

# Expanding Conversations with Children by Reading and Television

Philip T. Reynolds

Much of the literature concerning child language acquisition deals with the potential effects of parental face-to-face conversation on children's emerging language skills. In this paper, I'd like to expand the discussion to examine how the interaction children have with two other media — writing and television — shape their emerging language skills. This discussion of literacy focuses less on the skills themselves than on the mediating role parents can play in the acquisition process. This analysis on television looks at “conversations” between child, characters on the screen, and parents.

Why cluster early literacy with television viewing? Pragmatically, since the appearance of quality children's television programming, the context in which a child learns the rudiments of reading has shifted from a strictly “between two covers” activity to a multimedia event involving both hard copy and moving images.

From a theoretical perspective, both reading and television involve visual experiences (in contrast with the spoken word). Visual information tends to be processed, and remembered, differently from auditory information. For example, in a study of third and sixth graders' comprehension and memory of information conveyed through television, writing, or radio, Pezdek, Lehrer, and Simon (1984) report comparable levels of performance on the television and reading tasks, and inferior memory for the radio condition. With this in mind, let's take a look at children's early experience with reading and with television to see how the two

connect.

First of all let's ask: What's the best way to teach children to read? About the only conclusion educators share is that children should never be forced into literacy — whether at age 3 or at age 6 or 7. Beyond this truism, we find a wide diversity on the question of method. While Glenn Doman (another of *How to Teach Your Baby to Read*) and his colleagues argue for the use of flash cards and drills with toddlers, most educators advocate a more natural approach, capitalizing upon everyday interactions parents and children have with the written word.

Part of the methodological debate stems from a particular mind-set about what it means for a person to be literate. We typically speak of a child "learning to read" around age 5 or 6. Yet, common sense tells us that for the average child, the process of becoming literate hardly occurs overnight. Children in literate societies have great exposure to, and knowledge of writing long before they learn to read. At the same time, none of us really believes that a 6-year-old "knows how to read" just because he can decipher text. (Why else do we run reading classes throughout the elementary school years and literature classes thereafter?)

In recent years, the phrase *emergent literacy* has become popular, characterizing the gradual process through which a normal middle-class child in a literate society learns to read (and then to write). Building upon earlier work by Marie Clay (1972), Teale and Sulzby (1986) argue that we can better understand the process whereby children learn to read if we replace the notion of *reading readiness* with *emergent literacy*.

The term *reading readiness* first formally appeared in 1925 in the *Yearbook of the United States National Society for the Study of Education*. The phrase referred to the natural, *maturational* process believed to take place before children could learn to read. However, by the late 1950s and the 1960s, as intervention programs for early child development became increasingly popular (e. g., the Head Start

Program), *reading readiness* began referring to the *experiences* children had that were directly related to literacy.

Yet, despite this shift in emphasis, two assumptions have continued to undergird beliefs about reading readiness. The first is the belief in a sharp distinction between readiness skills and actual reading. The second is the assumption that such readiness skills can only be taught in school or in a school-like setting.

Bucking the prevailing trends, a handful of psychologists and reading specialists began to question both assumptions. In the words of Yetta Goodman (1984), "It slowly became obvious to me that children's discoveries about literacy in a literate society such as ours must begin much earlier than at school age." This alternative position looks upon eventual reading and writing skills as but one end of a literacy spectrum, whose roots begin soon after a child in a literate, middle-class community is born.

The idea of emergent literacy is hardly esoteric. The notion encompasses any experiences the growing child has with the written word. By the end of the first year of life, children generally understand that books have fronts and backs, that they have pages to be turned, and that words accompany the stuff on those pages. By age 2, most children comprehend that print in some way represents spoken language. By age 3, children have emerging concepts of how the material between the covers is likely to be structured. Stories generally have beginnings, middles, and ends.

Taking literacy as a continuum, we begin to see the varied ways in which children become acquainted with reading and writing. The most obvious is by having literate companions read stories or go through picture books. But any written message can be fair game, including box tops, traffic signs, or sides of buses. Children themselves play at reading and later, as they develop sufficient

manual dexterity, play at writing. Children see parents read and write, fetch the newspaper in the morning, and visit bookstores and libraries.

In fact, it is fair to say that emergent literacy is no different from what we might call *emergent speech*. Just as we model literacy activities long before children can make sense of what we are doing, we model speech to uncomprehending newborns. In the case of speech, adult modeling slowly elicits meaningful linguistic exchange. Single words give way to syntax. The richer the interaction, the better the head-start the child has in becoming linguistically fluent. The entire process begins at birth and takes many years. Just so with literacy: The infant's inattentiveness gives way to turn-taking and sharing (e. g., turning the pages of a picture book), interaction (e. g., identifying pictures), imitation (e. g., remembering lines from a story), and independent language production (reading or writing on one's own).

Once we look at literacy skills as emerging in much the same way as spoken language, we can begin asking how adults, in the course of normal parenting routines, can help their children become literate.

Children's earliest exposure to the written word generally comes about through joint "reading" of picture books with adults. Yet, building foundations for later literacy is hardly parents' motivation for reading to very young children. Rather, such reading structures parent-child social interaction and provides a rich opportunity to teach children about the concrete world without needing to haul dinosaurs and dalmatians into one's living room.

In the process of reading to young children, parents end up teaching a great deal of new vocabulary and conversational routines. A number of studies have explored the natural ways in which maternal reading styles (e. g., labeling items in books, asking names of pictured items, encouraging conversation about the storyline, increasing one's level of linguistic demands as the child matures) lead to

children's enhanced spoken language development.

Do all parents make equal use of picture-book reading as a medium for language instruction? Of course not. We are not surprised to learn that lower-class mothers are less "instructive" during reading sessions with their children than middle-class mothers, and that middle-class children evidence larger productive vocabularies (Ninio, 1980). But, what may come as a surprise are the differences in reading habits amongst middle-class parents, and in concomitant effects on their children's spoken language abilities.

A group of researchers at SUNY Stony Brook (Whitehurst, Falco, Lonigan, Fischel, DeBaryshe, Valdez-Menchaca, & Caulfield, 1988) studied the effects of reading style in 30 families as they read to children between the ages of 21 and 35 months. Half of the children were read to normally, while parents of the other half received explicit training on how to read. Parents in the experimental group were instructed to

- (1) increase the rate at which they asked open-ended questions of their children ("Tell me more about what is happening"), increase their use of function-attribute questions (e. g., "What is it doing?"), and increase the number of children's utterances they expanded (e. g., in response to her child's "Happy," the mother might comment, "Yes, the pig is very happy") ;
- (2) respond appropriately to the child's attempt to answer questions ;
- (3) decrease the amount of straight reading without conversational interruption ;
- (4) decrease the number of questions asked that the child can answer simply by pointing.

After a month, the children's spoken language abilities were assessed. Children whose parents had been trained in the above techniques spoke longer sentences, uttered more phrases, and used fewer single words than did children in the control group. These differences were still evident six months later, although the gap

between groups was less pronounced. It is obvious that parents can use reading to expand children's spoken language skills. But what about the potential effect of parents on their children's emerging reading skills?

Not surprisingly, the amount parents read to young children predicts their children's subsequent reading abilities. Wells (1985), for example, reports a correlation between the frequency with which children between the ages of 1 and 3 listened to stories and (1) their level of literacy at age 5 and (2) their reading comprehension at age 7.

But, reading storybooks is hardly the only influence parents can have on their children's emerging literacy. While storybook reading requires both a book and a relatively quiet setting, modern literate societies have countless other opportunities for enhancing literacy. Here are just a few.

- (1) naming the letters and numbers on found objects (e. g., single letters in sections of an auditorium ; numbers on license plates or the back of buses, etc.)
- (2) reading traffic signs while driving
- (3) reading messages on buses and trucks
- (4) reading food packages
- (5) counting objects at every possible opportunity

Initially, "reading" may mean attaching a whole-word label in context. As the child learns the alphabet (which may well be by age 2), such casual reading can be preceded or followed by the child decoding each of the letters in turn (e. g., "STOP. S. T. O. P."). If parents naturally engage in this kind of reading as they move through the day, children can learn an amazing amount about deciphering letters and numbers without heavy-handed pedagogical effort.

A third avenue for fostering reading skills is emphasizing rhymes in the young child's spoken and written world. From nursery rhymes to *A Child's Garden of*

*Verse* and Dr. Seuss books, rhyming has long been a vital part of the language heard by English-speaking children. But, besides simply providing enjoyment, rhymes are an excellent device for teaching relationships between words and sound patterns and, in the process, for helping children decompose words. *Cat* is teamed with *rat*, but they differ in initial sounds. An understanding of just these differences is a vital component of learning to read.

Not surprisingly, research has shown that preschoolers' knowledge of rhymes correlates positively with early reading skills. In one study (Maclean, Bryant, and Bradley, 1987) a group of 66 3-year-olds was tested for their knowledge of nursery rhymes, asking the children if they could recite "Humpty Dumpty," Baa-Baa Black Sheep, "Hickory Dickory Dock," "Jack and Jill," and "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." Over the next year and a half, the same children were tested on a number of typical reading-readiness tasks, including detection of rhyming words; production of rhyming words; alliteration; segmentation of utterances into words, syllables, or phonemes; recognizing letters; and reading whole words. Children who had a good knowledge of nursery rhymes at age 3 regularly scored higher on these tasks. The authors conclude that

nursery rhymes are one example of the informal way in which parents, for the most part unwittingly, draw their children's attention to the fact the words have separable component sounds. The direct practical implication of our research is that an increase in the amount of experience that 3-year-old children have with nursery rhymes should lead to a corresponding improvement in their awareness of sounds, and hence to greater success in learning to read. (p. 280)

Like many parents have done, I spent hours browsing in children's bookstores when my kids were young. I was ceaselessly amazed at the number and variety of people purchasing books for children. Judging from the sizable amount of money spent, one might have great hopes for the literacy level of the next generation. Yet,

the data do not support this idyllic prediction. Leaving aside for the moment disadvantaged populations, we still see an enormous discrepancy between the excitement middle-class parents have about reading to their toddlers or preschoolers, and the attitude these same children have toward reading when they grow up. While nearly all middle-class children learn basic literacy skills, comparatively few go on to become avid readers. The bloom of early literacy generally fades.

What goes wrong? While a satisfactory explanation yet exists, there are educators who feel that many parents are no longer avid readers. As George Steiner observed in "After the Book?" (1972), for many of us reading is no longer an individual activity we engage in to increase our personal knowledge or for personal enjoyment. Rather, reading has become a chore we perform for a salary.

What has changed our reading habits? Again the explanation is far from simple. Yet, many people *believe* they know the answer. The culprit most often cited is television. Parents worry that children spend hours glued before the set instead of reading. Teachers complain that book reports are based on television mini-series instead of on books themselves.

Is television necessarily the enemy of reading? Or can it, when properly used, actually enhance the growth of literacy?

Television was introduced in 1939 when, at the New York World's Fair, President Franklin D. Roosevelt broadcast the first transmission. However, it was not until the 1950s that television began to permeate modern society.

By the 1950s, parents and educators had already begun to worry about the effect television might be having upon school-aged children (e. g., Maccoby, 1951). Were children watching television instead of studying? Would television make them anti-social? Concerns about television viewing heightened in the 1960s and 1970s as the amount of violence portrayed on the screen increased dramatically. By the 1980s, not only was video violence an increasing problem (particularly with the



proliferation of cable programming), but the amount of time the television was turned on had skyrocketed to an average of over 40 hours a week. Admittedly, just because the set is on does not mean people are watching it, or that they are not engaged in another activity simultaneously. But, statistics do suggest that television has become a fundamental component of family life.

Does the medium of television truly lack redeeming social virtues? Of course not. Our experiences over the past 30 years have made clear that, properly used, television can be a superb medium of instruction, even for the very young. And among the things that can successfully be taught on television are the rudiments of reading.

Television as an educational medium has several obvious advantages over traditional pedagogy. To begin with, television provides visualizations of experiences that parents cannot easily provide: animated versions of fairy tales, pictures of volcanoes erupting, historical film clips. But secondly, television, like the computer, never gets tired. Whereas parents grow weary of telling the same story time and again, television programming allows for repetition. With the proliferation of video cassette recorders the capacity for repetition becomes nearly infinite.

For young children, television often proves an ideal medium of instruction. Its images rivet the child's attention. Its message is directed exclusively to the child — no brothers or sisters, telephones or doorbells vie for the "speaker's" attention. Toddlers and preschoolers are highly observant, highly imitative, and love repetition. As a medium, television is potentially tailor-made for these needs.

Has the potential been realized? The answer is a resounding "yes," and the credit goes overwhelmingly to one woman: Joan Ganz Cooney. Cooney is founder of the Children's Television Workshop — the creator of *Sesame Street*, the children's program that revolutionized our thinking about the educational potential of

television.

*Sesame Street* grew out of a study for the Carnegie Corporation that Cooney had done in 1966 on the prospects for educational television in the United States. Working closely with educators and psychologists at Harvard University, the new Children's Television Workshop set about designing a television program with explicit educational goals. By 1968, the following goals were established. for example, for teaching preschoolers letters of the alphabet.

1. Given a set of symbols, either all letters or all numbers, the child knows whether those symbols are used in reading or in counting.
2. Given a printed letter, the child can select the identical letter from a set of printed letters.
3. Given a printed letter, the child can select its other case version from a set of printed letters.
4. Given a verbal label for certain letters, the child can select the appropriate letter from a set of printed letters.
5. Given a printed letter, the child can provide the verbal label.
6. Given a series of words presented orally, all beginning with the same letter, the child can make up another word or pick another word starting with the same letter.
7. Given a spoken letter, the child can select a set of pictures or objects beginning with that letter.
8. The child can recite the alphabet.

(G. Lesser, 1974)

Comparable goals were defined for teaching numbers, geometric shapes, body parts, size relationships, and so on.

Since its inaugural program in 1969, *Sesame Street* has profoundly influenced educational patterns — and levels — of preschool children. Although the program

has not been without critics, educators generally agree that *Sesame Street* is single-handedly responsible for raising the emergent literacy skills of children across the United States and around the world.

Originally targeted at disadvantaged urban youngsters (hence the set design and choice of characters), the program is watched today by children from all socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic regions. And although the programming is designed for children from 3 to 5, babies as young as 12 months watch it with rapt attention.

We turn now from *Sesame Street* itself to the broader question of how much language and how many language-related skills children can learn from watching television. Because much of the critique of children's television is based on the assumption that television is a passive medium, many educators have questioned how much learning can go on with an "interlocutor" who cannot talk back.

Some early studies (e. g., Nelson, 1973) noted a negative correlation between spoken language development and the amount of time a young child (between age 1 and 2) watched television. Is there more to the story?

For those who want hard data, take a look at a study by Rice and Woodsmall (1988) demonstrating that 3- and 5-year-old children learn new vocabulary items after only brief exposure to the words on television. Yet, anyone with a young child who has watched much children's television does not need formal studies to confirm that an enormous amount of language learning takes place when children watch television.

But, learning from television hardly ends with new vocabulary. Young children learn a great deal about conversational appropriateness, conventions for storytelling, and politeness formulas from watching conversations modeled on television. Similarly, television offers modeling of complex syntax. While mothers tend to simplify and shorten the sentences they address to toddlers,

children's television provides an important balance of more adult grammar.

Given the evidence, what do we make of earlier studies that report negative correlations between television viewing and spoken language development? The explanation probably lies in variables for which the initial studies did not control.

One of these variables is the condition under which the child watched television. Was she simply parked in front of the set to free up the parents for other activities, or did the parents spend time watching alongside the child — thereby creating a three-way “conversation?” Even the most conscientious of us have been known to use the television as a babysitter. Yet, before concluding that viewing itself is harmful, we need to know how much other time parents spend speaking with their children and modeling language directly.

A second consideration is whether or not the child is actually attending to the television image. A study by Anderson and Levin (1976) reported that at age 12 months, babies attended an average of less than 20% of the time to a black-and-white segment of *Sesame Street*, and that children younger than 30 months did not systematically monitor the TV screen but rather had their attention “captured” for short periods of time. If an infant or toddler is literally parked before a screen on which she is not focusing, we can hardly expect her to be learning. Obviously, time spend interacting with a parent would be preferable.

Third, assuming the child is attending to the video image, we need to rethink whether television viewing is really a passive activity. Much research (e. g., Bryant & Anderson, 1983) has argued that our intuitive assumption that television watching is necessarily a passive activity is simply wrong in many instances, especially when children are involved. My own experience in observing my son as a youngster watch television confirms that the video medium itself in no way necessarily implies a passive viewer. I have home videos to prove that when certain favorite segments of *Sesame Street* came on, Gene joined along in the

singing, answered questions posed by favorite characters, and mimicked the actions portrayed on the screen. After such episodes, he had truly gotten both a good physical and linguistic workout.

And fourth, we need to be patient in assessing the possible influences of television viewing on language development. Many of the language skills children imbibe through viewing may not appear until months or years later in their own speech. In Gene's case, for example, delayed phonological development coupled with a cautious pronunciation strategy made him hesitant to attempt many of the words he understood from watching *Sesame Street*. Only by trying picture recognition in a book did we realize, for example, that by age 16 months he had learned the meanings of *square*, *circle*, and *triangle*.

I have already alluded to the question of whether children watch television in isolation or in the company of another language user. Mabel Rice and her colleagues have argued that parents can use television as a "talking picture book" that, like hard-copy books, serves as a scaffold upon which to hang modeled linguistic structures that facilitate language acquisition (Lemish & Rice, 1986).

Citing Wells, Lemish and Rice note that the ideal environment for language learning is

a shared activity with an adult in which the adult gives linguistic expression to just those meanings in the situation which the child is capable of intending, and to which they are at that moment paying attention. (Wells, 1974).

The authors go on to point up Snow and Goldfield's (1983) observation that the two aspects of parental book-reading with children that most contribute to children's language acquisition are (1) the routinization of the book-reading situation and (2) the predictability of the adult's language.

Television can offer precisely these conditions. Like children's books, children's television is designed in self contained episodes with familiar characters

who provide opportunities for questions and answers. Over time, these episodes become familiar and predictable. Much as with his favorite stories, my son Gene had favorite segments of *Sesame Street*. His interaction with these special books and video segments was remarkably similar. In both cases, he anticipated events, vocally followed along with the narrative (i. e., verbally shadowing me as I read or the character as it spoke on television), and threw in a lot of body English when the episode got really exciting.

Finally, let us return to the question that continues to worry parents who find their preschoolers absorbed in television: Doesn't television viewing negatively correlate with reading ability? If so, whatever the early language benefits of television, shouldn't we be worried that we are spawning illiterate television junkies?

A number of studies (e. g., Morgan, 1980) have reported a negative correlation between reading ability (and school achievement more generally) and the amount of television watching done by junior high school children in the United States. Yet, when we scratch beneath the surface, we find the story is really more complex.

One obvious question is whether such negative correlations result from failing to control for variables like intelligence, socioeconomic status, and parental education. It is now fairly clear (e. g., Zuckermann, Singer, & Singer, 1980) that among bright children from educated, economically sound households, there is no negative correlation between reading ability and television viewing.

Another variable to examine is the amount of viewing itself. Common sense dictates that some television viewing (but not too much) *positively* correlates with reading abilities. Williams, Haertel, Haertel, and Walberg (1982) found that reading achievement improved slightly for children who watched television up to 10 hours a week, and Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) note positive correlations for fifth graders who viewed television up to 20 hours weekly. Similarly, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) study done in 1979–1980 (National

Assessment of Educational Progress, 1981) found the highest reading scores amongst 9-year-olds who watched three to four hours of television daily. In all three studies, amounts of television viewing higher than these correlated negatively with reading scores.

Age itself turns out to be a relevant variable in assessing possible effects of television viewing on reading abilities. The NAEP survey just mentioned found positive correlations between reading performance and television watching for 9-year-olds but negative correlations between the variables for 13- and 17-year-olds (the three age groups tested).

And what about very young children, those below the age of 5? Does early television viewing help or hinder the acquisition of literacy skills? A proper experiment for addressing this question is obviously out of the question. Besides needing to control for hours of viewing, we would need to control for subject matter viewed, amount and type of picture-book reading, and even content of adult-child conversation. Who would want to be in the control group deprived of picture books or of *Sesame Street*?

We can, however, make some inferences from observational data. In a study of 11 children who were reading before the age of 4, Salzer (1984) reports that in most cases, "the child had learned [to read] independently, largely as a result of watching *Sesame Street*," and that some of the children had begun to watch fairly regularly before the age of 1. In several instances, children watched the program up to 2 or 3 hours a day.

Interestingly, other studies suggest that while early spoken language development may correlate positively with intelligence, early reading ability does not seem to correlate either with intelligence or with general spoken language development. Instead, the strong correlation for early reading is with family attitude, particularly with maternal views on the importance of education, emotional

support, and cognitive stimulation. Given that good children's educational television programming provides strong components of this support, it is reasonable to conclude that properly used, early television watching can be a boon to subsequent literacy.

#### REFERENCES

- Anderson, D., & Levin, S.(1976). Young children's attention "Sesame Street." *Child Development*, 47.
- Anderson, R. C., Wilson, P. T., & Fielding, L. G.(1988). Growth in reading and how children spend their time outside of school. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 23.
- Bryant, J., & Anderson, D. R.(Eds.).(1983). *Children's understanding of television: Research on attention and comprehension*. New York: Academic Press.
- Clay, M.(1972). *Reading: The patterning of complex behavior*. Auckland: Heinemann Educational.
- Doman, G.(1963). *How to teach your baby to read: The gentle revolution*. New York: Random House.
- Goodman, Y. M.(1984) The development of initial literacy. In H. Goelman, A. Oberg, & F. Smith (Eds.), *Awakening to literacy*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational.
- Lemish, D., & Rice, M. L.(1986). Television as a talking picture book: A prop for language acquisition. *Journal of Child Language*, 13.
- Lesser, G. S.(1974). *Children and television: Lessons from Sesame Street*. New York: Random House.
- Maccoby, E. E.(1951). Television: its impact on school children. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15.
- Morgan, M.(1980). Television viewing and reading: Does more equal better? *Journal of Communication*, 30.
- Nelson, K.(1973). Structure and strategy in learning to talk. *Monographs of the Society of Research in Child Development*, 38.
- Ninio, A.(1980). Picture-book reading in mother-infant dyads belonging to two sub-groups in Israel. *Child Development*, 51.
- Pezdek, K., Lehrer, A., & Simon, S.(1984). The relationship between reading and cognitive processing of television and radio. *Child Development*, 55.
- Rice, M. L., & Woodsmall, L.(1988). Lessons from television: Children's word learning when



- viewing. *Child Development*, 59.
- Salzer, R. T. (1984). Early reading and giftedness: Some observations and questions. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 28.
- Snow, C. E., & Goldfield, B. A. (1983). Turn the page please: Situation-specific language acquisition. *Journal of Child Language*, 10.
- Steiner, G. (1972). After the book? *Visible Language*, 6.
- Teale, W. H., and Sulzby, E. (Eds.). (1986). *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Wells, G. (1985). Preschool literacy-related activities and success in school. In D. R. Olson, N. Torrance, & A. Hildyard (Eds.), *Literacy, language, and learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, P. A., Haertel, E. H., Haertel, G. D., & Walberg, H. J., (1982). The impact of leisure-time television on school learning: A research synthesis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 19.
- Whitehurst, G. J., Falco, F. L., Lonigan, C. J., Fischel, J. E., DeBaryshe, B. D., Valdez-Menchaca, M. C., & Caufield, M. (1988). Accelerating language development through picture book reading. *Developmental Psychology*, 24.
- Zuckermann, D. M., Singer, D. G., & Singer, J. L. (1980). Television viewing, children's reading, and related classroom behavior. *Journal of Communication*, 30.