



Shared Reading Helps Tamaiti Development

Written by Keryn O'Neill, MA, PGCertEdPsych, Knowledge Manager

Language is so important – it connects us to our culture, supports us to think, to learn, and to communicate with others. Learning about language starts early; pēpi are learning about language from before they are born.

There are many ways in which whānau support strong language skills in their tamariki including talking with them, singing waiata, story-telling, play, and reading.¹ All of these are valuable. This article explores some of what we know about the role of shared reading. First we look at some of the benefits of reading, then we look at some useful information from the research, that can give us something to think about when reading with tamariki.

The benefits of shared reading

When parents have back and forth kōrero with their pēpi and tamariki they are helping their child's social and emotional development as well as improving their language. These chats are vital. Sharing books together adds further benefits on top of our everyday kōrero with tamariki.

Richness of language

Books use a greater variety of words, and more unique, rare, and challenging words than we tend to use when talking.² Tamariki who are read with often, are exposed to a wider vocabulary.³ This helps with their language development and sets them up for learning to read later as they already know a lot of words. When tamariki don't have this experience, they are learning new words and the skills of reading at the same time, making it harder for them.

Early literacy skills

Many early literacy skills are supported by early shared reading. Through looking at books with whānau tamariki learn to:

- pay attention,
- gain alphabet knowledge,
- begin to understand story structure,



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Shared reading is associated with better socio-emotional skills.

- recognise print,
- learn to turn pages and understand book orientation.⁴

Socio-emotional benefits

Sharing pukapuka/books has social and emotional benefits as tamariki experience a wider variety of situations and emotions than they come across in everyday life.⁵ Reading books with an adult provides a chance to talk about the thoughts and feelings of book characters which increases tamariki social understanding.⁶

Children's books often deal with interactions between people, or animals in human-like scenarios, providing many opportunities to kōrero about the characters' feelings, thoughts and wishes. This offers tamariki opportunities to practice and talk about tricky social situations. For example, a tamaiti may find it easier to talk about a book character who is lonely, rather than their own experiences of feeling this way.⁷ Topics covered in pukapuka may lead to further conversations between parent and tamaiti.⁸

It's not surprising then that shared reading is associated with better socio-emotional skills.⁹

Brain development

Reading has developed relatively recently in human history and our brain doesn't have a hard-wired reading network. As a result, other brain regions — such as those for vision, language, and paying attention — become connected and integrated through lots of exposure to books and reading.¹⁰ The brain regions supporting the various skills needed for reading need enough stimulation for the brain's reading network to develop well.¹¹ This is why regular reading is encouraged.

Pēpi develop rapidly, their brains are also growing at an amazing rate. Their early experiences lay the foundations for their later development. Although tamariki usually learn to read after they start school, positive, language-rich early experiences help establish strong foundations for their later learning to build on. This makes learning easier and more likely to be successful.





Some things to think about when reading

Start early, but it's never too late

Pēpi who are read with regularly from birth tend to have improved literacy skills later on.¹² Lots of time spent reading increases tamariki interest in pukapuka. Exposure to a wider variety of books improves their language development and lays a solid foundation for them to begin learning to read themselves. Continued exposure to books supports developing literacy skills, with each level of skill building on earlier skills.¹³

Reading at home is still important for school aged tamariki and supports their learning.¹⁴ This is particularly important for tamariki who struggle with reading and benefit from more practice.¹⁵

It's recommended to start daily reading with your pēpi from birth.¹⁶ One way to do this is by including reading a pukapuka or two as part of your child's bedtime routine, for example, snuggling up to share a story before bed.

Bilingual tamariki

For bilingual and multilingual tamariki, exposure to books in their languages helps increase their literacy in that language.¹⁷ Seeing how a language is written is an important step towards being able to learn to read and write it.¹⁸ This supports stronger reading and writing skills as well as spoken language skills.¹⁹ Having pukapuka in the child's languages at home can be helpful for this.²⁰ These can also be borrowed from public libraries.

Opportunities to see themselves and identify with the characters in the books around them is also important for tamariki and helps strengthen their identity.²¹

Link to child's life

The benefits of shared reading are greater when adults link what's happening in the story to their child's own experiences. This helps tamariki develop their language skills including their vocabulary.²²

When tamariki face change or challenging situations in their life, books can provide an opportunity to talk about these experiences. Pukapuka covering situations such as the death of a grandparent, the arrival of a new sibling, moving house, going to hospital or parental separation can make it easier to bring up these topics. In addition, talking with tamariki about the story is more beneficial for tamariki vocabulary and early literacy than simply reading the story.²³

Opportunities to see themselves and identify with the characters in the books around them is also important for tamariki and helps strengthen their identity.

Repetition helps learning

Parents sometimes wonder about their tamaiti asking for the same book, over and over again. Adults might want more variety, but this repetition has some benefits for our tamariki. As your tamaiti becomes more familiar with the story through repetition they can be a more active participant in the shared reading experience.²⁴

Repetition is an important part of learning and helps to strengthen pathways in their brain.

Book format makes a difference

An important part of parent-child reading is the adult and their interactions with their tamaiti. Studies show that these interactions differ depending upon the book format. Rich interactions are more likely when sharing a print book compared with sharing an e-book.²⁵

When parent and child are reading an e-book together their conversation is more likely to be about the child's behaviour or the device itself, whereas when using print books their kōrero is more likely to be about the story.²⁶ This suggests that richer conversations are more likely with print rather than e-books.

Now that e-books are available which can seemingly read to a tamaiti, parents may wonder whether this is as good as them reading with their tamaiti. Research indicates that tamariki understand and remember the story better when an adult is reading with them compared with using an e-book on their own.²⁷

Conclusions

Shared reading is a valuable part of tamariki early language experiences. The earlier parents begin reading with their tamariki, the greater the benefits for language acquisition and overall literacy skills.



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Moreover, the connections between reading and language development reach into many facets of child development and wellbeing.

Frequent interactions between adults and tamariki during shared reading offer a unique and invaluable learning environment that cannot be replicated by e-books or digital media. These interactions are akin to a “magic ingredient” in a child’s development journey, fostering not just literacy but also their cognitive, emotional and social development.

As whānau actively engage in supporting the healthy development of their tamariki, frequent shared reading becomes a powerful tool in their kete/basket of skills and knowledge. It enriches their language abilities, laying a strong foundation for future literacy and learning. And let’s face it, there’s nothing quite like having a good story read aloud to you. Happy reading!

Endnotes

- 1 Hutton et al., 2021
- 2 Massaro, 2016; Montag et al., 2015
- 3 Horowitz-Kraus & Hutton, 2015; Montag et al., 2015
- 4 Shaw, 2015; Tichnor–Wagner et al., 2016; Van Bysterveldt et al., 2010
- 5 Schapira & Aram, 2020; Stine-Morrow et al., 2015
- 6 Murray et al., 2016
- 7 Schapira & Aram, 2020
- 8 Montag et al., 2015
- 9 Grøver et al., 2023
- 10 Dehaene et al., 2015, cited by Hutton et al., 2020
- 11 Hutton et al., 2021
- 12 Mol & Bus, 2011; Westerveld et al., 2015
- 13 Fletcher et al., 2008
- 14 Tichnor–Wagner et al., 2016
- 15 Mol & Bus, 2011
- 16 Chen et al., 2016; Hutton et al., 2015
- 17 Zhang & Koda, 2011
- 18 Gathercole, 2018
- 19 Hsu, 2015
- 20 Zhang & Koda, 2011
- 21 Fulmaono et al., 2023
- 22 Hindman et al., 2014
- 23 Schapira & Aram, 2020
- 24 Schapira & Aram, 2020
- 25 Parish-Morris et al., 2013; Strouse & Ganea, 2017
- 26 Furenes et al., 2021
- 27 Dore et al., 2018; Furenes et al., 2021

Glossary of Māori words:

Kete — basket, kit

Kōrero — talk

Pēpi — baby, infant

Pukapuka — book/s

Tamaiti — child

Tamariki — children

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Being bilingual: learning two languages

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/being-bilingual-learning-two-languages/>

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