How reading books fosters language development around the world

David K. Dickinson,¹ Julie A. Griffith,¹ Roberta Michnick Golinkoff,² and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek³

¹Vanderbilt University, 230 Appleton Place, 230 Peabody, Nashville, TN 37203, USA
²Departments of Psychology and Linguistics and Cognitive Science, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716, USA
³Department of Psychology, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19003-2506, USA

Received 23 August 2011; Accepted 20 November 2011

Abstract

Research on literacy development is increasingly making clear the centrality of oral language to long-term literacy development, with longitudinal studies revealing the continuity between language ability in the preschool years and later reading. The language competencies that literacy builds upon begin to emerge as soon as children begin acquiring language; thus, the period between birth and age three also is important to later literacy. Book reading consistently has been found to have the power to create interactional contexts that nourish language development. Researchers, pediatricians, and librarians have taken notice of the potential for interventions designed to encourage parents to read with their children. This article reviews research on the connections between language and later reading, environmental factors associated with language learning, and interventions developed in varied countries for encouraging book use by parents of young children.
Developmental and cognitive psychologists probe the mysteries of language development and unravel the complexities of the reading process. Their findings have made increasingly apparent that particular kinds of experiences can play a special role in advancing language growth. Book reading provides an ideal setting for fostering language while at the same time building strong affective bonds between parents and children. Book reading also provides recurrent occasions for parents to help their infants and toddlers learn to regulate their attention and responses to stimuli. How those problems are solved, and the process that is used, gives us great training on solving problems (often how not to solve them) with which we are faced in life. Of course, Romeo and Juliet did not solve their problems well, and we learn from this play the dangers of impulsivity—a good lesson for teenagers.

Research shows that the language development, both oral and written, that is fostered from reading books, results in better learning all around. Adults who have read a lot and who continue to read are able to grasp complex written material far easier, and they are better writers overall. These are career skills which are difficult to learn later in life. The world is a busy place. We spend our days surrounded by others, inundated with stimuli that bombard our senses and our minds. Read, read, read! We know that reading to children has many benefits, and that books can be used to promote children’s language.