

*Promoting a Culture of Literacy*, by Diane W. Frankenstein

Read a book. Ask a question, Start a conversation.

Diane Frankenstein considers ways of promoting a culture of literacy in a school community through conversational reading. Conventional wisdom has become so focused on the importance of reading to children that it has somewhat ignored the critical component of the importance of talking with children about what they read. As important as it is to read aloud to children, a child's desire to read comes from being read to *and* talking about books.

Talking with children has an even stronger effect on literacy learning than reading aloud. Vocabulary is the lynchpin to literacy and many of the skills children need to *get ready* to learn to read are first learned in conversation. A child who enters school with a vocabulary of 22,000 words, acquired through conversation, has an advantage over the child who enters school with a vocabulary of 2,000 words. After six years of school, the child with the limited vocabulary has still not caught up to the child with the larger vocabulary.

Conversational reading, a comprehension strategy, is talking to children about the stories they read. Through books, children learn language— oral and written—and through language, they learn to think. Conversational reading helps children develop the ability to use language to express themselves. Children who talk about stories and the subjects a story explores are involved readers who better understand what they read, which in turn leads to confidence and pleasure.

Conversational reading promotes active literacy, reading for meaning, nurtures curiosity, and instills a love of exploring and learning. Children who read conversationally are readers who know how to become involved with a story, making connections between books, experiences and ideas. As a Chinese proverb reminds us: "Tell me and I'll forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I'll understand." The most important outcome is not how many books children read, but how many conversations they have about them.

Nobody comes into the world knowing how to talk about a story. Finding meaning calls for guessing, speculation, and pondering; it's less about what *you know* and more about what *you think*. It is a little like thinking out loud. Conversational reading is less about trying to figure out the meaning of the stories and more about what the story means to children in their lives now.

*'What is the use of a book, thought Alice, without pictures or conversations?'*  
Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

The following conversational reading strategies and tips can be used in schools as well as in the home. When practiced in the home and in the classroom, conversational reading encourages a culture of active literacy in a school community.

- Read the right book at the right time. Choose books that speak to both the appropriate reading level and a child's developmental readiness for the story.
- Children only read for story and when they are working too hard with the mechanics of reading, it becomes difficult for them to enjoy the story.

- Don't interrupt the reading of the story with explanations or editorials, which can easily annoy and frustrate a child.
- Read the story as it is written. Once you begin to tinker with the story, by substituting an easier word or leaving out complicated sentences that you think might be confusing, you are interfering with the magic of the story.
- Don't stop reading aloud to children once they have mastered the ability to read on their own. Many of the skills children need to become good readers are first learned in the stories they hear.
- Start a conversation with a good question— a question that takes you someplace in your thinking. A good conversation is not about the answers, it is about the questions. *What did you notice? What did you think?*
- Don't be afraid to ask specific, concrete questions—where the answers can be found inside the story. Who, What, When & Why questions. Children first need to understand the story before they can begin to understand the meaning of the story.
- Once the conversation gets moving, help a child see beyond the plotline by asking personal questions. "Has this ever happened to you?" "What would you do in this situation?" This helps children see connections between a story and their lives.
- Try listening. If you ask children a question, you have to wait a little while and allow them to think and respond.

### **Conversation Starters for any story**

- Have your child tell you what is happening in the story first by looking at the pictures (picture walk).
- What character would you like to be your friend?
- Is there a character you dislike?
- How would the story be different if...?
- Has this ever happened to you?"
- What would you do in this situation?
- Do you like the ending of the story? If not, how would you change the ending?
- Does the story call for a sequel? (What are some of your favorite books that called for a sequel but did not deliver one?)
  - What are you curious about at the end of the story?

**Diane W. Frankenstein** is the award-winning author of *Reading Together: Everything You Need to Know to Raise a Child Who Loves to Read*. She holds a Master's Degree in Children's Literature and Language Arts. Since 1989 Diane has worked as an educational consultant in children's and adolescent literature throughout the United States as well as in Asia and Europe.

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