

Rich Words for Free: Using Quality Children's Literature to Bring Language ALIVE! in
the Lives of Young Children

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Accepted for publication Fall 2017

Thompson, J., & Walker, K. (pending). Rich Words for Free. *ACEI Early Years Bulletin*:
Focus on Pre-K & K.

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Abstract: Children learn the language they hear. Many parents, families, teachers and caregivers magnify their language by using quality children's literature to provide children with richer vocabulary, more expressive prosody, and deeper, more meaningful content. Starting from their own available texts, readers can build a library of ideas, classic titles, personal favorites, new releases, and familiar verses, along with new ways to sing, giggle, laugh, and read their stories with young children, giving them rich words for free.

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Children are born into families, each generation dependent on their parents and caregivers, their families and teachers, to show them their way in this new world. Children bring tremendous capacity to learn and to grow, to move and develop strengths. But their dependence on others for nurture and protection provides them closeness and connection which especially aids them in acquiring language. With language comes storytelling, the fabric of 'our culture', the stories of 'our people', the songs of 'our nation.' Any child, born anywhere, in any corner of the Earth, could be nurtured and raised by any other family from any other corner; but once language is attached, once stories emerge, this child becomes a member of her people, a master linguist of her mother tongue, a participant in the story of her people (Bruner, 1990).

Many cultures and civilizations, from ancient times to current, create systems and language protocols that use language to transmit cultural values. Consider the ancient fables of Aesop, how Greeks desired their children to know the ways of getting along in their time and in their culture. Likewise, speakers of Chinese uses chengyu, the four-character idiom, to capture and convey history, culture, sociology, and manners all in a compact format, easily digested by native speakers, though complex and convoluted to outsiders. The Hebrew tradition of cultural transmission reminds families

to pay attention to the daily routines, knowing how closely the young child attends to those rituals, rites, traditions, and protocols of language: "Write these commandments that I've given you today on your hearts. Get them inside of you and then get them inside your children. Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night. Tie them on your hands and foreheads as a reminder; inscribe them on the doorposts of your homes and on your city gates" (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

Quintilian, an exemplar of 'pater familias' of Roman times, considered training in rhetoric, the use and functions of language, to be the highest work of a parent (father) for his or her child (son). American families also use language in ways that convey cultural norms and values, and researchers have begun to demonstrate how different American cultures use words differently.

Often this transmission of cultural values is delivered in the context of stories. Libraries and bookstores are filled with quality children's literature, classic and contemporary, just waiting to be read. The relationship between the reader, the stories they tell, and the experience of the listener at that particular moment in time must be considered. For example, author Karen Walker recalls how the story *Owl Babies* by Martin Waddell (1992) had different meaning to different children, one whose parent frequently traveled for business, another child whose parent was planning to leave the child for the first time while away on a long trip, or again, another child whose parent

drops him off daily at child care and reliably returns at the end of the day. The text becomes internalized in transaction with an individual's experience (Rosenblatt, 1978).

How the reader shares the text is also important. A story can be read quite literally, the adult reads from beginning to end, and the child listens. Mem Fox's *Tough Boris* (1998), for example, begs to be read straight through, without interruption during the first read. But, by reading *with* children instead of *to* them, adult caregivers elevate the experience in a way that maximizes language development. Dialogic reading, pioneered by Whitehurst and his colleagues at The Stony Brook Reading and Language Project (1994), is a method designed to actively involve children in sharing the story, not just listening to the story. The reader invites participation by asking questions, providing prompts and cues, and rephrasing and responding to children's comments and questions. Children engaged in conversations about books are more likely to have the oral language skills needed to be successful in school. Expository texts, such as Lois Ehlert's *Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf* (1991) for example, provide the type of information that provokes conversation and connection, jumping up from the reading chair, perhaps, to go out in the yard for an oak leaf or two.

The 30 million word gap

Hart & Risley's landmark study (1995, 1999) tracked the language used in three different socio-economic groups (all living in America at the time): children living in poverty, children born into middle-class homes, and children with professional parents.

The researchers' first major theme is that children from these different groups "*all have the same kinds of everyday language experiences*" (italics original) (Hart & Risley, 1995, p. x).

What is different in these groups is not the quality of language used and heard by the child, but the quantity. "It turns out that *frequency matters* (italics original) ... And the consequence is that [children living in poverty] learn fewer words and acquire a vocabulary of words more slowly" (p. xi). The study goes on to enumerate how big the gap is between the number of words heard by children living in poverty versus those heard by children in homes of professionals, thus the now often-repeated phrase, the '30 million-word gap' by the age of three years old. Repetition, reiteration, and re-contextualizing are just some of the ways that professional parents and qualified caregivers use rich words for free in children's lives, and this increase matters. Using words over and over again, in identical, or similar, or contrasting manners changes the way children learn, and consequently, the whole trajectory of their lives.

Impact of literacy habits on the brain

Recent brain imaging research confirms the power of storytelling and book reading on language development. Hutton and others (2015) watched brain activity in children, ages 3, 4, and 5 years old. They report noticeable differences in blood oxygen levels in the parietal-temporal-occipital (PTO) association cortex (see figure 1), which supports meaning making, or comprehension of language. Those children from homes with strong literacy habits demonstrated the most brain activity in the PTO area. These

habits included more frequent home reading, greater access to books, and a wider variety of content, e.g., concepts, beliefs, and relationships. Each of these contribute in our consideration here of rich words for free, using quality books to bring language alive in children's lives.

What makes a good book good?

Choosing high-quality books for young children is truly rather simple. A few key criteria will align the reader with all she needs to know to select quality, and leave the rest on the shelf. Review Isabel Baker's Standards for Choosing Good Children's Books (Table 1). How do these standards apply the principles of providing children rich words for free? Consider what the choice of a hardback or a paperback conveys to children about the value these books have in their lives. Isabel tells a story of a Head Start parent (low-income) preferring fewer hardback (more expensive) books over cheaper paperback books. "My child (a toddler) recognizes and 'reads' the title spine for each and every one of the 14 books on our home bookshelf. They are classics to him, treasures of his childhood."

Content matters, rich vocabulary and robust use of language make a difference in quality children's literature, and in the meaningful engagement children experience with books and their readers. A cute celebrity book, Jimmy Fallon's *Dada* (2015) for example, has a certain appeal, but where is the rich vocabulary and robust language? One father reports: "This book in particular doesn't work when read straight through –

it's hardly reading at all, just repetition of one word. M and I have enjoyed it more when narrated, filled in – (Dad) “The big brown horse says...” (M)...“Dada!”... (Dad) “...but the little baby pony just says...” (M) “...Neigh!” Not rich vocabulary, but conversant, dialogic, open-ended.”

The lists of books selected for awards by various reading and library organizations are a good tool for families and caregivers to use in selecting books, classics and new publications, for their own collection (Table 2).

Ultimately, it comes down to personal taste and preference. What makes a good book for you is something you will use and treasure. Perhaps it is a book from your own childhood, or early career. Sometimes, a great connection with a text enlivens a book for a parent or teacher, and then that book becomes a staple of that adult reader's life with children thereafter. Josh Thompson discovered *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* by Bill Martin Jr and John Archambault (Lois Ehlert, illustrator) soon after it was published in 1989, and it became a regular favorite of his kindergarten classroom, read rhythmically and cacophonously thereafter by class after class of kindergarten readers.

Conclusion

Children learn the language they hear. Use of quality children's books enhances the language they hear, the language they learn. Parents, families, teachers, and caregivers can improve the language they share with young children through a rather rigorous approach to choosing quality children's books; not just any ol' book will do.

Many aids exist to help adults choose well. Standards for what makes a good book good are readily available, accessible to readers. Lists upon lists exist from which to choose the very best for our very youngest. All it takes is the will to give our children the very best beginning to their lifelong love of reading and learning, by giving them rich words for free.

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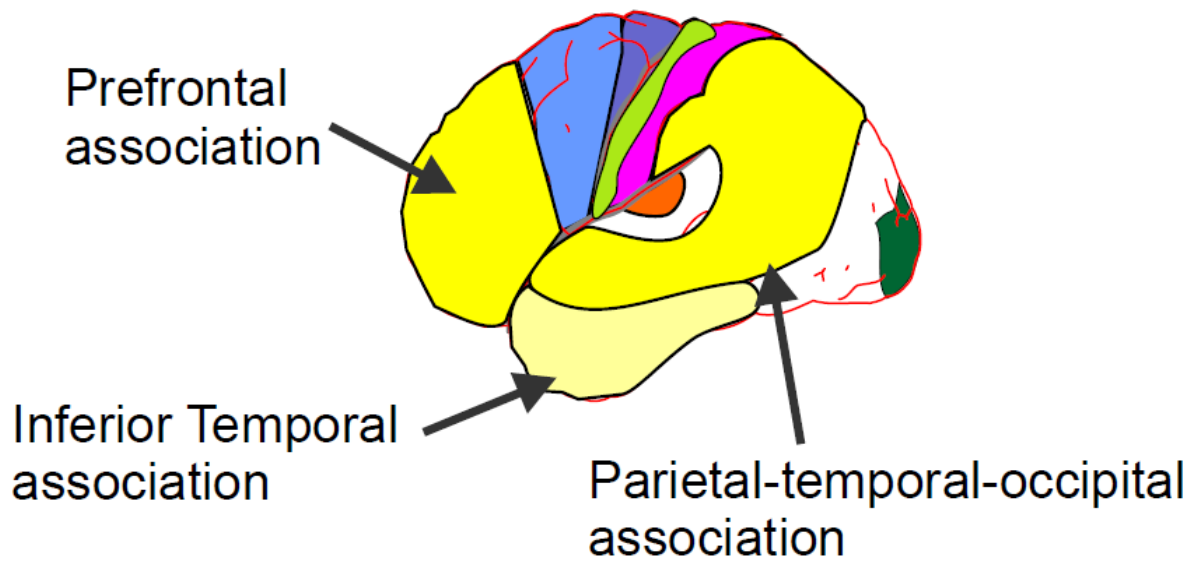


Figure 1: Location of three association areas of the brain (left-brain)

Standards for Choosing Good Children's Books
By Isabel Baker

Which is best, hardcover or paperback or digital?

- Illustrations and printing is quite different in different media
- Weight and volume, size and smell
- Value of a more expensive investment as compared to a throwaway disposable, consumable
- Fine ceramic china or 'Styrofoam'

Art

- Bold, not overly detailed. More is not better.
- Negative space, plenty of room on the page
- Does your eye know where to go?
- Color – does not equal quality
- Is the art in good taste?
- Does the art add a new dimension to the text? Like a marriage, each partner must add a spark and new direction.

Story Content

- Do the characters grow, change, and touch our hearts?
- Are the characters consistent and believable as opposed to one dimensional?
- Are the settings clear and authentic?
- Is there a theme that holds the story together? Are values being explored rather than being preached?
- Is there tension? Is the story interesting to children? Is there a goal? Plot driven obstacles help good stories develop.
- Choose stories you like.

Content: Multicultural Mirrors and Windows

- Mirrors: children deserve to see themselves in a book. Does your library have racially diverse books? Are there girls in leadership roles? Are males nurturing? Are there female doctors or male nurses?
- Windows: we need to provide windows into other cultures for our children. Books to educate us about cultures other than our own.
- Multicultural books should not be a separate category, especially in nonfiction. All people do everyday things. All people have a family life.
- Don't be disparate – a mediocre book about a culture does not do anyone a favor. In fact, it can be destructive.
- Children's books are a golden opportunity to contribute to our community of man.

Content: Nonfiction

- Is the information accurate? Is it honest?
- Children are naturally curious. Nonfiction has natural appeal yet is frequently ignored.
- Boys (and many girls, too) love nonfiction. They should not be deprived.
- Are the settings authentic?
- Nonfiction with a sense of wonder and imagination is at its best.

Language, Vocabulary

- Reading to and with young children may amplify their language acquisition
- Language in books contains more "unique word types" than oral language
- Does the language show respect for the reader?

Prosody, Rhythm, Rhyme

- Nursery rhymes and lullabies may come naturally to many parents or caregivers.
- Rhyme is the start of phonological awareness, the start of literacy

- Rhythm, repetition, pacing. Does it flow? Or is it forced?
- Does the rhyme cradle you? Does it soothe?
- Poetry or rhyme book – one rhyme per page

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Table 1: Isabel Baker's Standards for Choosing Good Children's Books

Award winning children's literature

- American Library Association www.ala.org/awardsgrants/awards
- Caldecott www.ala.org/awardsgrants/randolph-caldecott-medal-1
- Newberry www.ala.org/awardsgrants/john-newbery-medal-2
- Coretta Scott King www.ala.org/awardsgrants/coretta-scott-king-book-awards
- Pura Belpré www.ala.org/awardsgrants/pura-belpré-award
- Notable Books for a Global Society www.clrsig.org/nbgs.php
- Guys Read - - & Guys Listen www.guysread.com/
- The Reading Chair www.naeyc.org/yc/columns/readingchair

Table 2 Award winning and notable children's literature