

## Oral Storytelling within the Context of the Parent-Child Relationship

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This research summary focuses on the practice of oral storytelling, which has been shown to enhance emergent literacy and language development in young children. A thorough review of the literature revealed the need for parents and other adult caregivers to gain awareness of multi-faceted approaches to emergent literacy. Specifically, it is important to grasp that a love for literacy develops through experiences with adult caregivers. In fact, oral storytelling appears to be just as important as reading to children when discussing potential keys to emergent literacy. Oral storytelling is a contributor to emergent literacy and assists children in becoming motivated to approach literacy.

### Introduction

While there is tremendous energy being invested in conceptualizing and operationalizing emergent literacy and identifying an evidence base on which to build recommendations for best practices, the ultimate goal is clear: How can parents and other adult caregivers help children grow into readers (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; Ryan, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998)? In searching for answers to this question, researchers, parents, and adult caregivers have almost always begun the quest for literacy with an emphasis on the importance of reading to children, armed with a belief that more is better. Conventional wisdom dictates that the earlier parents begin reading to their children and the more frequently they read, the more they are setting their children up to win.

However, the literature on emergent literacy has broadened the horizon of how researchers and parents are approaching this critical developmental skill. Some of the changes that are emerging include a shift away from using *only* formalized book reading in the home as a way to prompt literacy development and toward practices that compliment reading early and often to young children. Promoting literacy at home no longer means creating an ersatz academic setting and formally teaching children. Instead, parents and other adult caregivers can take advantage of opportunities that arise in daily life to help children move toward emergent literacy (Burns et al., 1999; Snow et al., 1998). One of the strongest practices in which parents can engage is *oral storytelling*, which can be defined as shared verbal interaction between parents (or other adult caregivers) and

young children during which characters evolve in an identified (or emerging) plot sequence and setting. Succinctly, this form of communication involves the practice of creating narratives or stories using oral skills (J. D. Sobol, personal communication, March 28, 2006).

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research summary is to discuss one practice that is complimentary to reading early and often to young children by examining the positive outcomes that emerge from *oral storytelling* during parent-child interactions. The summary begins with a discussion of the difference between print-based parent-child interactions and oral storytelling. To illustrate the value of oral storytelling in enhancing emergent literacy, two practices that are used to promote the development of oral storytelling between young children and their parents and/or other adult caregivers are reviewed: (1) using oral storytelling to build a foundation of motivation for emergent literacy; and (2) using oral storytelling as an approach based on the *home environment* and *parent modeling* behaviors. A breakdown of the characteristics and methods for implementing each approach are included. Finally, implications for parents and other adult caregivers are provided.

### Background

The call for ongoing parent involvement in the development of emergent literacy is a relatively new phenomenon. Burns et al. (1999) explain how early research dating back to the 1930s suggests

that there was little use in teaching children how to read until they had already conquered specific literacy readiness skills, such as certain fine motor skills and the ability to tell right from left.

Further, according to Ryan (2000), “Prior to the 1970s, parents were often excluded from reading instruction. They were not allowed to help teachers or students in the classroom setting and they were not encouraged to work with their children at home” (p. 32). From the 1980s forward, parents became increasingly more involved in their children’s education and are now expected to be partners in the process. However, as Ryan points out, “if parents are to be part of the learning process, their roles must be clearly defined” (p. 36). Yet, conventional wisdom seems to keep recycling the same starting point: to help a child develop early literacy skills, parents and other adult caregivers should pick up a book and read to him or her *as early* and *as often* as possible.

However, this read early/read often paradigm has come under question, if not criticism. Throughout the 1990s, the National Research Council of the National Academy of Science set out to identify the specific skills and experiences that children need to become fluent readers (Burns et al., 1999; Snow et al., 1998). While the results of this undertaking certainly support the importance of early and continuous book reading (Burns et al., 1999; Snow et al., 1998), the authors collectively caution that reading to young children *can* be overdone:

Consider as an example the statement that ‘the more you read with your children the more they will learn to love reading.’ We emphasize that reading to young children is important for language and literacy growth, but it can be overdone. After several days of too many hours of reading every day, the reading experience might well start to become distasteful for a child (National Research Council, 2000, p. 4).

In fact, Burns et al. (1999) caution that almost any singular activity can be used to excess and therefore, become counterproductive to the development of literacy.

While print awareness and letter knowledge (the original goals of read early/read often) are very important skills for young children to develop, they should not be the *only* focus (or perhaps even the first focus) for parents and other caregivers. For example, there are those who contend that *oral storytelling may be a precursor to reading*:

Vocabulary, language skills, and knowledge about the world are acquired

during interesting conversations with responsive adults. Talking about books, about daily happenings, about what happened at day care or at work not only contributes to children’s vocabularies, but also increases their ability to understand stories and explanations and their understanding of how things work – all skills that will be important in early reading (Burns et al., 1999, pp. 19 – 20).

Increasingly, researchers are discovering the positive outcomes that emerge from oral storytelling between young children and their parents (Burns et al., 1999; Ryan, 2000; Snow et al., 1998). In fact, many researchers and educators believe that storytelling can contribute significantly to early literacy development (Cooper, Collins, & Saxby, 1992; Glazer & Burke, 1994; Phillips, 1999).

### Summary of Seminal Research

#### *Search Strategy and Sources*

In an effort to obtain relevant studies and seminal research on the topic of oral storytelling within the context of the parent – child relationship, the following search terms were used: preliteracy, early literacy, emergent literacy, emerging literacy, stories, oral storytelling, dyadic storytelling, oral tradition, interactive storytelling, narrative, narration, personal narratives, discourse, parent-child, young children, infants, toddlers, family environment, reading attitudes, play themes, and pretend play. Electronic databases were searched using the search terms listed above. These databases included Psychological Abstracts online (PsycINFO), Sociological Abstracts, Academic Search Elite, Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), Ingenta, Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), MEDLINE, the Cochrane Databases, Cumulative Index to Nursing, and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL).

An online search using Google and Google Scholar as well as hand searches of relevant journal articles, book chapters, and reference sections of relevant sources was also conducted. A thorough review of relevant abstracts and selected articles led to the selection of literature described in this summary.

#### *Print-Based Emergent Literacy and Oral Storytelling*

What is literacy? Many educators have differing opinions on how to define this concept. Often, literacy is viewed as the ability to read and write, in essence, the knowledge of letters and

sounds and how people express themselves. However, most authors, as well as most educators, will agree that literacy is much more involved than simply reading and writing. McLane and McNamee (1990) claim that “Literacy is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon” (p. 2). Clinard (1997) states that literacy is “the ability to use thinking, speaking, listening, reading, and writing to solve problems; complete tasks; and communicate wants, needs, feelings, and ideas” (p. 3). In sum, while those researching, promoting, and funding emergent literacy may begin with an emphasis on reading early and often as a key to developmental literacy, the skills listed above are testament to the “multiple literacies” that should be included in a conceptualization of emergent literacy.

*Print-based literacy.* Young children must learn to understand the alphabetic system of a language to identify printed words. This understanding can then be merged with their experiences and motivations to develop accuracy in word recognition and reading fluency, both of which are necessary to obtain meaning from print. Further, they must learn the mechanics of reading through an understanding of how to decode the sound structure of words. According to Burns et al. (1999), children who learn to read successfully master three core elements: (1) they are able to identify printed words and have a sight word repertoire; (2) they are able to use previous knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies to read for meaning; and (3) they read with fluency (p. 18).

In order to master these core elements, young children are often the *receivers* of information that has been selected on their behalf. Stories are read *to* children, words are pointed out *to* children, and endless repetition is believed to be the foundation for learning (Burns et al., 1999; National Reading Panel, 2000; Ryan, 2000; Snow et al., 1998). This received view of literacy development may be useful and valid up to the point where children lose their motivation for participating in the process (Burns et al., 1999; Ryan, 2000).

*Oral storytelling.* A creative alternative to print-based literacy development is oral storytelling that is shared between parents and young children. Storytelling is clearly a social experience with oral narrative, incorporating linguistic features that display a “sophistication that goes beyond the level of conversation” (Mallan, 1991, p. 4). For this reason storytelling acts as an effective building block easing the journey from oracy to literacy (Phillips, 1999). According to Howard (1991),

At an early age, children ask parents

endless questions. These questions generally fall into the generic form: ‘How can I understand (make sense of) the puzzling aspects of my experience?’ The repeated questions attempt to get a story that will give them a context and a culture in a form that makes the answer make sense (p. 188).

For example, the question, “Why is the sky blue?” is an attempt to get a narrative (story) response from a parent or other caregiver that makes sense at the child’s developmental level. The dialogue continues, with abbreviated statements becoming longer contributions to the narrative until the story is finished (Gray, 1997). The narrative responses are how children make sense of their lives and develop their views of the world (Gray, 1997, p. 293). In essence, vocabulary, language skills, and knowledge about the world are acquired during interesting conversations with responsive adults (Burns et al., 1999).

According to Heath (1982), preschool storytellers have several ways of inviting audience evaluation and interest. They may themselves express an emotional response to the story’s actions; they may have another character or narrator in the story, or they may detail actions and results through direct discourse or sound effects and gestures. All of these methods of calling attention to the story and its telling distinguish the speech event as a story, an occasion for audience and storyteller to interact pleasantly, and not simply to hear an ordinary recounting of events or actions.

## **Two Approaches to Using Oral Storytelling to Enhance Emergent Literacy**

### *Using Oral Storytelling to Build a Foundation of Motivation for Emergent Literacy*

Parents are a child’s first and most significant teachers (Ryan, 2000); their attitude toward reading is a crucial influence on future literacy development. Contemporary researchers are beginning to suggest that the most significant issue we are facing today regarding emergent literacy is not an inability to read, but rather, *a lack of interest in reading* (Ryan, 2000). This lack of interest has been referred to as *aliteracy* (Ryan, 2000).

During the first months and years of life, children’s experiences with language and literacy can begin to form a basis for their later reading success (Bergin, 2001; Burns et al., 1999). Therefore, vocabulary, language skills, and knowledge about the world are acquired during interesting conversations with responsive adults –

most importantly, parents. The key to building motivation as a foundation for emergent literacy is to keep in mind that knowledge about and love for literacy can develop only through experience (Burns et al., 1999; Snow et al., 1998) and these experiences grow from “talking.” In fact, talking with young children appears to be just as important as reading early and often when discussing potential keys to emergent literacy.

Traditionally, formal instruction in reading focused on the development of mastering word recognition and comprehension (Burns et al., 1999; Snow et al., 1998); however, the landscape has grown to include “multiple literacies.” The notion of multiple literacies recognizes that “there are many ways of being and becoming literate and that how literacy develops and how it is used depend on the particular social and cultural setting in which a child learns”(McLane & McNamee, 1990, p. 3).

Young children are motivated by personal interest. When given the opportunity to choose their own pathways to literacy, children will be more involved, interested, and motivated to return for more of the same (Burns et al., 1999; Ryan, 2000; Snow et al., 1998). At the same time, researchers are in agreement that “language stands head and shoulders over all other tools as an instrument of learning” (Butler, 1980, p. 3). Young children then need to be surrounded by dialogue. Storytelling or narrative is a simple process that builds upon itself. It can be as simple as a good-morning song or a question that is consistently asked when a child wakes from a nap or a night’s sleep (e.g., “What did you dream about last night Katie?”).

#### *Characteristics of Building a Foundation of Motivation*

In unpacking the characteristics associated with building a foundation of motivation to encourage emergent literacy, three recommendations for practice emerge from the literature. The first characteristic of building a foundation of motivation is to always remember that oral storytelling must remain fun and enjoyable or the child will lose interest (Phillips, 1999; Ryan, 2000). Indeed, research has shown *the most important characteristic for emergent literacy development is enjoyment* (Burns et al., 1999; Ryan, 2000; Snow et al., 1998). Further, since 1983, more research has shown that there is a direct correlation between emergent literacy success and a positive attitude toward the activities involved in encouraging literacy development (Ryan, 2000). Oral storytelling should follow the child’s interests, be stopped when the child grows

bored, and be presented using interesting and novel methods.

The key to the effective implementation of this characteristic of building a foundation of motivation is to begin talking to, singing to, making faces with, and sharing as many experiences with a child as soon as the child is born. It is important to start talking, follow the child’s interests, vary the methods of “storytelling,” know when to stop, and have fun!

The second characteristic of building a foundation of motivation for emergent literacy is that parents and other adult caregivers are encouraged to engage in oral storytelling as much as possible. Beginning at birth, infants should be “invited” into a conversation every time they are in the company of parents.

At first, these episodes of narrative building will take the form of a parent or adult caregiver speaking and making eye contact with the child and the child is encouraged to offer eye contact in return. The nonverbal cues offered by very young children will continue to develop and become more complex as he or she grows and develops. Eye contact will turn to smiles and smiles will turn to cooing and cooing will turn to phonemes and attempted words. From listening comes speaking and through both, come early literacy development (Cramer & Castle, 1994; Ryan, 2000). Therefore, it is important to remember to give young children something to listen to – something that provides an opportunity for engagement. Burns et al. (1999) note, “Even their babbles and coos and the ways their families speak to them before they really understand can help them to become speakers of their native tongue” (p. 20).

While speaking with very young children, parents are encouraged to vary their vocal tones, ask questions, nod and shake their heads, and model the type of response they wish to receive from their children. Children should also be exposed to as many contexts and experiences as possible, with parents constantly offering dialogue.

As the child continues to grow, a call and response can be used to begin early morning stories. For example, as a parent approaches the doorway to the room where the baby sleeps, he or she may softly sing, “baaabbbyyy” over and over. Once the child begins a vocal pattern of responding, the child’s part in the “conversation” can be provided for him or her: “baaabbbyyy . . . mommmmyy” and the dialogue has begun.

The third characteristic necessary for building a foundation for motivation for emergent literacy is to recognize that emergent literacy encompasses much more than simply reading and writing. It is a

multifaceted skill that involves abilities, beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and much more (Ryan, 2000). According to McLane and McNamee (1990):

For many children, the beginnings of literacy appear in activities such as pretend play, drawing, conversations about storybook plots and characters, and conversations about the words on street signs or the labels of favorite foods. Such activities make it clear that children are actively trying to use – and to understand and make sense of – reading and writing long before they can actually read and write (pp. 4 – 5).

As a young child is exploring oral storytelling and other forms of shared verbal and nonverbal interaction, it is important to remember that he or she loves the sound of his or her parents' voices. Even more, young children like to know that their parents believe in them and their abilities. One way to convey this belief is by having an attitude toward storytelling that is conducive to providing close, personal attention from someone the child loves.

In summary, young children benefit from developing a foundation of motivation on which a love for literacy can be constructed. A child's interest level affects his or her level of motivation (Ryan, 2000) and "the discovery of a child's interests is an essential first step in the motivation process" (Thomas & Loring, 1983, p. 40). Parents and other adult caregivers can help young children become motivated to approach emergent literacy by: (1) making oral storytelling interactions (in all forms and variations) fun and interest-based; (2) inviting infants, toddlers, and young children into these interactions as often as possible, using a variety of contexts and levels and involvement; and (3) demonstrating an attitude of belief in a child's abilities and potential.

#### *Using Oral Storytelling as an Approach Based on the "Home Environment" and Parent Modeling*

In addition to using oral storytelling to build a foundation of motivation for emergent literacy, researchers have shifted the focus away from a "received view" of knowledge regarding developing literacy toward an emphasis on "everyday literacy" (Burns et al., 1999, p. 27). Infants and toddlers are amazed and curious about everything that goes on around them and parents should be encouraged to clarify each event. Even little things such as leaves blowing in the wind, a ball bouncing, men sawing, and cars honking are important occurrences to "talk" about (Ryan,

2000).

As the young child grows more sophisticated and begins to ask questions, a perfect opportunity has emerged to begin scaffolding interactions. For example, when a child asks a question, a parent should not simply provide an answer. Rather, he or she is encouraged to provide a partial answer and invite the child to add to what is being explained from his or her view of the world. The parent or other adult caregiver should then continue to build the discussion until the child has clearly lost interest. "If presented in a boring way, any subject becomes uninteresting, and the results of offering new information become painfully meager" (Bettelheim & Zelan, 1981, p. 8).

*Characteristics of the home environment.* The largest research synthesis on early literacy, conducted by the National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that talking to adults (especially parents) is a child's best source of exposure to new vocabulary and ideas. A child's home provides a safe learning environment where support and encouragement assist in the development of motivation *and* provide countless opportunities for growth.

Specifically, there are a number of characteristics that are present in homes from which successful young readers emerge. These characteristics include *stability, parents and children openly communicating, children daily observing their parents reading, reading materials openly available to children, every member of the family valuing reading, a family that provides many opportunities for experiences outside of the home, and children who are well-fed and healthy* (Stoodt, 1981). Children learn about narrative through the oral stories they hear in the world around them. When they witness one parent telling another, "You'll never believe what happened to me on the way to the store," they begin to learn the magic, fun and purpose of stories (Burns et al., 1999, p. 37). In the home environment, children benefit from hearing stories and acting out stories. In the company of parents outside the home environment, young children benefit from both formal and informal storytelling events (e.g., puppet shows and children's theater).

According to Stoodt (1981),

The influence of family life on children's levels of reading achievement cannot be underestimated. Parents contribute greatly to the language, emotional and physical development of children. Parents who spend time talking with their children are encouraging language development. Love, patience and understanding foster a sense

of security that is groundwork upon which successful learning can occur (p. 39).

Therefore, while print-based materials are emphasized in emergent literacy development, so is the need for every parent to take advantage of the home environment. Additionally, parents are encouraged to model literate behavior.

According to Teale and Sulzby (1976), the home environment can be the source of multiple categories of early literacy experiences, one of which is experiences in which children observe adults modeling literate behaviors (e.g., reading the newspaper and having conversations with other members of the household). Given the relatively modest relations between storybook reading and the development of literacy skills, researchers have suggested that modeling home literacy experiences should include the influence of activities in addition to storybook reading (e.g., Dunning, Mason, & Stewart, 1994; LeFevre & Senechal, 1999; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994).

*Characteristics of parent modeling.* Often parents neglect to talk to their children about every day activities because they believe that their children are too young to understand. However, it is important to recognize the people that children are surrounded by serve as models in the literacy process; many researchers agree that much of what children learn is learned at home (Burns et al., 1999; Ryan, 2000; Snow et al., 1998). Specifically, there are three characteristics of parent modeling that lead to positive outcomes in emerging literacy for young children.

First, parents who talk to one another frequently, with animation, and using nonverbal behaviors that complement their verbal messages are behaving in a way that encourages young children to emulate what they observe (Burns et al., 1999; Ryan, 2000; Snow et al., 1998). Specifically, “young children pay close attention to what they see the powerful and significant people in their world doing and they imitate behaviors that seem to be important to these people” (McLance & McNamee, 1990, p. 90).

The second characteristic of parent modeling is the need for the parent to act as the director of the interaction (Bergin, 2001; Ryan, 2000). Specifically, he or she is responsible for making each storytelling interaction enjoyable and meaningful. Further, the parent is also a monitor who checks his or her child’s reactions to see if he or she is bored or excited with the interaction. If boredom is evident, then the parent should end the session, change the type of interaction, or find a way to make the interaction align with other

interests of the child (Bergin, 2001; Burns et al., 1999; Ryan, 2000).

Third, similar to the characteristics listed for building a foundation for motivation on which emergent literacy can develop; parental attitude and influence come back into play when considering how modeling behavior impacts the process. According to McLane and McNamee (1990),

The development of literacy, then, is a profoundly social process, embedded in social relationships, particularly in children’s relationships with parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, caretakers, and teachers. These people serve as models, provide materials, establish expectations, and offer help, instruction, and encouragement (p. 7).

If parents demonstrate an enthusiasm for narrative behavior (in any format), a child is likely to emulate this enthusiasm (Bergin, 2001). If the attitudes demonstrated by parents toward interacting are consistently positive, a child is likely to be receptive to what occurs during the interaction.

According to Hunt (1978), “The home is still the greatest educational force, and parents who make reading attractive contribute immeasurably to their children’s intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development” (p. 9). However, as Wiener (1990) contends, “Moms and dads have a much more important job to do [than teaching their children rules for reading]. They should: establish positive learning conditions at home, be loving, knowledgeable learning facilitators, and help [their] child be a better reader” (p. 191).

## Conclusions

According to Burns et al. (1999), “As adults, we sometimes view conversation as a luxury – an extra in our busy lives. However, for young children whose developing minds are striving to become literate, *talk is essential* – the more meaningful and substantive, the better” (p. 36). Although episodes of oral storytelling between young children and their parents or other adult caregivers may begin as nonverbal, journey through cooing and babbling, and slowly find linguistic structure, more researchers are espousing that storytelling serves as an effective bridge into early literacy (Miller & Mehler, 1994; Phillips, 1999; Ryan, 2000).

For example, Glazer and Burke (1994) stress the importance of a young child retelling a story (after listening to it), in that it enhances the child’s

sensitivity to story structure; and he or she can remember and comprehend more effectively, which in turn guides the child in creating his or her own stories. In fact, these authors claim that story retellings can signal acceleration towards literacy.

The purpose of this summary is to offer a complimentary practice to reading early and often as a way to promote positive relationships between parents and children while encouraging the development of literacy. Oral storytelling was presented as a practice with positive emergent literacy outcomes for very young children. Specifically, two approaches to using this practice were summarized and the characteristics that lead to positive outcomes were described.

In sum, while traditionalists have often begun with shared book reading as a pathway to emergent literacy, this research summary illustrates the value of looking for complimentary practices to strengthen a child's exposure to multiple pathways. Encouraging parents to read with their children will always be a powerful tool in the development of literacy. However, as this summary illustrates, there are other, perhaps equally as powerful means on which to draw.

### **Implications for Parents and Caregivers**

Based on the findings in this research summary, there are a number of recommendations for parents and other caregivers to consider regarding oral storytelling interactions between parents and young children (birth to five).

Parents can use storytelling as a pathway to emergent literacy in many different ways. The most important thing to remember perhaps is the importance of avoiding behaviors that may encourage the development of aliteracy or a lack of interest in reading. In an effort to do this, parents and other adult caregivers should help their children develop a foundation of motivation on which to build early literacy development. Following a child's interests and making shared talk interactions fun and enjoyable is an excellent start. Parents can also take advantage of everyday situations and offer opportunities for "conversation" as many times as possible each day, being careful to monitor a child for boredom or saturation with the activity. Finally, parents should remain aware of the impact that their beliefs, attitudes, and expectations for their child can have on oral storytelling events. A belief that the child will succeed and demonstrating an attitude of involvement, interest, and enjoyment can extend each oral storytelling event or episode.

Additionally, parents can develop an awareness of how powerful the home environment is for sharing stories with their children. The safety and support found in this environment is paramount and provides a perfect opportunity for young children to ask questions, develop stories, act out stories, and seek additional experiences outside the home.

Parents also serve as their child's primary role models for literate behavior. Just as a child who observes a parent reading is more likely to emulate the behavior, a child who listens to his or her parents sharing stories, responding to one another, and using verbal and nonverbal messages that match is more likely to learn to do the same. Parents should take on the roles of directors and monitors during oral storytelling so that children are not pushed to levels of boredom or over-excitement. Finally, parents should remain aware of how the way in which they express belief in their child and act on that belief can positively impact each and every oral storytelling interaction.

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