kindergartners to look at the illustrations before turning the pages. They paused at key points in the story so the kindergartners could predict what would happen next. These actions definitely showed their understanding of the strategies their teachers encouraged them to utilize in their own reading.

Going beyond their buddy reading duties, several of the fifth graders would help their buddies to complete class assignments if they had time remaining. Others encouraged their buddies to select other book titles they could read independently. It was evident that they took their role as older buddies seriously.

Benefits of the Book Buddies Project

The benefits of implementing the book buddy reading program were evident for both fifth grade and kindergartners students. Overall, the students enjoyed reading together. They experienced literacy in a positive and non-threatening atmosphere.

The fifth grade students, many considered to be struggling readers at their grade level, became more comfortable as they got more involved with the kindergartners. They took their roles as big buddies seriously. These students worked at fine-tuning their reading sessions with the kindergartners, practicing their oral reading skills without fear of being a "poor reader." This level of comfort was exactly what their teacher wanted them to experience at their grade level. The fifth grade teacher felt that the experience also had a positive effect on children's social development as evidenced by the reciprocal relationships they developed with their buddies.

The fifth graders improved their own reading skills as they read with younger children instead of being tutored in a remedial setting. They further developed enthusiasm for reading as they practiced book selection and reading strategies with kindergartners. The fifth graders were better able to communicate their thoughts to the kindergartners as they focused on word choice and meaning. They displayed critical thought as they questioned the kindergartners, helping them to respond in more thoughtful and meaningful ways.

For many of the fifth graders, their sense of self, their positive self-esteem, also seemed to blossom as they realized the important role they played in the kindergartners' learning.

For kindergartners, the book buddy activity presented an added venue for exposing them to language and literacy as they experienced older children teaching them how to read and enjoy literature. The admiration the kindergartners shared for the fifth grade students was evident. They focused more intently on the reading materials, became more engaged in the text, and often related the text to their personal experiences.

The buddy reading activity also enabled kindergartners to experience books in aesthetic ways. When the kindergartener teacher asked the students if they knew what the book buddy activity meant, one kindergartner declared, "To read!" The teacher acknowledged, "Yes, to read good literature. That means books."

Furthermore, the book buddy program helped to develop the students' positive social interactions in and outside of the classroom. The fifth graders liked being role models for kindergartners and kindergartners enjoyed working with "big kids." One kindergartner wanted to know if her buddy liked fifth grade. Another asked what subject her fifth grade buddy enjoyed most. Most of the students attended a local YMCA after school, and kindergartners often mentioned seeing their buddies there. It was clear that the students felt a bond that was beyond the reading activity and classroom environment.

A book buddy reading program has the potential to create long-lasting positive learning experiences for the students involved. Not only do young children experience literature through the eyes of other students, they also develop lasting relationships as they view older students as people they can look up to. Helping students to become fluent readers—by using positive, appropriate methods—is of utmost importance for all classroom teachers.

Using a technique that others have implemented and had positive results with is encouraging. Teachers and others involved in children's learning realize that they are not alone in the quest to find suitable strategies. Implementing the book buddies project in a school serving families in low socioeconomic groups and under-achieving students brought kindergartners and fifth graders together to enhance their reading skills.
This is just one example of how a successful book buddy reading project can be implemented.

References


Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Book Buddies: Kindergartners and Fifth Graders Explore Books Together

by Ruth McKoy Lowery, Donna Sabis-Burns, and Shawn Anderson-Brown

What is a book buddy program?
- Book buddy reading involves pairing less-skilled readers with more advanced readers
- Book buddy reading is a learning activity that can enhance both younger and older children’s early literacy development
- When older children work with younger children in buddy reading, both groups show significant gains in academic achievement and improved attitudes toward school

Related enrichment experiences for children
- Children can build on their reading in various formats, such as drawing or recreating a shadowbox scene from a favorite book they read with their buddies
- Children might create a “Who is the character?” portrait by illustrating some of their favorite characters with their buddies
- Students could write letters to the books’ authors
- Small groups of children who read similar books could reenact the story, complete with props and costumes they design

Recommendations for implementing a book buddy program
- Early childhood teachers can pair with teachers in higher grade levels to match buddy readers/reading pairs
- Teachers meet to determine how the program will be implemented, the length of the program, and what they hope students will achieve from the experience
- Involve librarian or school media personnel to help with appropriate book selections
- Coach older children by explaining or modeling reading strategies with them
- Involve parents by having students take home books and pair up with an older sibling, parent, or others to have a “home buddy reading pair”
- Parents and siblings can help kindergarten students to keep track of the books they read at home so they can share this information in an “author’s chair” at school
- Teachers evaluate students’ reading levels before, during, and after they participate in the buddy reading activity to determine if their reading skills are enhanced by the experience
- Keep a running log of favorite books so these and similar books can be consistently available in the classroom

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.