

Engaging Children with Print –

How and Why to do it During Your Reading Activities

... some children, including children with disabilities and those reared in poverty, can experience a slow start in their development of knowledge about print. In turn, this slow start can compromise their likelihood of success as they learn to read and read to learn. Because this may serve as an important mechanism for preventing later reading difficulties, researchers have increasingly become invested in determining effective ways by which to accelerate young children's learning about print. One particularly effective approach ... involves adult use of verbal and nonverbal references to print when reading books with young children, what we refer to as calling attention to print. Research findings have consistently shown that when adults call attention to print, children's development of print knowledge accelerates.

(Engaging Children with Print: Building Early Literacy Skills through Quality Read-Alouds, by Laura M. Justice, PhD, and Amy E. Sofka, MEd. Copyright 2010 by The Guilford Press, New York.)

As you read a story, you can point to specific letters or words or track the narrative text with your finger. Verbal references to print include questions, comments, and requests about print.

The following techniques for **calling attention to print** are identified in Engaging Children with Print:

1. Ask the children to name individual letters (“Do you know this letter?”)
2. Point out upper- and lower-case forms of letters and encourage the children to talk about their use.
3. Note different fonts, colored or patterned letters, very large or very small letters, or text that is laid out in non-linear form.
4. Contrast short words and long words. The children can count the letters out loud.
5. Note high-frequency or high-function words (“What do you think it says here?”)

6. Talk about punctuation signs and their uses.
7. Point out instances of environmental print in the story illustrations, such as signs (“This says ‘Stop’”), posters, or labels.

In a group Story Time setting, some books lend themselves better to these techniques than others, as the print has to be large enough for all the children to see. If the Story Time kit for the theme you have selected includes a book that is well-suited for **calling attention to print**, make sure you choose it as one of your two. At minimum, you should use this approach with the covers of all your books.

Calling attention to print is most effective in the context of a quality read-aloud, which includes the following elements identified in Engaging Children with Print:

1. **Orientation:** Introduce the book by discussing its cover. Read the title and the name(s) of the author(s) and illustrator(s). Use the title as a means of **calling attention to print**. Link the book, author, or subject with the children’s prior knowledge. Ask predicting questions based on the cover; this helps create excitement and curiosity about the book.
2. **Physical Delivery:** Use posture, facial expressions, pauses, and animated, expressive voice changes to capture and maintain the children’s attention. Maintain an engaging reading pace, but don’t rush. Pronounce words clearly.
3. **Word Learning:** If you notice a word or phrase that may be challenging for the children, ask if they know what it means. Explain it using simpler words, gestures, and/or facial expressions. Discuss interesting words. Where possible, use illustrations in the story to support the discussion. If you are working with a class of English Language Learners, be alert for slang or idiomatic expressions that may be unfamiliar to the children.
4. **Language Elicitation:** When appropriate, pause and encourage the children to fill in predictable phrases. Ask “cognitively demanding” questions (e.g., “what if,” “where have you seen,” “how would”) to prompt discussion of plot points, characters, and/or thematic elements in the story. “*What is happening?*” (This also tells you if the children are

following the story.) “What do you think will happen next?” “Do you ever feel like that?” “Why do you think this character did/said that?” “What message do you think the story is giving us?” Once you have read both books, ask the children what connections, if any, they notice between them; guide the discussion with compare/contrast questions about characters or events in the stories.

5. **Responsiveness:** Try to involve all the children equally. Allow them to share feelings and experiences that contribute to the reading experience; listen attentively and respectfully.
6. **Behavior Management:** Allow children to answer/ask questions only after they raise their hands. Keep your audience engaged! Whenever appropriate, ask students to provide sound effects or animal noises, or to act out gestures or movements. If the children are restless and wiggly, you may want to take a “stretching” break for a couple of minutes. Other tricks for re-engaging listeners:
 - a. Suddenly lower your voice so that children have to quiet down to hear (this is more powerful than you would think!)
 - b. Use the teacher’s technique for getting attention. Some examples:
 - i. “One, two, three--eyes on me!” Response: “One, two--eyes on you!”
 - ii. Clap a rhythm that the kids have to clap back.
 - c. Use ‘Listening Dust’ from a special bag at the beginning of the class. Sprinkle the imaginary dust over the kids before reading. Ask for it back at the end!
 - d. Have the children put on their pretend ‘Listening Ears’ before you begin, or pause to have them do it during the Story Time.
 - e. “If you are quiet and you can hear my voice...” Do different movements until all of the children are following you.
7. **Extension:** Prompt the children to relate what was read to events in their own lives. Present the fingerplay/song and the Story Time craft as activities that extend the book.