

Can we read it again and again and again? Why re-reading storybooks with young children matters

Lucy Rodriguez Leon

Current social distancing measures mean that many families are at home with young children with limited access to libraries or new selections of books. Yet even in more normal times, young children often identify a favourite picture storybook and ask, or indeed beg you, to read it over and over again. If you also enjoy the book you may treasure this time together, if not, you might find it becomes a little tedious. However, allow me to share a few thoughts about the benefits of re-reading the same book with young children.



The approach we take when we read with young children influences the extent to which they can actively participate. Much has been written in educational and academic literature about 'dialogic' shared book reading. In summary, a dialogic approach to **book sharing involves a high level of 'book chat'**; children are considered active participants in the reading, rather than passive listeners. It is about reading *with* children, not simply *to* them (e.g. Whitehurst et al., 1988; Kindle, 2013).

Of course, you can encourage 'book chat' with your child whether you are on the first reading of the book, or the twenty-first. However, the findings of a small study (Rodriguez Leon and Payler, in preparation) indicate that as children become more familiar with a book, they show greater confidence to enact reader behaviours and are better positioned to engage in deeper level narrative related dialogue.

Enacting Reader Behaviours

Reading with your child allows them to engage with books that they cannot yet manage independently. In addition, when you read with children, you model what competent readers do when they read. As children become familiar with the narrative, they can become a partner, or indeed take up some of the reading, particularly when the book contains repetitive refrains, such as *The Bear Hunt* (Michael Rosen) or *Dear Zoo* (Rod Campbell). They may be drawing on memory rather than their emerging decoding skills, yet nonetheless, through these experiences young children develop crucial knowledge and understandings about the reading process.

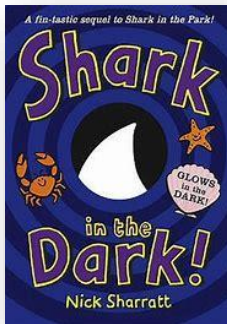


For instance, younger children might imitate the way in which you hold the book and turn the pages. They may attempt to track the print with their index finger, and in doing so are beginning to recognise the correspondence of the written and spoken word. Children often use exaggerated intonation when retelling stories to emphasise meaning. Including a range of soft toys, or perhaps your pet, provides an audience and might encourage your child to roleplay being the teacher or parent.

Depth of Dialogue and Thinking

One key finding of our study was that **the depth of the dialogue, and the complexity of children's thinking increased as they became more familiar with a book.** During the first readings, the children's responses tended to reflect a surface level understanding of the narrative. Their comments focused on factual elements of the book, sometimes seeking reassurance that they had arrived at the 'correct' understanding.

In contrast, in subsequent readings the book chat developed, and the children began to question and critique the character's intentions and actions; they formed hypotheses and grappled with alternative possibilities. For example, at the point when the Mother Owl returns in *Owl Babies* (Martin Waddell), one child, Amelia suggested that the mother should have said, "Sorry I left you all alone". Amelia, it seems, was contemplating the owl's behaviours in relation to her own understanding of parental duty of care!



During a re-reading of *Shark in the Dark* (Nick Sharratt), another of the focal children anticipated what was about to happen and questioned why the boy was not looking down. Our study tentatively concluded that prior narrative knowledge supported children to engage in deeper level thinking and dialogue around the storyline.



Thus, opportunities for book chat and to become familiar with a book through multiple re-readings may enable children to engage more creatively, develop critical thinking skills and contemplate multiple interpretations of the narrative. So, when your child selects the same book for the umpteenth time, embrace it! It's not simply a repeat, there are new potentials and possibilities in every re-reading.



Lucy Rodriguez Leon is a Lecturer in Early Childhood at The Open University. Her research focuses on young children's early experiences with literacy.

References

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