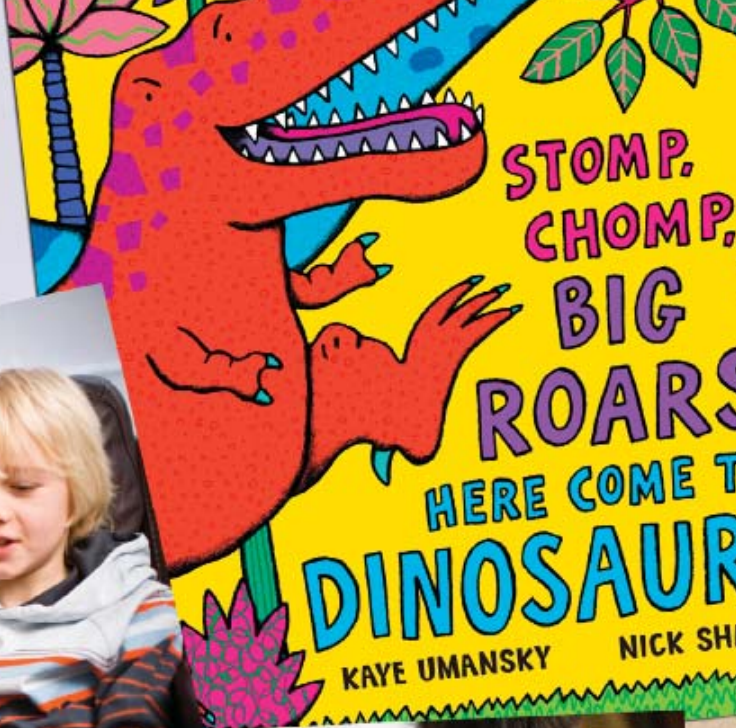


LearnEnglish Family



learning
together is fun!

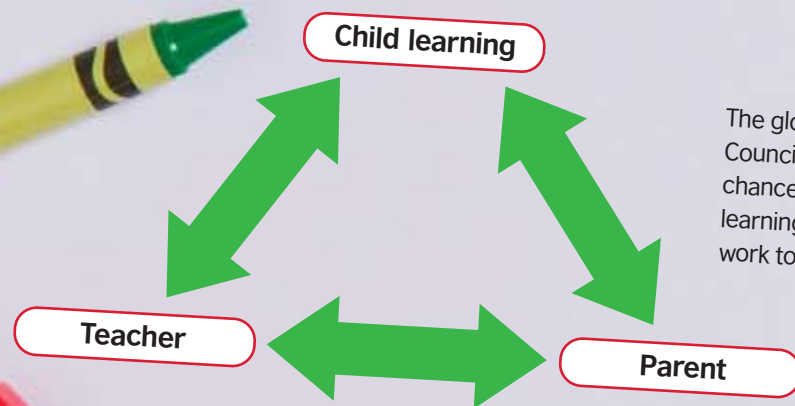
Learning English through
sharing picture books

Foreword

Getting involved in your child's learning can have a positive impact upon both their attitude and the speed at which they learn. When parents help their children outside the classroom, there are real benefits for children's achievement inside the classroom.

Jim Knight, the UK's Minister of State for Schools and Learners: 'Parents have six times more impact on the learning of primary age children than teachers do.' There are some simple steps you can take to encourage your child and build their confidence in using English.

British Council educational experts have developed new LearnEnglish Family products and services in order to support parents. We hope you enjoy using these products with your child. After all, learning together is fun!



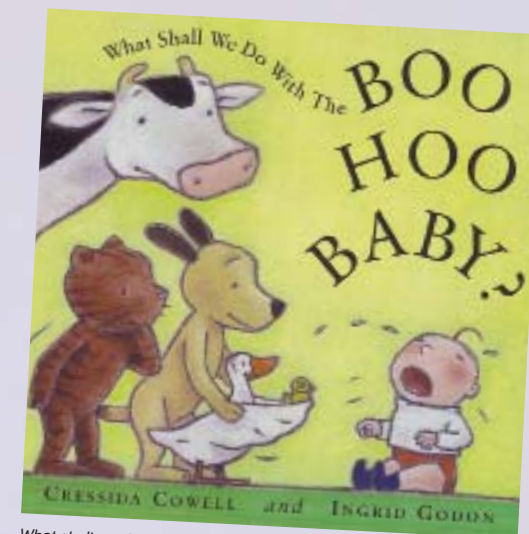
The global experience of the British Council tells us that children have more chance of being successful with their learning when teachers and parents work together.

Picture books

Every year thousands of children's picture books are published in the UK. Children's corners in bookshops offer a bewildering choice of new and old favourites, illustrated by some of the best artists working in Britain today. Native-speaker children have many opportunities to enjoy these picture books; there is no reason why young children learning English as an additional language should not enjoy them, too.



Bear About Town
Written by Stella Blackstone, illustrated by Debbie Harter
(Barefoot Books)
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What shall we do with the Boo Hoo Baby?
Cressida Cowell and Ingrid Godon
(Macmillan Children's Books, London, UK)





There was an old lady who swallowed a fly
© M Twiss 1973. Reproduced by kind permission
of Child's Play (International) Ltd. All rights reserved.

The advantages of beginning early

From the very first introduction to listening to English, children can enjoy carefully selected picture books. Young learners soon pick up the short text of a picture book, if initially it is shared with an adult who brings the pages alive.

Children are already familiar with stories. From a very young age they talk in narrative style. It is through their stories of everyday experiences that they define themselves: expressing their ideas, hopes and emotions in language as well as in drawing and imaginative play.

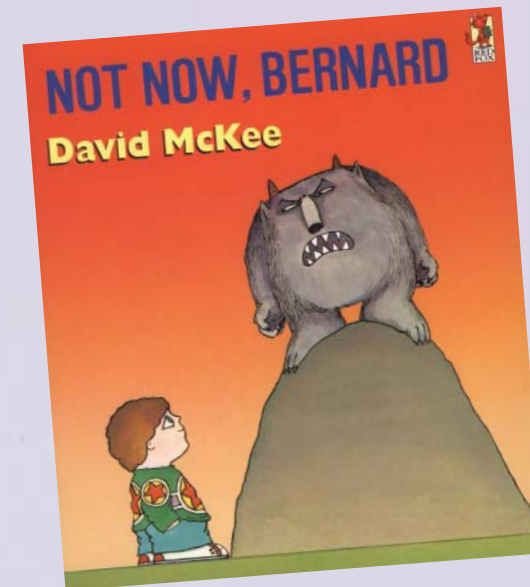
Many children are already used to decoding stories and information from television or film in their home language, while others may have already enjoyed the interaction of sharing a picture book. Most children, if guided by a parent, soon work out how to transfer their individual decoding skills to get meaning from picture books in English.

Sharing picture books is not only about picking up another language, it is also about giving children a wider window on the world, guided by their parents. The one-to-one interaction of sharing picture books gives children added opportunities to develop holistically at

their own speed and level, knowing that their parents are encouraging them. As children share more and more books their self-confidence develops. This can often be seen in the way they approach unfamiliar English and new experiences.

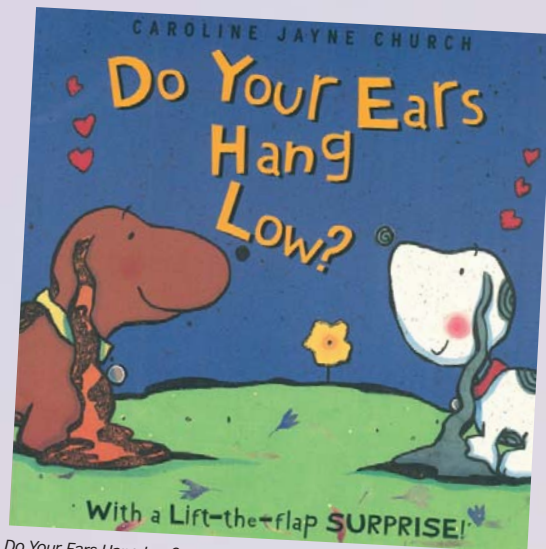
Picture books provide parents and children with an obvious reason for switching from their home language to speaking English. Parents who lack confidence in English find that the fixed text of a picture book is a useful prop. Apart from providing text to read and share, a picture book can be the basis for interaction, which parents can adjust to their child's developing needs, interests and attainments.

Some parents may be concerned that introducing picture books will not fit in with their child's school syllabus or text book. Sharing a picture book is an additional English learning experience that bonds families and helps children realise that speaking English at home is fun. Many families enjoy slipping English phrases picked up from picture books into everyday home language conversations. 'Not now, Bernard' is quite a favourite!



Not Now, Bernard
David McKee
(Random House)





Do Your Ears Hang Low?
Caroline Jayne Church 2002



Learning from picture books

It takes time to build up a child's readiness to talk about picture books in English. Children's silence, however, does not mean that they are not listening and learning (see the British Council booklet *How children learn English as another language*). Children usually understand more than they can say in words and, if the book experience is focused and fun, they usually want to pick up the new English at their own speed. Children are busy exploring their world and most are keen to find out something new, particularly if it is presented in an encouraging and attractive way.

Parents can underestimate their children's ability to pick up more text each time a picture book is shared. Many are surprised to see how keen their children are to join in 'reading' if they are encouraged to finish off a sentence or say a stressed word like 'No' each time it occurs. Once children work out how to join in, they gradually extend their skills to pick up whole short sentences until, eventually, they can recite most of a text as they turn the pages to match it to the illustrations. Many a busy parent purposely skipping a little text has had their 'mistake' pointed out by their child!

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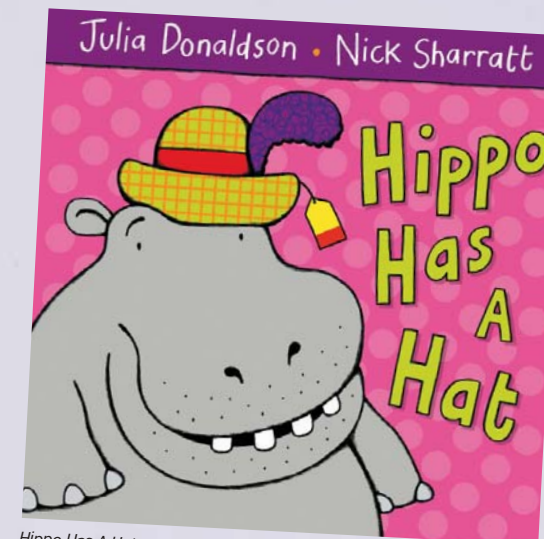
Young children's boredom threshold differs from adults'. Many may ask for the same book to be read and re-read. Parents need to respond positively to these requests as re-readings provide the natural repetition children may need for making meaning or picking up new language as well as confirming and refining language they have already acquired.

Picture books, sometimes referred to as 'real books', to distinguish them from graded text books, expose children to a range of language structures and vocabulary familiar to native-speaker children.

Illustrations in real picture books are not merely supporting understanding of language, as might be the case in many text books. The different styles of artwork naturally broaden children's visual experiences. One of the delights of sharing picture books with children is that, on first viewing, children tend to look at an illustration as a whole but with repeated reading of the book, details and subtleties usually emerge.

The illustrations may be by well-known artists, pictures may be photographs or the books may contain 3D novelty paper sculptures. How exciting it is for children to hold art in their hands. There is no doubt that exposure to picture books increases visual decoding skills and over time influences creativity and the ability to appreciate design and illustration.

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Hippo Has A Hat
Julia Donaldson and Nick Sharratt
(Macmillan Children's Books, London, UK)





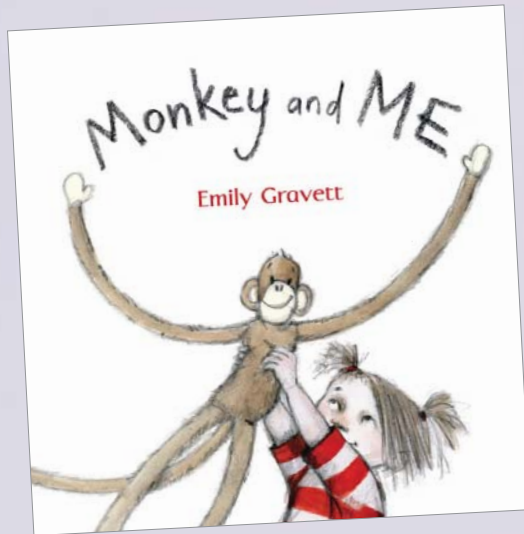
Picture books also help children find meaning within their own life. Children can pore over emotional situations contained within picture books that may help to relieve personal frustrations, or they can encounter exciting and imaginative experiences way beyond their own environment or even their dreams. Imagine the power a child feels as he or she firmly shuts a book and says, 'GOODBYE Giant!'

Selecting picture books

Picture books may be:

- **story books** – short simple story text including conversation and rhyme
- **information books**, with short explanatory text
- **rhyme books**, which might introduce one story rhyme or an anthology of poems
- **novelty books**, with short text and 3D paper sculpture
- **character series books**, with an accompanying character doll or puppet.

Parents need to select books that they enjoy and feel they can read confidently – enthusiasm is infectious! Before they introduce a book, they need to plan how they are going to read the text and, each time they re-read, follow the same plan. Children find it more difficult to pick up language if the reading differs each time.



Monkey and Me
Emily Gravett
(Macmillan Children's Books, London, UK)

In the early stages it is vital to select books with short texts, if children are to pick up language successfully and in a way that self-motivates. Children can measure their own success and this, together with merited adult praise, contributes to a positive feeling about sharing English picture books.

Where a simple text is slightly longer, it is generally advisable to limit the first reading to the essential story language. Once this is understood, the descriptions can be gradually added using *parentese* language (see the British Council booklet *Speaking English with your child*).

Most books should be selected to include some language a little beyond a child's level in English, so the child can start from familiar language and move on to some new language.

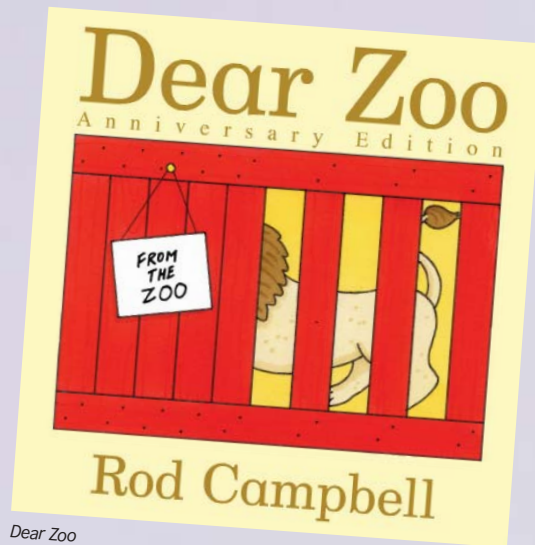
Once children have shared several books successfully, the habit of 'reading' together regularly in the family in English is likely to be established.

Ideally a book should include some words or phrases that can be transferred to children's everyday English, so giving them opportunities to use their innate skills to transfer language to different situations.



Next Please
Ernst Jandl and Norman Junge
(Random House)





Dear Zoo
Rod Campbell
(Macmillan Children's Books, London, UK)

In selecting books parents need to think about gender and include some books that appeal to both boys and girls, so children have some common story experiences to exchange.

Some boys find it easier to relate to information books rather than story books.

CD-ROMs and DVDs

Some story books are sold with an attached CD-ROM or DVD. These offer children a different, less intimate and more passive experience than sharing picture books. For profound learning, it is best to share the book until children know most of the text by heart before exposing them to either the CD-ROM or DVD.

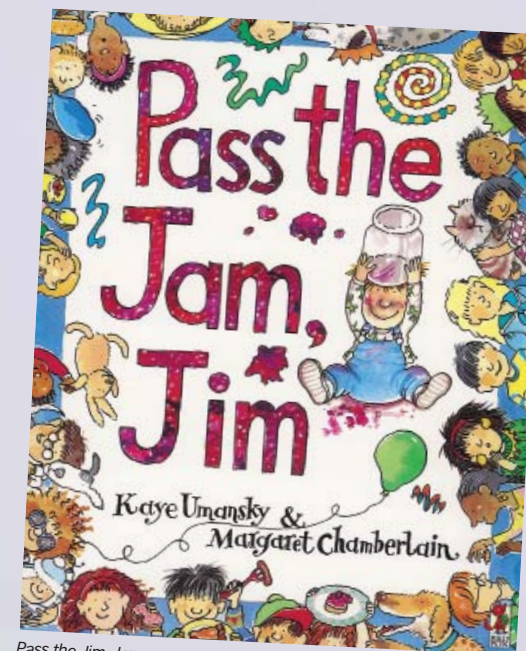
Apart from the wealth of all-round experiences that come from sharing, children may not be ready, before they are familiar with the text, to cope with a voice and even accent that is different from their parents'.

By this time children are likely to have found out how to enjoy the picture book, and may even want to read by themselves.

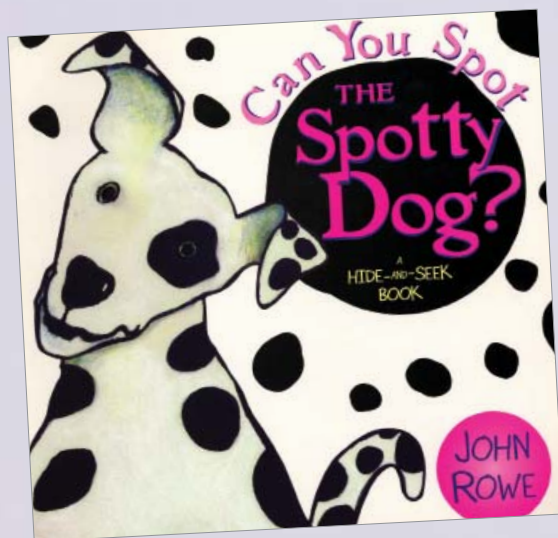
Book time

For successful sharing it is important to set the scene for regular book times. Children need to know that this is when they can snuggle up to parents and feel confident that their parents will focus only on them and sharing the book.

Book time may be a single session or part of a larger English session (see the British Council booklet *Speaking English with your child*) which includes other activities in English. Ideally there needs to be an 'English book time' every day or at least every weekday at about the same time, as frequent short exposure is more effective than fewer, longer sessions. Length can vary from ten minutes to longer periods to match children's readiness to learn and mood on the actual day. Regularity gives a feeling of security and something to which children can look forward.



Pass the Jim, Jam
Kaye Umansky and Margaret Chamberlain
(Random House)



Can You Spot the Spotty Dog?
John Rowe
(Random House)

It is a good idea to share the choice of books to be read, as children's requests may hide emotional or language needs. A new book is best introduced once children are beginning to 'read' the other books successfully. Presentation of a new book should be saved for a day when both parents and children 'feel good'.

Parents' role in introducing new books

In the initial stages children are dependent on the parent's reading and interaction for input and picking up language.

The role gradually changes as children begin to share a little of the reading. As children's reading ability increases, the role of the parent gradually diminishes.

By the time children know the text by heart and are capable of 'reading' the book aloud to themselves or to others, the parent's role is reduced to re-phrasing mistakes and praising successes.

Throughout this time the parent is managing the experiences and tuning into their child to find out what stage they have reached and where they need added support. This cycle repeats each time a new book is introduced, but as children learn more English the cycle takes less time.

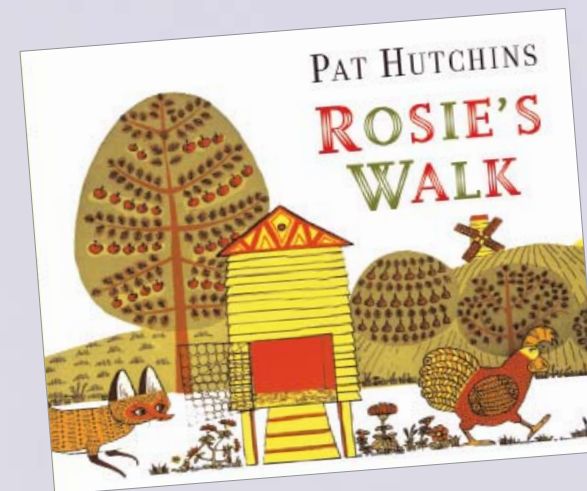
Book browsing

Book browsing is a form of play where children enjoy books by themselves, in their own time, turning the pages when they want. Like all self-initiated play, it is an important part of learning, as it gives children time to revisit what they want and consolidate their learning at their own level and speed and not that of the parent.

Young children also need opportunities to 'read' to the extended family, as it is natural for them to want to demonstrate their achievements; it is also a form of play. Successes motivate and help to confirm in children's minds that reading a book in English is what the family expects and finds fun. Young children want to please their parents and also share fun times with them.

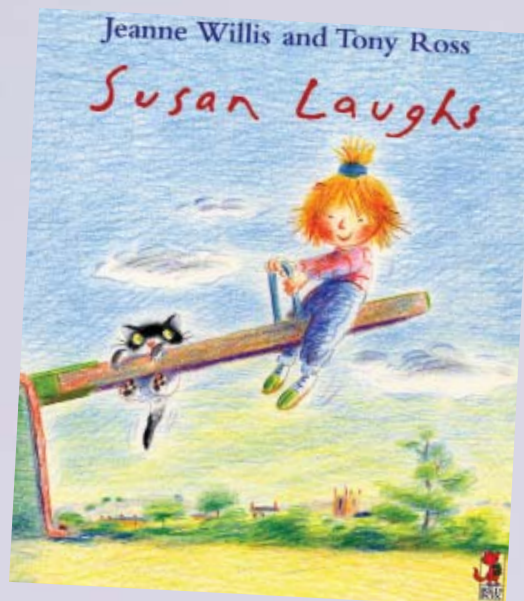
Building up a home library

Books that children already know well need to be stored in an available place so that, when they feel like it, they can take a book and 'read' it aloud to themselves. At this stage most children are not capable of silent reading. Ideally books should be stored with the front cover facing outwards – looking at a book's spine is less likely to motivate browsing at this age.



Rosie's Walk
Pat Hutchins
(Random House)





Susan Laughs
Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross
(Random House)



Books should not be added to the home library before children know quite a lot of the text language. If children find they cannot read a text of a book in the home library, they are most likely to be demotivated. Keeping the feeling 'I can' is important in the initial stages. Any 'I can't' feelings take time and encouragement to change.

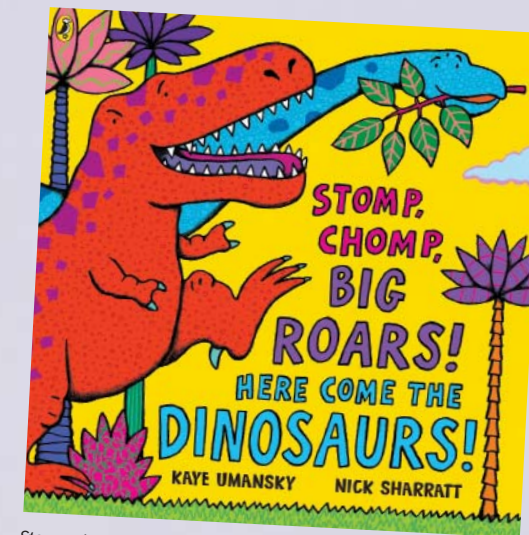
Sharing reading

The amount of *parentese* language parents need to use depends on children's language level in both their home language and English.

In the first few sharings of a new book, parents need to remember the following:

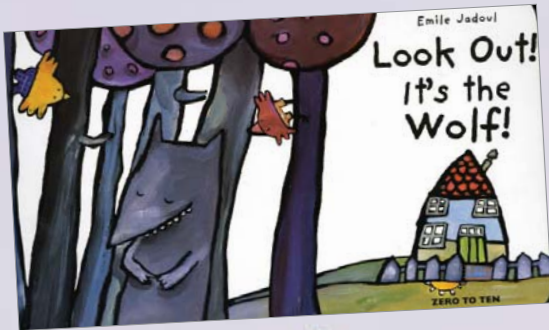
- Make sure that children are close enough to see how the parent's lips move to make sounds and how the eyes and face, as well as body language, convey the excitement and emotions which facilitate understanding.
- Read at the children's pace, letting them look at the picture for as long as they need. Young children are used to getting visual information to facilitate understanding. They often indicate that they have finished looking by turning their faces to look at the parent.

- Dramatise the story reading and if possible include some physical gesture, as physical involvement helps in memorising language.
- Use different fun voices for animal noises and characters like 'a cross Grandma', as you read the story. Children love to imitate characterisation and transfer it to their own 'reading' aloud.
- Point to each word as you read so that children develop better left-to-right eye movement, and become conscious of the shape of words.
- Encourage joining in by letting children finish off sentences or make the noises of animals or transport.
- Once the reading is finished, close the book and stay silent for a few seconds. Children may be in their own imaginative world and need time before they are ready to leave it.
- Asking too many questions about the book can spoil the magic. Families who enjoy books together often find that children, when they are ready, talk to them about the shared English books in their home language.
- If children use a home language word or phrase while talking English, it is generally because they have not yet acquired the word in English or have forgotten it. Make no mention about the mixture of language and repeat back to them the whole phrase in English. They will notice and generally pick up the English, ready to use it at some later stage.



Stomp, chomp, big roars! Here come the dinosaurs!
Kaye Umansky and Nick Sharratt





Look Out! It's the Wolf!
Emile Jadoul
(Evans)



How does the child understand?

Young children are busy decoding their own surroundings and making sense of their home language, which often includes a lot of new language, if they are not talking about daily routines. Children are very good at understanding the gist of what is said to them and responding to it. Unlike many adults learning another language, children do not wait to understand every word. They pick out words they understand and fill in the rest of the meaning from context clues and the speaker's body language, eyes or facial expressions. In sharing picture books, the child can get additional clues from the picture.

Initially, in order to facilitate quicker understanding, parents may feel happier translating a word or phrase. However, it is better to translate once only, using a whisper that indicates it is a translation and not part of the text. Children easily understand from a quick translation. If they know that parents are going to continue giving translations each book time, they do not make the effort to acquire the English.

Cultural content

Picture books illustrated by British-trained artists tend to reflect environments and cultural habits typical of British society. Where these are very different from the child's world, parents need to be prepared to give added explanation in the home language.



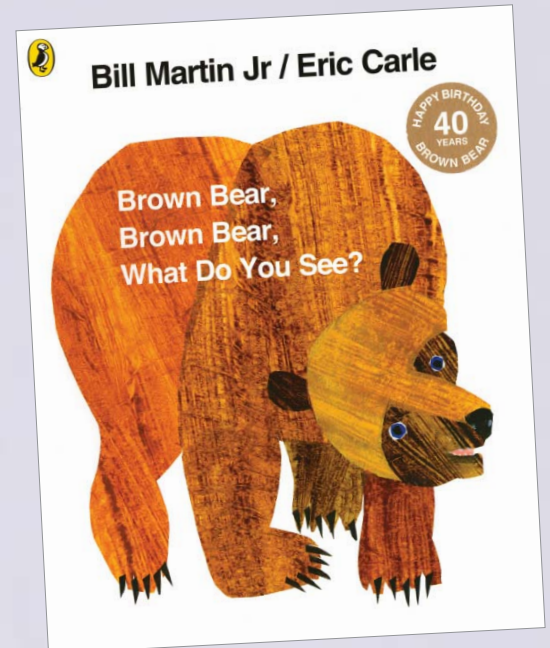
Learning to read

Parents may be concerned when children who can already read in their home language want to decode words in picture books. Parents think any reading might interfere with the school's structured programme of learning to read in English. Formal teaching of reading should not be confused with the experience of reading picture books for pleasure. If children show interest in teaching themselves to read, parents should encourage their enthusiasm and help them informally.

They can begin by introducing the small letters of the alphabet using their sounds, not their letter names. The consonant letters (for example b, d, m, t) are the simplest. Once children know some of the letter sounds, point out these letters at the beginning of words, stressing the initial letter sounds (dog).

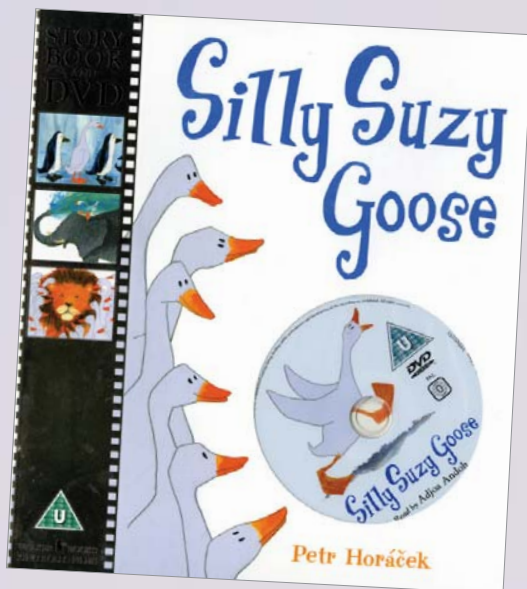
As children become more familiar with the small letter sounds (consonants and simple vowels), introduce the capital letters by the side of the small letters, repeating their sounds.

Children soon begin to recognise the shape of simple words as they already know the text by heart, and therefore know where to look for them. Ask them to look for the same word in other parts of the text and expand this game.



Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?
Bill Martin Jr/Eric Carle
(Puffin)





Silly Suzy Goose
Petr Horáček
(Walker)

Cover illustration © 2006 Petr Horáček From *Silly Suzy Goose* by Petr Horáček. Reproduced by permission of Walker Books Ltd, London SE11 5HJ

Many children who are already reading in their home language soon understand how simple decoding works and continue by themselves to recognise other short words in the text. To help their decoding, however, parents need to tell them how to read short, but difficult words to decode, like 'the'.

If parents sing an alphabet song, explain that letters have a name that is different from the sound it makes and in most alphabet songs we sing the names of the letters.

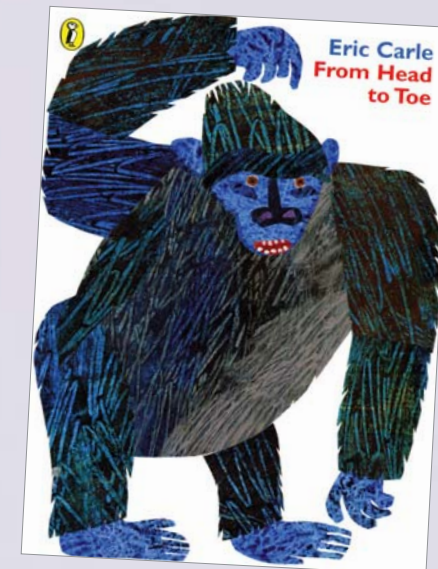
Some children teach themselves to read a text they already know orally, especially if it is rhyme. They use a number of strategies to decode the text and a little guessing to fill in until they know the text by heart. Many children have been using these strategies from an early age to 'read' logos of well-known products. Praise their efforts to read the text, but realise that this is restricted reading based on a text they know orally.



However, being able to read a text motivates and is an important step on the journey to becoming a fluent reader. Any reading done in an enjoyable, non-pressured way at this young age, when lifelong attitudes are being formed, is likely to contribute to a later love of language and books.

*'He who reads widely,
owns a gifted pen.'*

Chinese saying



From Head to Toe
Eric Carle
(Puffin)



www.britishcouncil.org/parents

One of a series of booklets commissioned by the British Council to support parents:

- *How children learn English as another language*
- *Speaking English with your child*
- *Learning English through sharing picture books*
- *Learning English through sharing rhymes*

Written by Opal Dunn, Author and Educational Consultant from the UK and founder of RealBook News

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