Putting children in charge of reading

Genan Anderson, Utah Valley University
Putting children in charge of reading

Trey runs and snatches up the *I Love You Stinky Face* packet just as Sally begins to reach for it. Danny comes close on their heels eager to join them. They have just finished their snack and are moving to reading time.

Each child knows that this time presents many choices:
- reading a book with a tape at the listening center,
- listening to a teacher read to a small group,
- listening to a dad read his child’s favorite book from home,
- reading individually or with a partner the picture or class books in the library corner, or
- reading a book with props as a small group, the option Trey, Sally, and Danny have chosen.

In a two-teacher classroom, one teacher is clearing away the snack and prepares to greet parents as they come to pick up their children. She is free to talk with parents about the child’s day in preschool and the reading that’s happening in the room. She will encourage parents to help their child choose a book from the classroom lending library, which is stocked with books obtained with book-club points. They will read the books at home tonight and bring them back and trade for another book tomorrow.

The second teacher is reading books to the children who have collected around her.

So who is facilitating the listening center? Is it the group interacting with *I Love You Stinky Face*? Indeed, Trey, Sally, and Danny are largely mentoring one another as a result of training that came from their teachers earlier in the day, week, or school year.

We have learned that a successful reading time allows the children to have a variety of choices and experiences with books.
How we set up the center

Teachers introduced the listening center as a free-choice area on the first day of school. It is simply a small table with a tape recorder, three headsets, three identical books that correspond to the tape in the recorder, and three chairs. The play button is marked with a green sticker; the eject button, with a red sticker.

During the free-choice time when a teacher is available to demonstrate and mentor, the children learn to start the tape, follow the story in the book, and turn the tape over to listen again. Some children choose to visit the listening center during daily free-play periods. Others may choose to visit the listening center at the more formal reading time.

Providing a variety of books

Books are always a choice during free-choice center time. The variety regularly includes familiar picture books, books the children have written together, informational books, and early readers. Children interact often with these texts and become independent in using these them.

Books they have written together as part of a class activity are often their favorites. They quickly learn which page was written by which friend, and they remember accurately what their friend wrote.

Always the page they wrote themselves is their most favorite. We simply laminate the pages of these books and have them spiral-bound at our local printer.

Introducing the stories

We introduce the stories with props as part of our group time when we share special stories together. About once a week we read a story while we demonstrate the use of the props that enhance it.

For example, before the teacher read *I Love You Stinky Face*, she handed the flannel characters from the story to children in the group. As she read, she held the book so the children could see the pictures on the page she was reading. When she came to each new character, the child entrusted with that figure came up and placed it on the flannel board. When the teacher finished reading, she reminded the children that the book and props would be in the library during reading time and reading it again with friends would be one of their choices.

Adding books to the lending library

We add new books and story props to our library one by one, week by week. After the winter holidays, we add these story packets to our lending library, allowing children to take them home to read.
with their families. Because we want our props to be used and loved, we make them both durable and replaceable.

Some books contain text in both English and Spanish (the two dominant languages of our families).

**Typical developmental stages of emergent literacy**

- Recognizes specific books by their covers.
- Pretends to read books.
- Understands that books are handled in particular ways.
- Enters into a book-sharing routine with the primary caregiver.
- Shows enjoyment of rhyming language and non-sense word play.
- Labels objects in books.
- Comments on the characters in books.
- Recognizes pictures in books as symbols of real objects.
- Pays attention to repeating sounds.
- Understands and follows oral instructions.
- Shows awareness of some sequences of events in stories.
- Shows an interest in books and reading.
- Demonstrates an understanding of a story's literal meaning through questions and comments.

Some books are either all-English or all-Spanish. Either way, we make up packets with both English and Spanish so parents can choose which language they wish to read. Often the children read the story in English, and their parent then reads it in Spanish. This reinforces the acquisition of language skills in both languages.

**How children use the books**

Trey has the packet in hand and sits on the carpet. Sally and Danny sit in front of him as though he is the teacher and they are the students. Thoughtfully and carefully, Trey pulls each felt piece out of the bag. He hands Sally the ape, Danny the skunk, Sally the monster, and Danny the alligator until all the felt pieces have been distributed.

Trey holds the book so Sally and Danny can see the pictures. Trey begins to read (retell) the story. As he reads about each character, Sally or Danny reach over and place their figure on the small flannel board on the back of the packet bag.

When the reading is finished, Sally gathers up all the pieces and begins to pass them out to Trey, Danny, and Emily who has now joined them. Sally is now the teacher and the process begins again. When Sally has finished, Danny will become the teacher.
The children know that the person with the bag is in charge. They love being in charge. They also know that if they stay and participate, they will have a turn to put up their favorite characters and a turn to be in charge of everyone. Knowing this helps them have the patience to wait for their turn, which minimizes conflict.

We have learned that a successful reading time allows the children to have a variety of choices and experiences with books. The richness of those opportunities has increased as the children have learned to engage collaboratively in literacy activities.

**Ideas for take-home literature activities**

Use these suggestions to jump-start your take-home bag production. Pack materials in the bag with a copy of the book. You might find it useful to keep a master list of materials to make sure everything is returned.

- *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* by Bill Martin and Lois Ehlert. Buy a small magnetic white board. Cut lower-case letters from craft foam. Attach small pieces of magnet strip to the back of each letter. Cut a 12-inch-long coconut tree from craft foam and glue several pieces of magnet strip to the back.
- *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin and Eric Carle. Make color copies or trace silhouettes of each animal on black paper. Laminate and trim the pieces.
- *The Wheels on the Bus* by Maryann Kovalski. Draw an outline of a bus. Laminate and trim the outline. Glue magnet strips to the back. For pictures of story items—driver, people, door, babies—copy computer clip-art or cut from catalogs and magazines. Laminate, trim, and glue magnets to each.
- *The M and M Color Pattern Book* by Barbara B. McGrath. Cover a 9-by-12-inch sheet of cardboard with white flannel or felt. Cut out small circles from colored felt (red, yellow, green, blue, brown, orange). Use a correction fluid pen to write M's on each circle.

  **Idea 1.** Cut out two white mitten shapes from posterboard, each about 9-by-5 inches, and laminate. Hold the pieces together and punch holes around the edges. Lace the pieces together with heavy yarn, leaving the bottom open. Laminate and trim clip-art pictures of the animals from the story to fit inside the mitten.
  **Idea 2.** Color copy or trace and color the mitten outlines and each animal from the book (along the edges of each page). There will be eight animals and eight mittens. Laminate and trim all pieces. Glue hook-and-loop tape on each to attach the animals to the mittens.

- *The Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle. **Idea 1.** Use a green knee-sock (long) for the caterpillar. Paint or stitch a face on the toe end. Trace and laminate shapes of each food item in the story. Cut a large hole in the middle of each so that the food can slide over the sock when it's worn on your arm like a puppet.
  **Idea 2.** On posterboard draw a large grid. Write Monday through Sunday across the top and draw

---

**Tips for making literature bags**

Sending books home with children reinforces the importance of all literacy activities. Use these tips to make the most of these take-home bags.

- Cover books with adhesive-backed plastic to extend their life. When possible, use board books because they are more durable. Many familiar children's books are available in board-book form.
- Keep materials to a standard size for storage, filing, and check-out purposes. Buy pre-made bags, or use extra-large, heavy-duty, zipper-lock plastic bags to hold the book and the materials.
- Provide a laminated index card that describes the ways the materials can be used.
- Make a list of the contents, including all the pieces for retelling the story, so families can identify each piece. Tape the list to the outside of the bag with wide, clear packing tape.
- To make story pieces durable, cover with adhesive-backed plastic or laminate. The extra-heavy laminating will last longer and withstand more wear-and-tear.
- Make sure materials are appropriate for your age group. Avoid pieces that are small or have loose pieces that could be a choking risk.
10 squares under each day. Cover the posterboard with clear, adhesive-backed plastic or laminate. Make copies of each food item in the same size as the graph squares. Laminate the copies. Place the foods on the graph as the caterpillar eats.

- **I Love You Stinky Face** by Lisa McCourt. Cover a 9-by-12-inch sheet of posterboard with white flannel or felt. Trace or draw the story characters (mother and child, ape, skunk, alligator, dinosaur, swamp creature, alien, one-eyed monster) onto paper. Laminate and trim. Glue felt or sandpaper pieces to the back of each character to attach to the board.

- **There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly** by Simms Taback. Enlarge an outline of the old lady from the story. Cut a large circle out of the stomach area. Laminate the lady and add a clear pocket over the laminated stomach, enabling swallowed items to be seen. Use clip art or trace the items swallowed—a fly, spider, bird, cat, dog, cow, and horse. Laminate and trim.

- **Go Away Big Green Monster!** by Edward R. Emberley. Cover a 9-by-12-inch sheet of posterboard with white flannel or felt. Draw and cut out felt shapes—yellow eyes, bluish greenish nose and ears, red mouth, white teeth, purple hair, and large green circle for a face—to place on the board.

**About the authors**

Tracy Sermon is a lecturer at Utah Valley State College in Orem, Utah, and the head teacher in the UVSC Teacher Education Preschool. She has worked as a preschool teacher in early childhood programs and in programs serving blind children. She has a master's degree in early childhood education from Brigham Young University, and is the mother of four children.

Genen Anderson is the director of the Children's Center at Utah Valley State College. She has worked as an early childhood educator for more than 25 years and is a frequent contributor to *Texas Child Care.*