First Book Discussion Generated Lots Of Opinions

A book with a good serious long title certainly should produce some good serious long discussion. Our first book chosen for that purpose this year was The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child’s Developing Mind, Survive Everyday Parenting Struggles and Help your Family Thrive, and it succeeded very well. It was written by Dan Siegel and Tina Payne.

The session was held on October 30 at the home of Early Childhood teacher Bridget Tomlinson. The group consisted of parents of students ranging from Early Childhood through High School.

They enjoyed a lively discussion of the book’s 12 strategies to nurture the developing minds of their children. Everyone left the event with some valuable parenting tips and new friends.

Next up: March 24, Drive, by Daniel Pink.

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Edited by Eloise Rochelle

Reminders About Up-Coming Parent Events

Important events designed to keep parents up to the minute on Montessori continue throughout the year.

The three remaining Open House programs are very important and productive. These three are focused on Upper Elementary. January 13; Elementary, January 20; and Early Childhood and Kindergarten, January 27. These sessions are held on the Wirt Road campus.

The Open House programs are open to the interested general public, as well as current and prospective parents. All programs start at 7 PM.

Open House programs for Woods Middle School and Woods High School are held in November of each year.

Winter Break brings meaningful celebrations for everyone.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO ALL.
Is E-Reading to Your Toddler Story Time, or Simply Screen Time?
by Douglas Quenqua

The American Academy of Pediatrics advises against screen time for toddlers; however, story time is now often on a tablet.

Clifford the Big Red Dog looks fabulous on an iPad. He sounds good, too — tap the screen and hear him pant as a blue truck roars into the frame. “Go, truck, go!” cheers the narrator.

But does this count as story time? Or is it just screen time for babies?

It is a question that parents, pediatricians and researchers are struggling to answer as children’s books, just like all the other ones, migrate to digital media.

For years, child development experts have advised parents to read to their children early and often, citing studies showing its linguistic, verbal and social benefits. In June, the American Academy of Pediatrics advised doctors at every visit that they should read to their children from birth, prescribing books as enthusiastically as vaccines and vegetables.

On the other hand, the academy strongly recommends no screen time for children under 2, and less than two hours a day for older children.

At a time when reading increasingly means swiping pages on a device, and app stores are bursting with reading programs and learning games aimed at infants and preschoolers, which bit of guidance should parents heed?

The answer, researchers say, is not yet entirely clear. “We know how children learn to read,” said Kyle Snow, the applied research director at the National Association for the Education of Young Children. “But we don’t know how that process will be affected by digital technology.”

Part of the problem is the newness of the devices. Tablets and e-readers have not been in widespread use long enough for the sorts of extended studies that will reveal their effects on learning.

Dr. Pamela High, the pediatrician who wrote the June policy for the pediatrics group, said electronic books were intentionally not addressed: “We tried to do a strongly evidence-based policy statement on the issue of reading starting at a very young age,” she said. “And there isn’t any data, really, on e-books.”

But a handful of new studies suggest that reading to a child from an electronic device undercuts the dynamic that drives language development.

“There’s a lot of interaction when you’re reading a book with your child,” Dr. High said. “You’re turning pages, pointing at pictures, talking about the story. Those things are lost somewhat when you’re using an e-book.”

In a 2013 study, researchers found that children ages 3 to 5 whose parents read to them from an electronic book had lower reading comprehension than children whose parents used traditional books. Part of the reason, they said, was that parents and children using an electronic device spent more time focusing on the device itself than on the story (a conclusion shared by at least two other studies).

“Parents were literally putting their hands over the kids’ hands and saying, ‘Wait, don’t press the button yet. Finish this up first,’” said Dr. Julia Parish-Morris, a developmental psychologist at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and the lead author of the 2013 study that was conducted at Temple University. Parents who used conventional books were more likely to engage in what education researchers call “dialogic reading,” the sort of back-and-forth discussion of the story and its relation to the child’s life that research has shown are key to a child’s linguistic development.

Complicating matters is that fewer and fewer children’s e-books can strictly be described as books, say researchers. As technology evolves, publishers are adding bells and whistles that encourage detours.

“What we’re really after in reading to our children is behavior that sparks a conversation,” said Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a professor of psychology at Temple and co-author of the 2013 study. “But if that book has things that disrupt the conversation, like a game plopped right in the middle of the story, then it’s not offering you the same advantages as an old-fashioned book.”
Of course, e-book publishers and app developers point to interactivity as an educational advantage, not a distraction. Many of those bells and whistles — Clifford’s bark, the sleepy narration of “Goodnight Moon,” the appearance of the word “ham” when a child taps the ham in the Green Eggs and Ham app — help the child pick up language, they say.

There is some evidence to bear out those claims, at least in relation to other technologies. A study by the University of Wisconsin in 2013 found that 2-year-olds learned words faster with an interactive app as opposed to one that required no action.

But when it comes to learning language, researchers say, no piece of technology can substitute for a live instructor — even if the child appears to be paying close attention.

A co-author of a recent study said, “What we’re really after in reading to our children is behavior that sparks a conversation.”

Patricia K. Kuhl, a director of the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington, led a study in 2003 that compared a group of 9-month-old babies who were addressed in Mandarin by a live instructor with a group addressed in Mandarin by an instructor on a DVD. Children in a third group were exposed only to English.

“The way the kids were staring at the screen, it seemed obvious they would learn better from the DVDs,” she said. But brain scans and language testing revealed that the DVD group “learned absolutely nothing,” Dr. Kuhl said.

“Their brain measures looked just like the control group that had just been exposed to English. The only group that learned was the live social interaction group.”

In other words, “it’s being talked with, not being talked at,” that teaches children language, Dr. Hirsh-Pasek said.

Today, what Dr. Kuhl found is commonly referred to as the “Baby Einstein” effect, named for the popular video series that entranced children from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, but was ultimately found to have a negative association with language development in infants. In 2009, the Walt Disney Company, facing the threat of a class-action lawsuit, offered refunds to people who had bought the videos.

Similarly, perhaps the biggest threat posed by e-books that read themselves to children, or engage them with games, is that they could lull parents into abdicating their educational responsibilities, said Mr. Snow of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

“There’s the possibility for e-books to become the TV babysitters of this generation,” he said. “We don’t want parents to say, ‘There’s no reason for me to sit here and turn pages and tell my child how to read the word, because my iPad can do it.’ ”

But parents may find it difficult to avoid resorting to tablets. Claudia Raleigh, a mother of three children under 6 years old in Berkley, Mich., said she adhered strictly to the A.A.P. guidelines but found that she needed to distract her toddler, Teddy, during his sister’s swim class. “You know how hard it is to wait somewhere with a 2-year-old,” she said. “So that was his introduction to the iPad. It kept him from jumping in the pool.”

“I considered it a lifesaving device,” she said with a laugh.

The guilt, she added, did not linger for long. “I literally read to my kids every day since birth,” she said. “I’m over feeling guilty about a little screen time.”

Even literacy advocates say the guidelines can be hard to follow, and that allowing limited screen time is not high on the list of parental missteps. “You might have an infant and think you’re down with the A.A.P. guidelines but found that she needed to distract her toddler, Teddy, during her sister’s swim class. “You know how hard it is to wait somewhere with a 2-year-old,” she said. “So that was his introduction to the iPad. It kept him from jumping in the pool.”

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Even literacy advocates say the guidelines can be hard to follow, and that allowing limited screen time is not high on the list of parental missteps. “You might have an infant and think you’re down with the A.A.P. guidelines, and you don’t want your baby in front of a screen, but then you have a grandparent on Skype,” Mr. Snow said. “Should you really be tearing yourself apart? Maybe it’s not the world’s worst thing.”

“The issue is when you’re in the other room and Skyping with the baby because he likes it,” he said. Even if screen time is here to stay as a part of American childhood, good old-fashioned books seem unlikely to disappear anytime soon.

Parents note that there is an emotional component to paper-and-ink storybooks that, so far, does not seem to extend to their electronic counterparts, however engaging.

“Lilly definitely has an iPad, and there are education apps she uses,” Amy Reid, a publicist at CNBC, said of her 4-year-old. “But for her, there is nothing like the excitement of choosing her own book and bringing it home from the library.”
Car seat manufacturers announced changing their installation instructions because the reading level was too difficult for over half of their customers in the United States. How high was that reading level? A fifth grade level.

As a young mother, I had a knot in my stomach when reading this kind of article, along with a cold fear that my children might be among those people who can’t read basic instructions.

Today my children have graduated from college and more. I have taught hundreds of children how to read, and confidence replaced my fears. I know parents make a tremendous difference in their child’s success.

**How can you assist your child in language acquisition?**

Create a quiet environment with clear and meaningful communication for the child from birth. A television blaring from every room is a huge obstacle to a child’s language development. Clearly spoken language with lots of repetition is important. Make sure your baby can see your face and mouth when you are speaking. Speak “to” your child, not “at” your child. Make the everyday language environment rich by reading stories aloud, singing, and including home activities such as age appropriate chores, crafts, and games.

By two-and-a-half years of age, language is fully developed in the child. By age three, a child should be able to clearly speak in full sentences, with correct basic syntax (meaning words are spoken in meaningful order), and each sound in a word should be clear and intelligible. Unfortunately, for many children this is not the case. Ear infections, a long illness, separation from parents, physical and environmental challenges can cause language delays. Luckily, the critical period for language acquisition continues for another three years. At age three analyze your child’s spoken language for areas that are weak and not fully developed. Once you recognize areas for language development, you can begin to enrich your child’s learning in purposeful ways.

If you see speech difficulties, make sure that your child has no physical problems receiving or communicating information. Your pediatrician should be able to help you determine if your child has poor vision, hearing loss, or weak muscle tone in the mouth and tongue. After correcting any physical situations, you can begin to enrich your child’s language environment and target specific skills.

If your child cannot make certain sounds, sing songs two or three times a day using a word that contains that sound. For example, if your child
cannot say the “F” sound, sing the tune to “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” using only the word “fish” over and over again. Sing the word “fish” to work on the initial sound, the word “gift” for internal sound practice, and the word “off” for ending sound practice. Make it fun and silly and in a few days you will begin to see an improvement in your child’s “f” sounds. If your child needs work with multiple sounds, concentrate on one at a time, adding one new sound per week while reviewing the previous ones.

To enrich the language environment, be sure that siblings, grandparents, and grandoparents, everyone, speaks to your child using normal clear speech and not “baby talk”. Some of the mispronounced words children use are cute and funny, but don’t incorporate them into your own speech. A four-year-old student of mine had difficulty with the “D” and “S” sounds and would say “pie-na-thor” for dinosaur. His siblings and parents mimicked his speech, so that he came to believe that “pie-na-thor” was the correct pronunciation. Remember to use the correct word and no “baby-talk”. If it’s not cute on a thirty-year-old, don’t let it be cute on a three-year-old.

Another four-year-old student of mine would use the word “me” instead of “I” and omit prepositions. “Me go slide.” and “Me go eat” are examples of things she would say. I knew her family didn’t use “baby talk” and when I did some investigation I found her caregiver spoke to her that way. Fortunately, after some consultation with her family, she was using pronouns and prepositions correctly in a matter of a few months.

If your child is having difficulty with sentence structure, restate your child’s sentence in a clear and kind way. For “Me eat” restate, “Yes, you are eating. I am eating too.” There is no need to force a child to repeat words or sentences after you. If your child sees and hears it the right way, he or she will soon be speaking it correctly.

In summary, to assure your child’s reading success, be aware of how children naturally develop speech. Analyze your child’s speaking skills at age three. Keep language rich in your home and target specific skills. Then relax a little and let your child’s natural ability to create language do its job.
There is certainly value in reading a book from cover to cover to allow children to enjoy a complete story. However, research shows that engaging preschool children in interactive reading experiences is more effective in promoting children’s language and literacy learning than simply reading books aloud to them.

What is interactive reading? In interactive book reading, adults and children are active participants in a conversation, or dialogue, about the book. Adults plan the experience to support, challenge and extend children’s literacy skills. Three essential characteristics are adult sensitivity and responsiveness, child engagement and repetitive reading. Adults sit face-to-face with children to form a physical and emotional connection during the reading experience. They observe children’s verbal responses, facial expressions, body posture and eye gaze to determine engagement, motivation and understanding.

Adults let children set the pace of interactions, pause to look at pictures, talk about the characters and events in stories and explore related topics. It is effective to read aloud the same books again and again – perhaps daily during a single week. This creates a sense of familiarity for children, helping them become more confident in their knowledge.

Choosing books. To locate the best books to share, explore a variety of high-quality fiction and informational books designed especially for ages 3 to 6. Timeless topics of universal appeal for them are friendship, growing up, animals, weather – and the particular interests of the individual children in your setting. Simple picture books with large print lend themselves to discussions about concepts of print, alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness.

Narrative knowledge. The ability of young children to convey a story or retell a familiar event in logical order and with sufficient detail is linked to social and academic success. During read-aloud experiences, parents can lead children in talking about basic story elements, characters, setting and order of events. Interactive reading experiences begin with a focus on building narrative knowledge as children talk about and make predictions about a new book, listen to prove or disprove their predictions, and discuss questions that promote language and thought.

It’s important to practice reading a book aloud before reading it to children to develop the most effective way to read it. (See scenario in left column.)
OTHER BENEFITS FROM INTERACTIVE READING EXPERIENCES:

Rereading to Promote Word Knowledge

1. Read the first page of *The Big Storm: A Very Soggy Counting Book*. Point to the opening in the hill and ask, “Do you remember what this is called?” (It is a hollow.) Explain that a hollow is an open place, a place with nothing in it. Talk about other items shown on the page that may be unfamiliar to the children.

2. Read the first line of print on the next page: “Leaves started to swirl!” Ask, “What are the leaves doing? What do you think is making them swirl?” Invite the children to stand and swirl like the leaves.

3. After reading “10 critters huddled together, tight and snug;” mention that the author refers to the animals as *critters*. Ask children to look at the way the animals are pictured on the page. Point out that they are *huddled* together, standing or sitting very close to one another. Ask the children to huddle together. Then ask them to recall whether the animals get wet from the rain. (No.) Point out that the author said they are *snug*—they are dry and warm in the hill hollow. Talk about where children might feel snug, such as in their beds.

Sample Interactive Reading: Alphabet Knowledge

An interactive reading of *Kitty Cat, Kitty Cat, Are You Waking Up?* might include something like the following:

**Ms. Harn:** Let’s look at the title of this book (pointing to each word as it is read): *Kitty Cat, Kitty Cat, Are You Waking Up?* I see two big *K’s* in this title (pointing to each one). I see two Cs in the title. Who can find one and point to it? (Calling on a volunteer.) Another? (Calling on another volunteer to find the second C.) As we read the book, let’s watch for these letters.

Sample Interactive Reading: Print Knowledge

An interactive reading of *Kitty Cat, Kitty Cat, Are You Waking Up?* might begin this way:

**Ms. Harn:** The name of the book is *Kitty Cat, Kitty Cat, Are You Waking Up?* The name of the book is called the *title*.

Here are the words in the title (pointing to each word as she reads it): *Kitty Cat, Kitty Cat, Are You Waking Up?* I heard the words *Kitty and Cat* two times. Look, here’s *Kitty* (pointing to the word) and here it is again (pointing to the second time the word *Kitty* appears). And here’s the word *Cat* (pointing to the word) and here it is again (pointing to the second time the word *cat* appears).

The names of the authors are Bill Martin Jr. and Michael Sampson. They wrote the book, so they are the authors. Their names are right here (pointing to the names on the cover).

There is another name on the cover (pointing to the illustrator’s name)—Laura J. Bryant. She is the illustrator, the person who drew the pictures.

Extending the Phonological Awareness Activity

Once children are able to hear likenesses and differences in words that rhyme, they are ready to play *Odd One Out*. Begin the game by saying, “Now I’m going to hold up three pictures and you tell me which one doesn’t belong. Which one doesn’t rhyme with the other two? (1) *cat/hat/dish*, (2) *dish/fish/cat*.” Continue in this manner using other pictures from the book.

Teachers can also use games to help children build phonemic awareness—for example: “Let’s play a word game. I’ll stretch out the sounds in a word, like a rubber band, and you tell me what word I’m saying; /bl/ /el/ /dl/ (bed); /fl/ /ur/ (fur); /sl/ /l/ /eel/ /pl/ (sleep).”

There are other ways to use the book *Kitty Cat, Kitty Cat, Are You Waking Up?* to develop phonological awareness.

- **After reading the first page, say,** “There are two words on this page that rhyme. Listen: *up/butter-cup*. They rhyme because they both have */up/*/.”

- **After reading the third page, ask,** “What is Kitty Cat doing now? (Practicing his purr.) *Purr* rhymes with another word on this page. What other word has */ur/ in it? (Fur).”

Kathy Barclay is the professional development manager for Rowland Reading Foundation. This article was adapted from hers which was published in *Young Children Magazine*, November 2014.