

Bringing Books to Life! Build Early Literacy Skills by Acting Out Stories

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You probably know about the importance of reading with young children. Reading books together is one of the best ways to build children's language and early literacy skills.

But did you know that you can take book reading one step further by acting out your child's favourite stories? When you act out a story, you deepen your child's understanding of the story, help them think about the characters' actions and perspectives, and provide opportunities for your child to use new words from the book. All of these skills are essential for your child's literacy development.

Studies have shown that children who participate in pretend play related to a story they've heard:

- remember more events from the story
- learn new words
- can retell the story well, providing more details and descriptions [1]

Six tips for acting out stories

So, choose a book that your child enjoys and use these tips to act it out together:

Collect some props

Gather some props or costumes that can be used to act out the story. Having a prop or costume that represents your child's character will help your child stay in their role. You don't need elaborate props or costumes – accessories like hats, jewelry or briefcases work well, or objects associated with a character (e.g., your child could hold a whisk if they are pretending to be a chef). Even a picture of your child's character strung on a necklace can work (and even better if your child draws the picture!). You can also use puppets, dolls, or stuffed animals to act out the story.

Plan the play

Help your child decide which role they will play and take on a role yourself. If there are other adults or children around, invite them to join in the fun! Talk about how you will act out the story together. The language you use to decide upon roles and plan out the play gives your child a chance to hear and use language that's beyond the "here-and-now". Research has shown that this type of language builds children's understanding of the story [1, 2]

Have the book handy

Have the book available as you act out the story so you can refer to it if your child forgets a part of the story. Being able to act out the story with all the main parts and in the right order builds your child's story retelling abilities.

Emphasize new words from the book

Highlight new words that were introduced in the book while you act out the story. This builds your child's understanding of the new words and helps them understand their meaning. If you're acting out *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, you could emphasize the word "cocoon" and show your child what it means by wrapping your child up in a blanket, pretending they are wrapped up in their cocoon!

Explain, describe, and talk about feelings

When you provide explanations and descriptions about what is happening in the story, you model the type of language needed to develop literacy skills and for success at school. Talking about the characters' feelings builds your child's perspective-taking skills and deepens their understanding of the characters' behaviour and motivations. Here are some examples of how to do this when acting out the story of *The Three Little Pigs*:

- You can explain what you are doing by saying things like: "I'm going to build a brick house because it will be strong and sturdy. I hope the wolf won't be able to blow it down!"
- You can describe the houses by saying: "My straw house looks a bit flimsy. I don't think it's very strong.", but the stick house looks stronger."
- You can talk about how the pigs feel by saying things like: "I'm really scared! I hope the wolf doesn't blow down my house!" or "I'm not worried. My house is made of strong bricks."

Think beyond storybooks

Besides storybooks, there are other books you and your child can act out together. Information-based books (non-fiction books that provide information about a subject) can be a source for some role play. For example, if you've just read a book about animals, you could act out a trip to the zoo or a vet clinic. Or if your child enjoys books about outer space, you could pretend you are astronauts going to the moon! Using these types of books as themes for pretend play deepens your child's understanding of the new words and ideas introduced in the book (such as "space" and "astronauts"), and also gives your child opportunities to hear and use some of these new words.

Looking for other ideas about how to build your child’s literacy skills? *I’m Ready!™ How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success* provides practical strategies you can use during your everyday routines and activities to encourage your child’s early literacy development.

References

1. Rand, M. K. & Mandel Morrow, L. (2021). The Contribution of Play Experiences in Early Literacy: Expanding the Science of Reading. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 56(S1), S239–S248. doi:10.1002/rrq.383
2. Galda, L., Pellegrini, A.D., & Cox, S. (1989). A short term longitudinal study of preschoolers’ emergent literacy. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 23(3), 292–309.
3. Greenberg, J. & Weitzman, E. (2014). *I’m Ready!™ How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success*. Hanen Early Language Program: Toronto, Ontario.

About The Hanen Centre

The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization committed to supporting all the important adults in young children’s lives to build the best possible social, language and literacy skills. This includes children with or at risk of language delays/disorders, autistic children, and children who may benefit from social communication support.

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