

Motoring Toddlers Require Moving Story Experiences

by Linda Dauksas and Judy Fiene

Early childhood professionals know that emergent literacy experiences are essential to helping young children grow as readers. Although they are encouraged to read to children daily, there are ways to maximize daily book sharing with toddlers.

Teachers typically create a daily story time where they gather toddlers to read a book and then check for understanding by asking questions about it. However, there is little evidence to suggest that these questioning techniques are meaningful for very young children. Honoring the toddlers' desire to move and explore forces us to be creative in sharing stories in a non-traditional engaging manner. Nurturing children's motoric responses to shared stories allows teachers to check for comprehension in an authentic and meaningful way.

We suggest honoring the developmental strides of inquisitive toddlers by providing movement activities as they explore their environment. Manipulation and movement help the toddlers make meaning of their environments. When body movements are paired with language, and language is paired with sensory motor experiences, toddlers have two ways to make meaning of their experiences. This bodily kinesthetic and linguistic connection encourages recall

and pairs descriptive language with movement (Marigliano & Russ, 2011).

Begin by including printed materials that require movement and investigation in the children's play space. Books should have the same presence as toys.

- Store books in low, open spaces or bins accessible to all.
- Select books sized appropriately for tiny toddler hands.
- Present books in all areas, including blocks, manipulatives, dramatic play, snack, and napping mats. Toddlers do many things on the run, so keeping books where they belong is not as important as keeping books in several different spaces so they can be explored or carried from place to place.
- Toddlers enjoy routines and repetition, so expect to share the same book over and over.
- Display two and three copies of favorite books.
- Honor choice in selecting books. Providing choice helps to build reading habits that can motivate readers of all ages (Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004).

- Select books that incorporate many sensory modalities. Include books with wheels that encourage zipping and zooming. DK Publishing has a series of vehicle/books including motorcycles, fire engines, sports cars, tractors, construction equipment, and buses perfect for the block area.
- Books with buttons produce sounds and reinforce cause and effect. Toddlers quickly learn that every time they depress the button, they produce a sound.
- Share books with finger puppets to enhance children's fine motor skills. *Little Snowman: Finger Puppet Story*



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(Habben, 2008) is one in a series of little puppet books (*Little Bee*, *Little Bunny*, etc.)

- Provide books that require action. *Shake it Baby!* (Katz, 2009), *Where Is Your Nose? A Peekabook Book with Flaps and a Mirror* (Shappie & Moffatt, 1997), or scratch-and-sniff *Little Bunny Follows his Nose* (Howard, 2004) all rely on manipulation.
- Include plastic and cloth books that endure washing.

Developmentally, toddlers gain knowledge by manipulating real objects. This happens prior to understanding the meaning of illustrations or photographs. When toddlers are handling objects, they are learning about their different properties and potential uses. These discoveries enable them to gain real-world knowledge and provide a basis for language learning (Bardige & Segal, 2005). So, before sharing a story and long after a story is told, embed manipulatives or objects from the stories within the toddler's environment. For example, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1981) incorporates objects such as apples, grapes, cake, and caterpillars from daily routines. Embedding real objects that toddlers can see, touch, and manipulate into their environment adds meaning to book sharing, helps with vocabulary development, and facilitates story retelling.

Toddlers are great imitators. They imitate talking on the phone, sweeping the floor, feeding a teddy bear. As they get older, imitation turns into pretend play. They begin to use objects to aid their play: blocks become phones and tables become bridges. Books offer unlimited roles for pretend play. Introducing the *Three Billy Goats Gruff* (Galdone, 1981), encourages toddlers to hide under or tramp over a bridge, and bleat like a goat. Encouraging toddlers to move while reading enhances knowledge of

positional concepts, extends their engagement with the book, and adds understanding to the reading experience. *Roll Over!* (Peek, 1981) is another classic that invites listeners to roll over and out of bed in order to replicate the story line. Another favorite, *Baby Dance* (Taylor, 1999) is a playful poem that shows a father and child dancing lovingly across its pages, inviting toddlers to swing and sway.

Books that encourage singing, chanting, and movement become predictive and provide opportunities for piggybacking. For example, while toddlers listen to stories with repeating lines, they learn to anticipate and participate in book sharing. They can create their own piggyback songs by inserting their own names or food preferences. Books like *Mary Wore Her Red Dress and Henry Wore His Green Sneakers* (Peek, 1998) and *Today is Monday* (Carle, 1997) provide the opportunity to read and sing as stories are told.

Encourage toddlers to create their own movements using story characters. For instance, *Good Dog Carl* (Day, 1992) shares the mischief made by one affectionate pet. Toddlers can be invited to lumber like Carl or demonstrate other ways dogs move throughout their day. Using informational text allows young children to move and grow their conceptual understanding. Toddlers are concrete learners and benefit from experiences found within their environment. In the series *Insects* (Coughlan, 2006), toddlers can see photographs of insects. One book within the series, *Ants*, uses photographs with simple, concise language to describe insect body parts. Encourage movement that replicates the insects or ants from the text. Exposing toddlers to these novel experiences builds background knowledge and develops comprehension skills (Narvaez, 2002).

Showing similarities between books is one way to enhance emergent literacy skills. Sharing a series that contains the same character helps the toddler see familiar character traits across multiple settings.

Many young children enjoy hearing the endearing stories of *Biscuit*, the fun loving puppy (Capucilli, 1996). With movement, you can point out similarities that can be found across books by saying such things as, "Look, it's Biscuit again! Show me what happened when he took a bath? I wonder what he's going to do in this story." Comparing what Biscuit does in one story with a previous story will help the toddler make text-to-text connections, a skill that is used by good readers. Later in the child's reading development, he will begin to develop comprehension skills with more complex text.

Books and movement provide many occasions to help young children develop inferring skills. Who could forget the emotion of the little bird whose mother went missing for a short time in *Are You My Mother?* (Eastman, 1960). Ask toddlers to show, "How do you think the little bird feels right now?" This type of question helps to introduce the concept of drawing conclusions and using actions and words to express feelings. Reading between the lines is a skill that can start with simple questions and progress as the toddler begins to understand what it means to be a reader. Moreover, this type of dialog will also help the toddler begin to identify and label emotions to which the vocabulary is attached. This is an example of how vocabulary acquisition can occur long before the child knows how to read (Biemiller, 2001). Other stories that evoke emotions experienced by toddlers include *Owl Babies* (Waddell, 1992) and *Bye-Bye Time* (Verdick, 2008). Both reinforce the cycle of separation and reunification that many toddlers experience daily.

Asking questions is a comprehension tool that good readers use to navigate text while making meaning of what is read. Questions we wonder and ponder are considered 'thick questions' (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). This type of question encourages the reader to think beyond the text. Modeling this type of thinking will help to foster a sense of discovery and

curiosity. Wordless books with illustrations are great ways to introduce the process of asking questions. *The Lion and the Mouse* (Pinkney, 2009) is a terrific example of a picture book that uses illustrations to tell the story of a friendship between two unlikely characters. Asking toddlers to show how Lion and Mouse worked together incorporates movement and provides an opportunity to assess the child's understanding of the story.

Other books can also lend themselves to asking thick questions as part of the book-sharing experience. Karen Katz's baby series encourages labeling or naming objects that can be embedded or may be a part of the toddler's environment. *Where is Baby's Dreidel?* (2007), reinforces positional concepts and provides a hide-and-seek adventure that toddlers will love to reenact. Inviting toddlers to move around the classroom and find another spot to hide their dreidel is a motoric response to "Where else should baby look for the dreidel?" This type of thick question will encourage toddlers to continue thinking about the reading experience long after the book sharing is over.

Toddlers can interact with books that go beyond their idea of self and move them toward understanding that the world is bigger than their family. Making these connections can help the toddler relate to their sense of self and world, and open their understanding of the text in a new and deeper way. Most young children have a bedtime routine and can easily relate to the story of *Jazz Baby* (Wheeler, 2007). The stylized depiction of family adds to the author's use of catchy phrases and rhythmic patterns to show bedtime as a chance to celebrate togetherness. *All the World* (Scanlon, 2009), is another book that uses rhyming patterns to help young children explore a variety of day-to-day experiences, some customary, others extraordinary. Making text-to-self and text-to-text connections can begin by showing a variety of routines and activities.

Concluding Thoughts

Sharing books in the earliest years encourages physical closeness, reciprocity, and joint attention. Good readers talk about books, and talking or motoring about books needs to begin at a very young age. Ask toddlers about the books they like, their favorite characters, actions, and episodes. Honor the words and wonder created from these moments shared; it will make a difference. Remember, if you read to your child often — someday your child will read to you!

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