

# CHAPTER 5:

## Using “Real Books” in Your Program

(from *Teach a Child to Read With Children's Books* (2009) by Mark Thogmartin and Mary Gallagher (<http://teachachildtoread.net>)

### Books: The core of a good reading program

The statement that books should be the central, most important element in any reading program may, at first, seem self-evident. However, many reading curricula do not introduce real books into the program right at the beginning. Letter cards, memorization drills, worksheets, and the focus on isolated sounds are the primary modes of instruction in the first months of these programs. Any stories that are used are ones that are usually devised to meet some phonetic purpose and do not represent the true nature of "real" books. For a child who has grown to love rich literature, the reality that he will not be given the opportunity to read such books on his own may confuse or discourage him.

Most of these stories use language that is unnatural and, therefore, unfamiliar to young readers. The sentences often sound choppy and may be hard for a child to read fluently. The contrived sentences do not follow natural patterns of speech and language and may confuse children as they attempt to use context clues and background information to make predictions about the text. The idea that children will only access one skill (decoding) when attempting to read a new story directly opposes what research shows us that good readers do. In addition, the vocabulary may be unfamiliar and the student may lack background knowledge to understand the story. The illustrations are either nonexistent or are simple black and white sketches. Take this example from *The Ordinary Parent's Guide to Teaching Reading* (Wise & Buffington, 2005):

**The crab shrank back in the crack on the rock.**

**The shrimp swam in the crack.**

**Smack!**

**The crab did dash with his shrimp snack.**

**Yum!**

This example was developed to help the child practice the digraph *sh* and the trigraph *shr*. Wise also notes in her response to frequently asked questions that, when teaching these sounds, pictures are not necessary because it is an "extra mental step" and the pictures "distract the child from print" (Wise & Buffington, 2005). Now, without pictures, background knowledge, and a little "setting the stage" about shrimps and crabs and their hunting and eating habits, we are not sure that most 5-year olds would understand what they just read even if they could sound out all the words perfectly. In addition, words like *shrank* and *shrimp* are not words that students will encounter regularly at this stage of their reading careers.

Children's books support a child's limited vocabulary by providing illustrations that support the text, thereby giving the child opportunity to read words that may be unusual or new to him. The pictures do more than just that, they engage the brain in a multi-sensory approach to learning and linking knowledge. Pictures of shrimp and crabs assist the child in developing his vocabulary, general world knowledge, and overall understanding of the story. And, we would be remiss if we failed to point out that the pictures themselves add to the pure enjoyment of the text and, after all, isn't that one of the primary goals you have for your child - to enjoy reading? As adults, we all enjoy books that bring us pleasure, and many times those books include beautiful illustrations or photography! If pictures were not part of the pleasure of reading and did not aid in comprehension, then magazine sales would be nonexistent.

Proponents of skill-based programs would be quick to point out that these drills are not intended for meaning or enjoyment. They have a specific purpose, and that is to provide practice in a particular element of their reading skills sequence. Blumenfeld, on page 43 of *How to Tutor*, states "Emphasis on comprehension and meaning should not begin until *after* [emphasis his] the child has mastered the entire sound-symbol system and can read and write with ease every word in his own speaking vocabulary." While we agree that reading at this stage should be pleasurable and not filled with drill and intense questioning about the story elements and plot, in all reality, how can reading be pleasurable and meaningful if one does not understand what one is reading? Discussing stories and providing a fun atmosphere to talk about what you are reading with your child will develop early level comprehension skills that will be critical to his success as a

developing reader. Keep in mind that in the beginning years (grades kindergarten through third), children are *learning to read*, but from fourth grade on, children are *reading to learn*. It is important to model and practice comprehension strategies such as predicting, making inferences about the story, comparing characters, identifying who is telling the story or what the author is trying to teach through the story even at the early stages of reading instruction.

The problem with this approach suggested by Wise and Blumenfeld and others who promote teaching isolated skills apart from "real" reading is that children are not able to separate practice from the real thing, nor should they be expected to. We did not prevent them from talking with us until they had mastered every sound in our language, and until they had a speaking vocabulary of at least 400 words! Learning to read, like learning to talk, can and ought to be meaningful and enjoyable from the start.

The writers of many phonics programs instinctively realize that the process should be enjoyable and not boring. This is why they introduce all sorts of artificial elements into their programs to make them fun—elements like puppets, songs, letter people, rewards, and colorful progress charts. Since repetitive drill and contrived stories are things that most children would soon learn to dislike, they must be supplemented with rewards, games, and songs to keep the students interested. Therefore, the focus is taken away from reading for real purposes. When the child thinks "reading," he thinks "games" or "songs" or "worksheets" or "drills" or "boring." Unfortunately, statistics show that as students progress through school, time spent on actual reading is replaced with worksheets and workbooks. At the same time, student time spent reading for pleasure at home decreases as they move through grade levels (Allington, 2006). Perhaps it is not the students' lack of interest, but rather the association that reading is boring, that moves children away from reading for pleasure. We urge you to not let this happen with your child!

A reading program that uses real children's literature as the primary instructional tool has purposefulness and enjoyment built right into it. After all, children's books are meant to be enjoyed. Otherwise they would not have been written and published. Learning to read with real books delivers its own rewards as part of the process and educators refer to these learning experiences as authentic reading experiences because they teach children that reading is rewarding and purposeful. Contrast the selection from *The Ordinary Parent's Guide to Teaching Reading* cited above with the following selection from *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* by Bill Martin:

**Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?  
I see a redbird looking at me.**

**Redbird, redbird, what do you see?  
I see a yellow duck looking at me.**

With the book in hand, most five-year-olds can “read” this selection, with expression, during the earliest formal reading lessons. This is not to say that they would have mastered all of the words in isolation, or even all of the letter sounds. But in the student’s mind, he is *reading* a real book, and that is exciting! This increases his desire to learn more about reading so he can tackle harder books and this positive reinforcement of gaining meaning and enjoyment from the book develops his confidence as a reader. In this type of book, he is also getting practice with commonly used words such as color words and high-frequency words such as *I, me, see, what, do, you, and at*. He will eagerly attempt to read the sequel *Polar Bear, Polar Bear*, because he has learned to use the patterns, illustrations, and predictability of the text to help him read. All of the other elements of reading will come in time, with lots of practice and good instruction.

Children have their own tastes and preferences just as adults do. As you expose your child to quality children's books, he will find favorite authors, styles, and types of books. A series of books that creates a desire for your child to continue reading is a natural "set of readers" and one you do not even need to purchase! A local library card will provide you with all the resources you need to give your child practice.

## Predictable books

The key to using real literature at the very beginning of formal reading instruction is in using books that are predictable. In an article by Lynn K. Rhodes (1981) titled “I can read! Predictable books as resources for reading and writing instruction,” she discusses the characteristics of predictable books. They are as follows:

- **Predictable books have a repetitive pattern.**

Children can quickly follow and read along with the book after the first few pages.

- **They are about concepts that are very familiar to most early readers.** The children can easily identify with the story line and the characters.
- **There is a good match between the text and its illustrations.** This is an important key in a book's readability. In the selection from *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* above, the pictures that accompany the text essentially tell the story for the child after he has become familiar with the pattern.
- **Many predictable books use elements of rhyme and rhythm to increase the overall predictability of the book.** Once the child catches the rhythm or the rhyming pattern, it enhances his ability to predict what will come next. Practicing with rhyme is necessary for children to develop the ability to discriminate between and manipulate sounds.
- **Predictable books provide exposure and practice with high-frequency words.** Children will see and read over and over words such as: *we, the, said, at, I, with, go, do*, etc.
- **Many also use a cumulative pattern as the story progresses.** A familiar example of a story that has a cumulative pattern is *The Gingerbread Man* where each of the fugitive cookie's pursuers is added to the narrative as the story reaches the climax.
- **Stories that are familiar to a child also enhance their predictability.** It is easy for most children to predict what the wolf will say in *The Three Little Pigs* because of their prior experiences with the story.
- **Familiar sequences are often characteristic of predictable books.** Eric Carle, in his book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, uses two sequences that are familiar to most young children—numbers and the days of the week:

**On Monday he ate through one apple.  
But he was still hungry.**

**On Tuesday he ate through two pears,  
but he was still hungry.**

# Why use predictable books?

The primary reason for using these books in the earliest instructional sessions has to do with motivation. In traditional phonics-based programs, the child has to wait until he has mastered some basic elements of reading before he is able to venture into the world of “real” books. Because of this delay, he may become confused about the purposes or value of reading. The rewards of learning to read may be perceived as being so far off into the future that the child gives up hope. With most six-year-olds, delayed gratification equals no gratification!

Let's use an analogy to give the broader picture of how a child practices the skills to become a proficient reader. If a child signs up to be on a soccer team (at any age), he is anticipating that he will be playing in soccer games. The coach will provide drills to practice specific skills and will give the players exercises to strengthen their muscles and build their endurance, but the coach also knows that the children need to practice these skills in the context of a real game. It is during the games that the child becomes a proficient soccer player. He is able to apply the basics he has learned to real game situations. He learns to make adjustments to his style and predicts what to do based on the behavior of other players. He is practicing all the fundamentals and, although his skills may be basic, he is indeed playing the game! Imagine signing your child up for soccer only to be told that until all his skills are stellar he will not be allowed to participate in a real game! We doubt that you, or your child, would commit much time and enthusiasm to the soccer practices without the reward of being a part of the games. It is the same with reading. Your child is still developing his skills as a reader but he needs the opportunity to "get in the game" and put all those skills together, to experience the reward of reading real books, and to feel successful as a reader.

This may be a good time to digress and discuss the issue of reading readiness, or the belief that there comes a point in each child's life when he is ready to become a reader. While clearly there are important things that you should be doing to prepare your child to learn to read, classifying a child as either a reader or a nonreader does not reflect the latest thinking on literacy development. Recall the earlier discussions in Chapters 2 and 3 about language acquisition and early readers. Some children may move from one stage to another faster but all progress through the stages. The process is much the same when learning to read. While it may appear that some children "just start reading" while others require intensive instruction through beginning stages, all children move from one stage to

another - they just move at different paces. Given this information, it is more appropriate to consider the literacy development of children as being on a continuum of increasing competence. There are five stages of reading development children move through on their way to becoming successful and fluent readers. Marie Clay (1966) coined the term *emergent literacy* to describe this process of a child becoming increasingly literate. Even a baby who has learned to control the intensity of his crying or cooing has demonstrated his control over certain elements of speech. We would be mistaken to classify him as a “noncommunicator” because he is not speaking the language fluently.

Predictable books provide a means for an emergent reader to practice the many behaviors that make up the act of reading. Concepts about the printed word and book handling skills are learned through experience during read-aloud times and during the child’s initial experiences with predictable books. Some of these concepts and skills include:

- the idea that print contains an exact message
- the difference between letters and words
- some individual letter sounds and words
- recognition of common sight words
- the one-to-one correspondence between spoken and printed words
- the left-to-right progression of print
- the top-to-bottom progression of lines on a page
- the return sweep at the end of each line
- the front and back of a book
- the page-by-page progression of a book
- expressive and fluent reading
- the practice of correcting oneself when mistakes (miscues) occur, to maintain meaning

Perhaps you have never considered the importance of these conventions in reading or what is the best, most effective way to teach them. An emergent reader who has participated in many read-aloud sessions has learned most of these conventions by the time he begins practicing them on his own as he reads predictable books. Rarely does the adult/teacher need to provide direct instruction on any of these concepts. Concepts about print and book handling skills are more thoroughly and efficiently learned through experience and practice.

Stanovich has indicated that the sheer amount of print that is processed by a person has a positive effect on his reading vocabulary/word recognition skills and on his knowledge in general (1994). This is true no matter how skilled the reader is or how low his ability, and research continues to show that children who read more read better (Allington, 2006). Using predictable books provides the best way for a young child to be exposed to much print even though he has had little formal instruction or experience. These books use many of the high-frequency words that are so important in our language. The first 25 words on the widely used high-frequency word lists account for almost one-third of all written material and the first 100 words make up almost half. These words are also referred to as "sight" words because they are typically words that do not follow conventional phonics rules or spelling patterns and, therefore, cannot be easily decoded. Because children encounter these words so often when reading, they need to recognize them quickly and read them automatically. Many opportunities to overlearn these words will arise when reading predictable books, thereby helping the child to become a fluent reader.

Using predictable books in the initial stages of a formal reading program allows the emergent reader to utilize everything he has learned about reading up to that point. These books are like a lightning rod where all knowledge about reading processes can be discharged. The enthusiasm that is released in the child as a result of this discharge will provide valuable energy as the texts become more difficult, and the instruction grows more focused and intense.

## The heart of the matter - again . . .

Reading is comprehension. We read for one reason—to get the author's message. Reading is not just sounding out letters one after another, it is not simply saying one word after another, nor is it being perfectly accurate—it is making sense of print. This should be the first and primary idea taught, demonstrated, and established in the child's formal reading program. A good read-

aloud background will have already laid this foundation in the child’s experience. Using predictable books will build upon that foundation.

“Prediction is the core of reading.” Frank Smith, the author of *Understanding Reading* (1988), repeatedly drives this idea home. Prediction and comprehension are intricately tied together. Smith goes on to explain, “Prediction means asking questions, and comprehension means being able to get some of the questions answered.” Effective readers engage in a wide range of prediction strategies while they read. These strategies span the range from thinking about style (“Knowing this author, he will probably introduce some bizarre element next”), to predicting events in a story (“I bet the butler did it”), to confirming expected word or phonic elements (“The Pony Express rider jumped on his h\_\_\_\_\_”). Their prior experiences with stories, print, and life in general are what enable readers to process the text so efficiently in this manner.

A good reading teacher can help students learn prediction skills, but once again, these skills are better learned through interaction with stories—lots of them. Reading predictable books helps a young reader to flow fluently through text because his expectations about what comes next are repeatedly confirmed. It’s just good practice, and practice at reading is like practice with anything else: the more we do the better we become!

## A bibliography of predictable books for young readers

In Appendix A at the back of this book we’ve included a bibliography of books that you can use. The books are divided into levels of increasing difficulty. At the beginning of each level is a description of the features of the books on that level. You can add your own favorites by comparing yours to books with similar features.

## Theory into practice

We’ve discussed the theory related to using predictable books in the early stages of a reading program. With all this theory in mind, we are now ready to begin looking at the specific methods you should use as you begin to capitalize on teachable moments and begin more intentional instruction with your child.

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