

## Encouraging young children to retell stories enhances their language and literacy development

*What does research tell us about story retelling as a strategy for developing early language and literacy?*

Once isn't enough when it comes to storytelling—and that's a good thing! Research shows that encouraging toddlers and preschoolers to retell stories they've heard is an activity that benefits their language and early literacy development in a number of ways.

Researchers at the Center for Early Literacy Learning (CELL) examined 11 studies that included 687 children participating in various story-retelling interventions. The effectiveness of the story-retelling interventions was determined by evaluating child outcomes including comprehension, expressive vocabulary, receptive language, and aspects of early literacy such as phonological awareness and print awareness.

The intervention practices varied. Their characteristics in terms of the adult reading included: introducing the story before beginning to read; reading the story multiple times; giving an oral review of the story's characters and events; pointing out a relationship between the child and an event or character in the story; prompting the child to respond to the story by asking open-ended questions and/or encouraging the child to ask questions; asking the child for predictions about what will happen in the story; using props or toys to more deeply involve the child in the story; and telling the story using book illustrations or sequencing picture cards as aids. In terms of the child's retelling, the practice characteristics included: adult prompting to encourage the child's retelling; elaborating on



***“Now it’s my turn to tell the story. Mommy and Tiger can listen!”***

the retelling with specific questions about story structure and details; letting the child hold the book to use for cues during the retelling; using pictures or picture-sequence cards to assist the child's retelling; and having the child use manipulatives like toys to assist with the retelling.

The study analysis showed that a combination of these characteristics had the greatest benefit for child literacy and language learning. The research findings also confirmed what educators who favor story retelling as a learning strategy have asserted—that the practice is especially effective in promoting children's expressive vocabulary and comprehension.

This *CELLnotes* summarizes findings reported in Dunst, C. J., Simkus, A., & Hamby, D. W. (2012). Children's story retelling as a language enhancement strategy. *CELLreviews* 5(2), 1-14.

# Acting on the Evidence

Download free, two-page *CELL*practices guides in versions for parents or practitioners at [www.earlyliteracylearning.org](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org)

Staff of CELL have created a number of practice guides especially for parents and early childhood practitioners to encourage putting this research evidence to use in home, community, and classroom settings. All of the two-page guides listed below are available for free download on the CELL project web site: [www.earlyliteracylearning.org](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org). At this web address you can also find interactive posters called *CELL*pops and multimedia practice guides such as videos that illustrate practices supported by this research.

*Especially for parents of toddlers!*

## Let Me Tell the Story

*Storytelling and Listening*

Long before children read on their own, they can engage in shared book reading activities with grown-ups. Shared reading is a powerful way to learn new words and create a love of books and reading. This handout describes ways to make these early literacy skills.

**What is the practice?**  
Toddlers learn about reading while listening to, looking at, and talking about the story in a book. Asking questions that encourage a parent to talk with you about a story helps expand his listening and speaking skills.

**What does the practice look like?**  
Snuggling together in an armchair with your toddler's favorite book creates a great opportunity to "read" together. As you read the story, stop frequently and ask your toddler who, questions about the pictures or story. Encourage him to talk about what he sees and understands. Ask who, questions like "What do you see in the picture?" or "Where did the boy go?" This helps him talk about the story, be patient while he tells you about what he thinks is happening.

**How do you do the practice?**

- Start by asking your toddler which book he wants to read.
- Ask your toddler to tell you what the story is about if it is an old favorite. If it is a new book, look at the pictures with him. Then ask what he thinks the book is about.
- As you look through the book together, let your child hold it and turn the pages. Don't worry if it pages get skipped. When reading with a toddler, using every word is not necessary. Just let him tell the story as you go along. Encourage your child to talk with you about the story. Ask questions like, "What do you think will happen next?" or "Why is the dog all crazy?" This will encourage your toddler to give answers longer than one word. Who and what questions encourage children to talk more than questions that can be answered with a "Yes" or "No." "Is the dog brown?" is an example of a yes/no question.
- Show your interest in what your toddler says by following his answer with another question. For example, "You think she is crying because she is scared? Why do you think she is scared?"
- Smiling and commenting on his attempts to answer your questions shows your interest and keeps him involved in reading.



**Look at more shared book reading**

**Key Questions**

As with her 2½-year-old daughter on joint book time, they snuggle down on Jenna's sofa. Taking the book Jenna picks up, Jenna asks what the book is about. Jenna says, "I'm going to tell you about everything." Mom asks, "What are the things in the picture?" and she continues to read the book. Mom asks about the pictures and story. She is encouraging her daughter because she is so into it.

**Selecting Books at the Library**

Every few weeks, 2-year-old Kollie and her mother browse new books from the library. While they choose books, they play or game. They take turns making guesses about a book just by looking at the pictures. Kollie's mom starts the game by asking Kollie what she thinks the name of the character is. Or Mom asks what Kollie thinks is happening in a certain picture. Mom can tell Kollie like a book by how long she wants to look at it.

**and-Feel Books**

In a social experiment, two children were shown a book before her brother comes in. To help teach her mom uses books, or books with sounds and big pictures. One of Kollie's favorites is Dorothy Kunhardt. Each time they read it, mom asks her questions like "How does the bunny feel?" She encourages her to touch the bunny illustration with his palm or lift her. To expand their conversation about the book, Leah's mom asks what sounds the animals would make. They talk about which pages are favorites, and why they like them.





*Especially for practitioners working with toddlers!*

## Creating Young Storytellers

*Storytelling and Listening*

Introduce children early to the time-honored practice of storytelling. It is a great way for them to learn the basic structure of stories and to gain and practice new vocabulary. The practice guide suggests ways to promote a toddler's ability to enjoy storytelling and related activities.

**What is the practice?**  
Toddlers above all love to hear stories about themselves or other family members. This is a great opportunity to learn to listen and tell stories with and about loved ones in their lives. By sharing with the focus of interest, toddlers become active participants in the development, telling, and retelling of stories.

**What does the practice look like?**  
Repeated storytelling occurs only if a toddler repeats a story he heard from someone else or a story partly made up by the toddler and an adult. A toddler might retell a story about what happened when playing with a friend. Repeating a story about a family trip to the beach is another example of repeated storytelling. Repeated storytelling expands a toddler's knowledge of how to put thoughts in order to form a story. It also increases the number of words they know how to use and their enjoyment of the art of storytelling.

**How do you do the practice?**  
Many opportunities to take part in storytelling and repeated storytelling happen every day. They might occur when children are busy with favorite toys, engaged in a book, or looking out a window. Try some of these ideas for promoting storytelling.

- Start by picking out topics that are interesting to the child. If a toddler is interested in trains or a favorite pet, make up a story about one of those interests. The toddler is more likely to participate in the storytelling moment if she finds the topic interesting. Remember that toddlers often like to hear stories about themselves or about the important adults in their lives. The story of the day the child was born is a favorite in many homes.
- Choose times and places for storytelling that are most likely to make it easy for the toddler to take part. A place where you can hear the toddler and she can easily hear you is helpful. The attention span of a toddler is limited. However, it helps to have some time when there are few interruptions.
- Start the story, but quickly encourage the child to add information to the story. If this is a made-up story, ask the toddler to add details for the story. For instance, you could ask the toddler, "What's the dog's name?" The story may be about a real person or event. If so, ask the toddler for some information the knows about the person or event.
- Retell the same story during different storytelling sessions. With each retelling, ask the toddler to supply more and more of the story, focus on doing this until the toddler can tell the basic story on her own.
- The child might have trouble adding the ideas to design an end to a story. By providing two possible endings and let him decide how to continue. "Does Papa Bear like his beds too soft or too hard?"
- Smile and respond to the toddler's efforts to keep her interested in the story.

**How do you know the practice worked?**

- The toddler repeating more stories.
- Does the toddler seem to enjoy telling stories or helping you tell them?
- Has the toddler tried to tell new stories when asked?



**Look at more learning to tell stories**

**Telling Stories**

Early childhood specialists like to help classroom teachers to become storytellers. She is talking with a group of 2-year-olds about ways to include very young children in the reading and learning community. Children like the big farm machines. Jacques says he likes that but farm machines and animals would be a good group of children. The teacher introduces a story and the children know what they are. She gives a story with them. The teacher pauses and asks about the farm animals and equipment as the story unfolds.

**Interest-Focused Stories**

Ava's mom looks forward to when her daughter's home visitor comes. Their meetings are a great chance to get helpful information. Ava's mom reads and it's a great opportunity to tell stories to the children. However, she does not know how since Ava is only 20 months old. The home visitor starts by telling Ava a story from the end of Ava's journey. Mom mentions that Ava's favorite toy and her baby doll and her stuffed dog. The home visitor suggests that mom start making up a story with Ava about her favorite toy. Mom asks questions about the story that Ava can answer to keep her engaged. She might ask, "Where is the baby's head?" or "Do you want the doggie to go for a walk?" Ava and mom create and tell the story together.

**Visual Cues**

aid child who is hearing impaired. Her mother wants to help her learn to communicate. The support team encourages Dawn's mom to use visual cues when telling a story. She suggests building a story from more pictures. Dawn is using signs and pictures. Together they tell and sign a short story about the dog going down a creek.





## Especially for PARENTS

**Infants:**  
*Baby's First Picture Book  
Tell Me More, Tell Me More  
The Right Touch*

**Toddlers:**  
*Book Reading Made Fun for All  
I Wanna Be a Storyteller  
Let Me Tell the Story*

**Preschoolers:**  
*Read It Again  
Let's Read Together  
Read with Me*

## Especially for PRACTITIONERS

**Infants:**  
*Repeated Storytelling  
Touch-and-Feel Books  
First Picture Books*

**Toddlers:**  
*Creating Young Storytellers  
Reading Together Out Loud  
Letters and Books*

**Preschoolers:**  
*Read and Repeat  
One for the Books  
Tales for Talking*