

Dialogic Reading

David Yang

Simply reading to children does not guarantee adequate gains in children's oral language and early literacy skills, but rather the quality of book reading is more important than the quantity (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). Over the past several decades, numerous studies have demonstrated that children's early experiences with shared reading is linked to their later language and literacy skills (e.g., Stevenson & Fredman, 1990; Wells, 1985; Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). Shared reading is a broadly used term that captures a range of methods to engage children in book reading (Towson et al., 2017). Dialogic Reading (DR), first described by Whitehurst and colleagues (1988), is a particular type of shared reading in which the adult (caregivers or educators) uses strategic questioning and responding techniques to engage the child actively in verbal and non-verbal interactions during shared reading. DR was based on the assumption that practice, feedback, and appropriate scaffolded adult-child interactions facilitate language development (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003).

Zevenbergen and Whitehurst (2003) introduced two sets of specific techniques that have been developed for DR: one for reading with children 2 to 3 years of age, and the other for reading with children 4 to 5 years of age. Children in both age groups are encouraged to become the storyteller while the adult uses DR techniques to prompt the child with questions, expand the child's utterances, and praise the child's efforts. Following the principle of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), the adult gradually raises the standards for the child's responses by encouraging the child to verbalize a bit more than they would naturally do (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). The following introduces two sets of DR techniques for two age groups.

DR techniques for reading with children aged 2 to 3

1. **Ask "what" questions.** Prompt children to name objects pictured in the book; also ask children simple questions about the story (e.g., "What did the dog do next?").
2. **Follow answers with questions.** Follow the child's initial response with some other related questions (e.g., "Yes, that's a dog. What color is the dog?").
3. **Repeat what the child says.** Repeat what the child said helps to reinforce the child's verbalization (e.g., "Yes, that's a wagon").
4. **Ask open-ended questions.** Examples of open-ended prompts include, "What do you see on this page?" and "Tell me what's going on here."
5. **Expand what the child says.** Repeat what the child said about the book and add a few more words to that verbalization.
6. **Help the child as needed.** When the questions are difficult for the child to answer, the adult can answer the question and have the child repeat the answer (e.g., "That's called an octopus. Can you say, 'octopus'?").
7. **Praise and encourage.** Praise and encourage the child's attempts to talk about the book and respond to question prompts.

8. **Follow the child's interests.** It is important to follow the child's interests to keep them engaged and encourage them to talk more. It is more likely for the child to enjoy reading with the adult if the adult is sensitive and responsive to the child's interests.
9. **Have fun.** The child's enjoyment in shared reading experience is an important goal of dialogic reading. The adult uses various techniques to engage the child. If the child appears to be bored or tired, the adult can just read a few pages without any prompts or just put the book aside.

DR techniques for reading with children aged 4 to 5

DR with children aged 4 to 5 uses different techniques from those used with younger children, in that the types of questions asked of the older children are generally more challenging. Two acronyms are used to help us remember DR sequence (PEER) and specific question prompts (CROWD).

PEER = Prompt, evaluate, expand, and repeat

During a DR session, the adult periodically *prompts* the child to participate in the reading. Once the child responds to the adult prompt, the adult *evaluates* the response and *expands* on the child's utterance by repeating what the child has said and adding information to it. Finally, the adult *repeats* the prompt to allow the child another opportunity to recite the response.

For example, when the adult and the child are looking at the page of a book that has a picture of a dog on it. The adult asks, "What is this?" (the prompt) while pointing to the dog. The child says, "Dog", and the adult responds with "That's right (the evaluation); it's a kind of dog called 'poodle' (the expansion); can you say 'This is a poodle'?" (the repetition).

There are five types of prompts that are used in dialogic reading with the PEER sequence. The acronym CROWD is used to help remember these prompts.

CROWD = Completion, Recall, Open-ended, wh-prompts, & distancing

Completion prompts

The adult leaves a blank at the end of a sentence and encourages the child to fill it in. Completion prompts help children to learn about the structure of language that is important for later reading.

Recall prompts

The adult asks questions about previous events in the story the child has already read. For example, "Can you tell me what happened to the hungry caterpillar?" Recall prompts are used to help the child in describing sequences of events and in building an understanding of story plot.

Open-ended prompts

These prompts work well for books with rich, detailed illustrations. For example, the adult can ask, "Can you tell me what is happening in this picture?" Open-ended prompts provide children with the opportunities to improve their expressive language.

Wh-prompts

These prompts start with what, where, when, why, and how questions. Sometime, wh-questions can target specific vocabulary. For example, “What’s the name of this?”

Distancing prompts

These prompts relate the pictures or words in the book to the child’s personal experiences. Distancing prompts help children to connect the book with the real world. They also help children with their expressive language, conversational abilities, and narrative skills.

Special prompts

Building on the work by Whitehurst and colleagues, Fleury and Schwartz (2017) modified DR by adding “Special prompts” to accommodate the needs of children who have language impairments or developmental disabilities, such as autism. Special prompts are used when the child is unable to respond to a traditional prompt and they are delivered based on a least-to-most prompting hierarchy. The adult uses relatively less intrusive verbal prompts in the beginning and gradually introduces more intrusive verbal prompts when needed. The special prompts are listed as follows on a least to most intrusive basis:

- Provide a choice of binary options that include the target response. For example, “Is it a horse or a cow?”
- Request the child to respond “yes/no” to a question. For example, “Is it a cow?”
- Ask the child to repeat a target word. For example, “say cow”
- Request the child to point to the correct image. For example, “point to the cow”

In the event that the child fails to respond to the final prompt in the hierarchy, the adult can physically prompt the child to point to the correct response. It is also important that the adult gives the child some extra time to think and respond to a prompt before using these special prompts. In addition, adults can enrich DR experience for children with diverse needs by using objects and/or props, which can provide a more concrete opportunity for the child to participate and learn.

References

- Fleury, V. P., & Schwartz, I. S. (2017). A modified dialogic reading intervention for preschool children with autism spectrum disorder. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 37*(1), 16-28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121416637597>
- Scarborough, H. S., & Dobrich, W. (1994). On the efficacy of reading to preschoolers. *Developmental Review, 14*(3), 245-302. <https://doi.org/10.1006/drev.1994.1010>
- Stevenson, J., & Fredman, G. (1990). The social environmental correlates of reading ability. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 31*(5), 681-698. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1990.tb00810.x>
- Towson, J. A., Fetting, A., Fleury, V. P., & Abarca, D. L. (2017). Dialogic reading in early childhood settings: A summary of the evidence base. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 37*(3), 132-146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121417724875>
- Vygotsky, L. S., & Cole, M. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard university press.
- Wells, G. (1985). *Language development in the preschool years*. Cambridge University Press.

Whitehurst, G. J., Falco, F. L., Lonigan, C. J., Fischel, J. E., DeBaryshe, B. D., Valdez-Menchaca, M. C., & Caulfield, M. (1988). Accelerating language development through picture book reading. *Developmental Psychology*, 24(4), 552-559.

<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0012-1649.24.4.552>

Zevenbergen, A. A., & Whitehurst, G. J. (2003). Dialogic reading: A shared picture book reading intervention for preschoolers. In A. van Kleeck, S. A. Stahl, & E. B. Bauer (Eds.), *On reading books to children: Parents and teachers* (pp. 177–200). Lawrence Erlbaum.