

Reading Picture Books with Infants and Toddlers

Learning Through Language

Jane Torr



Reading Picture Books with Infants and Toddlers

Reading picture books with infants and toddlers facilitates their early language development, with far-reaching benefits for their later reading abilities and academic achievement.

While the importance of reading books with children aged from 3 to 5 years is widely recognised, the benefits of reading with much younger children from 0 to 3 years, who are still engaged in learning their first language, are less well understood. This book will explore the seemingly simple practice of reading picture books with infants and toddlers aged 0–3 years, from a range of perspectives. Not only do book-focused adult–child interactions support language and early literacy development in multiple ways, such interactions can also, at the same time, foster intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual growth. By weaving together in an accessible manner the insights from several different discipline areas, this book will explain how and why reading with infants and toddlers has such power to enrich their lives.

Providing an evidence-based, theoretically informed account, *Reading Picture Books with Infants and Toddlers* supports educators, parents, and caregivers with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to provide frequent, enjoyable, and language-rich reading experiences with infants and toddlers.

Jane Torr has spent over thirty years teaching and researching in the areas of young children's language, literacy, and literary development in home and early childhood education and care settings. She has drawn on insights from systemic functional linguistic theory to support her research, which has been published in academic and professional journals.



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1 The Benefits of Reading with Infants and Toddlers

Stories enrich the lives of young children. Picture books introduce them to a world beyond their personal lived experience, by exposing them to captivating illustrations, interesting words, and the patterned language of different genres. When parents and educators not only read the printed words aloud, but also talk about the meanings expressed through the words and pictures, a deeper and richer type of engagement can take place. The conversations surrounding picture books forge strong relational bonds between an adult and child. These conversations provide an opportunity for mutual engagement and shared understanding. Unlike older children who can read independently, young children rely on the guidance of adults to help them access the meanings they encounter in picture books.

In addition to providing pleasure and entertainment, children's earliest experiences with picture books provide the foundations upon which their future reading skills will be built. The seemingly simple act of reading and talking about picture books with infants and toddlers is considered so significant for children's future language and literacy development that governments and professional bodies around the world actively encourage parents to read with their infant (High & Klass, 2014; Zuckerman et al., 2018). For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics, through its Reach Out and Read program, presents new parents with a complimentary picture book and advice on how to support their baby's literacy learning (Zuckerman & Augustyn, 2011; Zuckerman & Needlman, 2020). Similarly, in England and Wales, the Bookstart program gives all children under 12 months of age a picture book, together with literacy information and other resources. Similar programs are run in Ireland (O'Farrelly et al., 2018). These programs are informed by a wealth of empirical studies that show a strong association between children's earliest experiences with books and reading, and their future language and literacy development (Demir-Lira et al., 2019; Shahaeian et al., 2018).

Infants and toddlers are engaged in learning their first language(s), so it may appear premature to start reading picture books with them. Yet, as Halliday (1975; see also Halliday 2003 [1980]) has shown, one of the first symbolic "acts of meaning" produced by infants in their first year of life serves an *imaginative function*. Halliday (1975) explains the imaginative function in this way:

2 *The Benefits of Reading with Infants and Toddlers*

As well as moving into, taking over and exploring the universe which he finds around him, the child also uses language for creating a universe of his own, a world initially of pure sound, but which gradually turns into one of story and make-believe and let's-pretend, and ultimately into the realm of poetry and imaginative writing. This we may call the “let's pretend” function of language.

(Halliday, 1975, p. 20)

The imaginative function of language is nourished when an infant or toddler has plentiful experiences with oral story-telling, nursery rhymes, lullabies, and picture books. Such experiences facilitate the development of a rich imaginative life, while simultaneously providing many language learning opportunities and contributing to children's learning across multiple domains.

Aims of this Book

All children have the basic human right to learn to read, according to the International Literacy Association (2018), and the first steps towards the fulfilment of that right begin in the first three years of life. Parents, educators, and caregivers play a crucial role in supporting and facilitating children's development as readers. The relationship between infants' and toddlers' experiences with picture books and their future success in learning to read is complex and multifaceted. Informed by systemic functional linguistic theory (Halliday, 1994) and drawing on empirical research from different disciplines, this book has the following aims:

- to increase awareness of the relationship between infants' and toddlers' experiences with picture books and their current and future language and literacy development;
- to describe the processes involved in children's language development from birth to three years of age, and the unique role that shared reading plays in supporting this development;
- to investigate how parents and educators can facilitate children's language development, literary awareness, and learning more broadly through their talk surrounding the reading of picture books; and
- to analyse a range of picture books intended for children aged under three years in terms of their illustrations, printed text and thematic content, and their potential to support early language and literacy learning.

Shared Reading: A Definition

The term *shared reading* (sometimes referred to as *joint reading* or *interactional reading*) as it is used in this book refers specifically to the book-focused interactions that take place between an adult (parent, educator, or caregiver) and one or more children aged under three years. Three elements contribute to the

overall meaning-making during shared reading of picture books. First, the adult reader contributes by reading the print aloud, talking to the child about the words and pictures, and using her voice and gestures to stimulate the child's interest, understanding and engagement. Secondly, the child participates by looking at the pictures, listening to the words read aloud, communicating through vocal, verbal, and gestural means, and physically interacting with the book by touching, patting, pointing, handling, and manipulating it.

Thirdly, the picture book itself provides a stimulus that can amuse, delight, inform and educate very young children. Picture books reveal their meanings through the interaction between the printed words and illustrations, while at the same time directly addressing the actual child and adult readers and viewers of the picture book. In picture books for children under three years, much of the meaning is conveyed through the illustrations, although the printed words are equally important. Shared reading therefore involves the complex interaction between different modes of meaning-making that run parallel to each other and intersect at various points.

Content of this Book

Chapter 1 begins with an overview of the foundational knowledge, skills, and motivations that are necessary for children to be able to learn to read after they start school. The chapter then presents empirical research showing a strong association between infants' and toddlers' earliest experiences of shared reading and their future achievement in learning to read after school entry. Chapter 2 introduces a theory of language which is also a theory of learning; systemic functional linguistic theory (SFL). As Meek (1988) explains, reading is "something with language at its core" (p. 3). This means that shared reading is most likely to be effective as a pedagogical practice if parents and educators consider what language is, how it is learnt, and the role they play in facilitating this learning.

Chapter 3 describes the potential of shared reading to facilitate children's access to the types of educational knowledge that are valued in school contexts, with implications for future reading success. Chapters 4–6 trace children's language development from birth to 18 months (Chapter 4), 18 months to two years (Chapter 5), and two to three years (Chapter 6). The role of picture books in creating contexts for learning during each phase of development is described.

Much of the research on shared reading is based on mothers' interactions with their own child. Professional early childhood educators play a crucial role in facilitating the language development of children aged under three years in group contexts. Chapter 7 explores how shared reading is enacted in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres for children aged under three years, and the contextual factors that affect its enactment.

Chapter 8 shifts focus to consider the qualities of picture books as aesthetic artefacts and pedagogical texts in the lives of young children. The picture book serves as a catalyst for the adult–child conversations surrounding the reading, so

it is important to consider the qualities of picture books intended for infants and toddlers.

Terminology

Please note that this book uses the term *infant* to refer to a child aged under two years, and *toddler* to refer to a child aged from two to three years. The adult–child talk surrounding the reading of a picture book is referred to as the *extra-textual text*. The picture book itself is the *focal text*. Unless otherwise stated, the term *picture book* refers to a commercially published picture book. The term *educator* refers to a member of staff working with children under three in an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centre. The term *caregiver* refers to other adults who have regular contact with children under three years, for example grandparents and older siblings.

Literacy and Learning to Read

Contemporary definitions of literacy involve multiple forms of meaning making, including speech, print-based and digital texts, colour, music, sound, visual images, dance, and song, all of which can be used to represent aspects of human experience. The International Literacy Association (2018) defines literacy as “The ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials across disciplines and in any context”. The Australian Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009), which is a curriculum for children aged from birth to five, defines literacy as “the capacity, confidence and disposition to use language in all its forms. Literacy incorporates a range of modes of communication, including music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media and drama, as well as talking, listening, viewing, reading and writing” (p. 37).

This book focuses on one of those forms of meaning making, shared reading, and its role in supporting children’s language and literacy development. To this end, this book adopts the definition of *reading* presented by Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998); “a process of getting meaning from print, using knowledge about the written alphabet and about the sound structure of oral language for purposes of achieving understanding” (p.vi). Children’s early literacy knowledge is learnt gradually and informally during the early childhood years, through observation, experimentation, and countless interactions with more experienced speakers. Participation in stories, songs, rhymes, pretend-play, and craft activities all increase young children’s awareness of different forms of meaning making.

The ability to read and write skilfully and fluently is one form of literate activity that is highly valued in educational and professional contexts. Two types of processes are required for skilled and fluent reading: decoding processes and comprehending processes. These processes are sometimes referred to as constrained skills and unconstrained skills (Snow & Matthews, 2016). Decoding processes (constrained skills) involve the translation of the printed words on the

page or screen into their corresponding spoken form. Comprehending processes (unconstrained skills) involve the interpretation of the words so that they make sense in the context. Skilled readers are able to apply both types of processes simultaneously to gain meaning from printed text. In order to be ready and able to learn to read and write effectively after they begin their formal schooling at the age of five or six years, young children need to arrive at school having already informally gained certain forms of knowledge and skills about print, pictures and books.

Knowledge and Skills Necessary when Learning to Read

This section outlines the types of knowledge, skills, and motivations that children need in order to be ready to learn to read after they commence their formal schooling.

Decoding Processes

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the understanding that each spoken word is made up of separate, individual speech sounds called phonemes. A phoneme in a particular language is recognised when paired with another word that differs from it by only one speech sound and which has a different meaning. If two rhyming words (a minimal pair) have different meanings, then the individual speech sound that distinguishes between the two words has the status of a phoneme in that language. For example, in English, the two words “cot” and “got” differ by only one speech sound (/k/ and /g/), have different meanings, and therefore they are recognised as two separate phonemes by English speakers. In the normal flow of connected speech, however, the acoustic qualities of any speech sound are influenced by the speech sounds that surround it. In the sentence “Tina caught the flu”, the /t/ sound is pronounced differently depending on whether it is in the initial position (Tina) or the final position (caught) of a word. Yet readers and writers in English “hear” these two different sounds as the same phoneme /t/.

Print Concepts and Conventions

This is the understanding that print conveys meaning. It includes knowing that print is organised in certain ways on the page. In English, for example, print is read from left to right and from top to bottom.

Alphabetic Awareness

Alphabetic awareness refers to the understanding that each individual letter (grapheme) in a printed word corresponds to a specific speech sound (phoneme), and that individual speech sounds must be joined together to produce the spoken form of a word. In some languages, there is a consistent relationship between

each letter and its corresponding phoneme. In English, however, there are 26 letters in the alphabet, and they represent 44 different phonemes in speech. This means that the same phoneme can be represented by two different letters (e.g. the /k/ sound in *cat* and *kite*), and the same letter can represent two different phonemes; for example the /k/ and /s/ sounds in the word *cancel*. The situation is made more complex because in English a single phoneme can also be represented by a combination of letters; for example the letters *ch*, *sh*, and *th* represent just one speech sound each.

Comprehending Processes

Vocabulary Knowledge

The size of a person's vocabulary refers to the number of content words a person can produce (productive or expressive vocabulary) and can understand (receptive vocabulary). Content words are "open-class" words and include nouns (referring to objects or entities), verbs (referring to actions and processes), adjectives (referring to qualities and attributes) and adverbs (referring to circumstances). Content words contrast with "closed class" words (grammatical words), which are fewer in number and contain fewer letters. Examples include pronouns (e.g. *I*, *me*, *my*, *he*, *she*, *it*, *you*, *they*) and linking words such as prepositions (e.g. *in*, *on*, *by*, *at*) and conjunctions (e.g. *and*, *because*, *although*).

The depth of a person's vocabulary relates to their knowledge about how words are related to each other either morphologically or thematically (Hadley & Dickinson, 2020). This includes the understanding that there is an underlying connection between words that differ in tense (*jumps*, *jumped*, *jumping*) and number (*cat*, *cats*). Thematic knowledge includes the understanding of taxonomies; for example that the word *fruit* is a superordinate term for *apples* and *oranges*, but not for *carrots* and *potatoes*.

Grammatical Knowledge

Grammatical knowledge refers to the various ways in which words may be arranged in sentences to express meaning. Spoken and written language perform complementary functions in speakers' lives, and this is reflected in the types of grammatical structures they contain to express meaning. The term *register* (sometimes referred to as *genre*) is used to describe the ways in which a speaker's or writer's choice of vocabulary and grammatical structure will differ according to the function or purpose of a piece of language. Commonly recognised registers in western cultures include narratives, recounts, and explanations.

Background Knowledge

Background knowledge refers to the way readers draw on their knowledge about the physical or social world in order to interpret the meaning of a