

# Promoting emergent literacy and social–emotional learning through dialogic reading

*Striving for a balance between emergent literacy and social–emotional development honors young children’s development and creates a more powerful learning experience in both domains.*

**M**alik (all names are pseudonyms) is often the first student to sit in the circle. He makes friends easily and seems to thrive in kindergarten. Three times a week, Malik and a small group of children cluster around their teacher, Ms. Bruss, and listen to a story. Ms. Bruss is using a type of shared book reading called dialogic reading. In each of the readings, she asks strategic questions that bring the children deeper into the meaning of the story. She responds carefully so that she encourages their expression and comprehension while correcting and expanding as needed. Ms. Bruss introduces the children to new vocabulary and challenges them to look at character motivation. The small-group setting gives children many chances to participate, and by the second or third reading the children are taking part actively in retelling the story. This special time with his teacher and friends is Malik’s favorite part of the day.

The last reading session for each book concludes with a sequencing activity, where the children solve problems together to figure out the logical order of four pictures from key points in the story. This engaging activity blends knowledge of narrative structure—an emergent literacy skill—with the social–emotional skills of cooperation and

problem solving, thus supporting the children’s needs in both social and academic areas.

Although teachers in the United States, such as Ms. Bruss, face increasing pressure to focus on academics in kindergarten, research (Blair, 2002) indicates that promoting school success in young children involves integrating skills in multiple areas, such as physical, cognitive, and social domains. Furthermore, brain research (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) supports Ms. Bruss’s desire to take a broader approach in her classroom and include a focus on the social–emotional development of her students. It is in the context of secure and dependable teacher–student relationships that young children’s overall development thrives

Talking, listening, and engaging in conversations that reflect a child’s interests and preferences are ways that Ms. Bruss influences her students’ attitude and motivation to read. For example, the shared book-reading sessions held in a safe, encouraging small-group environment become highly motivating because the children associate the readings with social interactions with other children and with their relationship with Ms. Bruss. The children in her class are gaining confidence in their skills and beginning to see themselves as readers. These positive experiences will stay with them as they move on to formal reading instruction.

## Promoting emergent literacy

### **Shared book reading**

Shared book reading is an interactive way of reading books aloud with children that gives them

a chance to be active participants in the reading session, thus providing a meaningful experience that stimulates learning. Numerous studies (Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1992; DeTemple, 2001; Dickinson, 2001a, 2001b; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Wasik & Bond, 2001) have shown that a critical factor in shared book reading is the discourse, or verbal interaction, between adults and children. Interactive behaviors occur during shared book reading when adults help children understand and interpret text by referencing the children's experiences and background (e.g., "We're reading about Wemberly's first day of school. What was your first day of school like?"). Questions are posed and answered during the interaction. Children receive immediate feedback, and adults are able to adjust instruction to meet children's current level of understanding (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Moreover, children regulate their learning by asking questions of adults with whom they are interacting in the moment; this further enables children to construct meaning and make sense of text. In short, interactions during shared book reading create rich opportunities for emergent literacy development.

### **Dialogic reading elements**

Ms. Bruss uses dialogic reading to support emergent literacy in her classroom. Dialogic reading, first described by Whitehurst et al. (1988), is a particular type of shared book reading that includes strategic questioning and responding to children while reading a book. The technique involves multiple readings and conversations about books with children in small groups. Over the course of the readings, children are encouraged to become the storytellers. The adult prompts children with questions and careful responses that encourage children to say more. Systematically studied for more than a decade in a variety of populations of children from 2 to 6 years old, dialogic reading has a positive effect on oral language development, a cornerstone of emergent literacy (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1999; Dale, Crain-Thoreson, Notari-Syverson, & Cole, 1996; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992; Whitehurst, Arnold, et al., 1994; Whitehurst, Epstein, et al., 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1988, 1999). The relationship between oral language and code-related skills, such as conventions of print,

emergent writing, knowledge of graphemes, grapheme–phoneme correspondence, and phonological awareness (all skills important for later reading), is quite strong during the preschool years. The relationship weakens during first and second grade, but the importance of oral language skills reemerges in third and fourth grade as a strong, direct influence in the sequence of reading development (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Thus, dialogic reading's emphasis on oral language development is supported by research on effective emergent literacy practices.

**Small groups.** Research indicates that it is ideal to hold dialogic reading sessions with small groups of children (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Whitehurst, Arnold, et al., 1994). Morrow and Smith (1990) found that children read to in small groups demonstrated better story comprehension than children read to in whole-class settings. A kindergarten teacher who uses dialogic reading was amazed by the results he found when reading in small groups:

I watched the kids evolve, become better listeners. They were better able to articulate their thoughts. The ELL [English-language learner] children, in particular, really bloomed. The increase in their language use was remarkable. I think it was the benefits of the small group—you can give each child the chance to articulate. (S. Corsa, personal communication, May 29, 2003)

Although large-group readings still have value in the classroom, the dynamics of a small-group setting offer particular advantages, including more opportunities for children to participate and a chance for teachers to get to know their students better and form more meaningful relationships.

**Repeated readings.** Dialogic reading relies on repeated readings of a book or story. Pappas (1991) found that children asked more questions and engaged in more dialogue when they listened to repeated readings of the same story. Moreover, children who had repeated exposure to a story elaborated on and engaged in more interpretations of text than children who did not. Phillips and McNaughton (1990) corroborated Pappas's work when they found that children's comments during initial readings focused on clarifying the text but that contributions in later readings focused on inferences and predictions. Furthermore, in later

readings they initiated comments and participated more.

Children in Ms. Bruss's classroom love to hear the same stories again and again. Why? Consider adults listening to a piece of music for the first time; some parts might be appealing, some might be confusing, and others might seem familiar. It is difficult to put it all together, not knowing where the music is leading. However, by the third or fourth time of listening to the piece, adults begin to anticipate what part is coming next; hum along with a favorite part; and remember that just after the long, serious part comes the light, melodious ending. It is similar for children who listen to stories over and over again and for teachers such as Ms. Bruss who recognize the value of repeated reading of the same books.

Another teacher who uses dialogic reading commented,

It's the multiple readings that really opened the children up and helped them develop vocabulary in meaningful ways. Being able to know what is coming next in the story during the repeated readings empowers them and, of course, helps them retell the story. (K. Robinson, personal communication, May 29, 2003)

The familiarity of a known story offers children a safe place to practice new skills, such as retelling a story or trying out a new vocabulary word.

**Vocabulary.** The conversations that occur during the repeated readings lend themselves to vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary development occurs through direct instruction of word meanings (Stahl, 1997) and through incidental learning from verbal contexts (Elley, 1989; Weizman & Snow, 2001). Penno, Wilkinson, and Moore (2002) tested intervention strategies to improve young children's vocabulary and found that the greatest gains came from a combination of contextually relevant direct instruction and incidental learning. Moreover, they found that this effect was tied to the frequency of the readings, with children who heard repeated readings of stories making the most significant vocabulary gains. Thus, dialogic reading's hallmarks of guided conversations occurring in repeated readings in small groups offer a helpful context within which powerful vocabulary learning can occur.

**Comprehension.** Dialogic reading gives teachers a structure in which to ask meaningful questions that begin a conversation about what is happening in the story and help children comprehend the story. Asking meaningful questions is more difficult than it may seem and less common than might be imagined. McKeown and Beck (2003) found that adults often did not prompt children to process and connect ideas or to express their understanding of the story. Interactions tended to focus on simple, factual information. Children were usually only asked to repeat language from the story or the teacher. McKeown and Beck's work demonstrates that young children will respond to the complexities of text when they are prompted with meaningful questions. They have the potential to answer with rich and complex thoughts and words when asked and challenged.

Ms. Bruss uses dialogic reading with *Frederick* (Lionni, 1967), a seemingly simple story about mice getting ready for the winter. She builds comprehension on a deeper level by guiding children to uncover the story's complex social dynamics. While the other mice do more traditional chores, such as gathering nuts and corn, Frederick's work is less obvious—he gathers rays of sun, colors, and words for long, cold, gray winter days ahead. The attitude toward Frederick is subtle. Lionni writes, "Are you dreaming, Frederick?" they asked reproachfully" (unpaged). The exchange might appear neutral if children do not understand the sophisticated word *reproachfully*. When Ms. Bruss takes the opportunity to define the word, discuss how it is used in the story, and give an example from their classroom, children begin to have a meaningful conversation about these important social dynamics. She uses vocabulary to facilitate comprehension. Later in the story, the mice come to appreciate Frederick's contributions. Ms. Bruss begins a dialogue about this by asking a detail question such as "How do the mice feel now about Frederick not doing his share of the work?" followed by a connecting question such as "What are some important and different kinds of work that we have to do in our classroom?" The discussion then dives into complex issues of fairness, equal contributions to group efforts, and accepting different gifts. Instead of merely summarizing a simple story about preparing for a harvest, dialogic reading has opened the door to deeper comprehension.

## Promoting social-emotional learning

Leo and Malik often play and work together in Ms. Bruss's classroom, but they have different styles of playing. Malik finds it challenging to control his feelings when Leo skips turns, grabs favorite toys from his hands, and pushes in front of him. Ms. Bruss notices that these encounters affect Malik's concentration during class and interfere with Leo's relationships with others. Ms. Bruss works individually with Leo on play skills, coaches small groups in cooperation activities, and decides that the entire class will benefit from some basic emotion-regulation strategies. She begins with *Matthew and Tilly* (Jones, 1991), a story about a tense conflict among good friends. After three dialogic readings of the story, Ms. Bruss uses the illustrations of the characters in the heat of the conflict to introduce the need for calming down. She teaches the class a simple strategy to control feelings—taking deep breaths. She models the technique, guides children in practicing it, and then coaches them to use the technique during situations throughout the day. Ms. Bruss continues to remind the children about taking deep breaths and even has them make a class Calm-Down Poster with other ideas. Malik begins to feel more confident in social situations because he knows that he has more control over his emotions. Better concentration in class follows naturally, and both Malik and Leo benefit from their growing social competence. The teacher is witnessing what research tells us: Learning to cope with strong emotions is important for social and academic success (Denham, 1998; Elias, 2003; Zins, 2001), and the development of social skills can be taught (Elliot & Gresham, 1993; Ladd & Mize, 1983).

### **Social-emotional characteristics of young children**

Denham (1998) found that young children demonstrate growing social-emotional competence in a variety of ways. Socially competent 5-year-olds can cooperate and share, making the learned skill of getting along with others look innate. They understand fairness and sometimes serve as interpreters for social situations. For example, when others are arguing over a toy, the child

with strong social skills might say, "You will need to give it back when you are finished." It is children like that who follow directions and are the first to notice how others are feeling. They are learning to distinguish the differences between emotions: Being sad is not the same as being angry. They also understand that you can display one emotion on the outside and experience a different one on the inside. They are beginning to display complex emotions such as guilt, pride, and shame, and they are beginning to learn about rules of display: There are times when you show emotions and times when you don't. They can talk about past emotional experiences such as the death of a pet or being lost in a store. Like Malik, they are beginning to moderate their feelings and gain some control; they understand when and how to express emotions appropriately and when to manage them.

### **Learning social skills**

Ms. Bruss knows that to learn these skills children need to know what to do and how to do it (Ladd & Mize, 1983). When using dialogic reading with books that have social-emotional content, she can focus conversations on developing an understanding of certain prosocial skills. For example, with *Swimmy* (Lionni, 1963) Ms. Bruss introduces the word *cooperate* during a discussion of how the fish solve their problem. Children can understand the word *cooperate* cognitively after several guided conversations about this story. However, children also need to practice the skill of cooperation to learn it thoroughly. Following the dialogic readings, Ms. Bruss guides children in a cooperative activity where each child must contribute for the task to be successful. For example, a small group of children participates in a cooking activity where each child has the job of contributing an ingredient and then helping with a part of the preparation, such as stirring, pouring, kneading, and rolling. Ms. Bruss models the skills, gives direct instruction to children, and then guides their practice. In the cooking activity, she also "narrates" what is happening ("Leo is stirring while Malik is pouring. They are working together.") and engages children in a dialogue about cooperation ("What would happen if Malik didn't add the milk?"), but the critical piece is children actually practicing and participating in cooperation. This helps children form an

understanding of cooperation and identify a standard for what cooperation is, based on verbal explanation, teacher modeling, and their own practice. Ms. Bruss continues to reinforce that knowledge and encourages children to use the skill in other settings so that they can achieve true mastery (Elliot & Gresham, 1993; Ladd & Mize, 1983). For example, later in the day, she points out how three children are cooperating to build a very tall tower out of blocks.

## Social-emotional learning and emergent literacy together

The opportunities for mutual growth of social-emotional skills and emergent literacy are evident when teachers select and read books with social-emotional content (see Figure 1 for suggestions) using the dialogic reading technique. Books with social-emotional content present models of adults and children solving problems and interacting, and they have the potential to connect children emotionally with the experiences of the characters. Our attention, learning, memory, and decision-making capabilities are intimately connected with emotions. Children's memories are more accurate, and they are better able to talk about past events when emotion is attached to those events (Fivush, 1998). When children write and speak about stories or activities with emotional content, their narratives are more detailed, accurate, and coherent (Liwag & Stein, 1995; Risemberg & Zimmerman, 1992).

Important but less well-researched and understood theories of how and why children learn to read support the principles of dialogic reading. Bus (2003) explained the importance of an engaging relationship with children as part of the read-aloud experience. Simply reading the text, asking strategic questions, and responding in ways that extend language is not enough. Studies (Bus, Belsky, van IJzendoorn, & Crnik, 1997; Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1988, 1992, 1995, 1997) have shown strong evidence that the quality of the adult-child relationship explains why some children have negative responses to book reading while others have positive responses. When adults who are in a close relationship with a child (e.g., Ms. Bruss with Malik) ask questions that connect the child's experience with the experience of a character in a book, there

is a greater chance that the child will engage in a deeper understanding of the story (Bus).

Moreover, because dialogic reading is done in small groups, children are learning important social skills during the experience. They are practicing taking turns, listening to others, and using language in socially acceptable ways. Children are benefiting from the social experience while they are learning important emergent literacy skills. Malik clearly thrives in the social setting of the group; he associates the positive interactions with Ms. Bruss and his classmates with reading and enjoying books, and this motivates him to participate. Ms. Bruss's responsive use of language and her emotional connection with the children contribute to their motivation, enjoyment, and engagement.

In addition, teachers who know and understand their students can use personal information to make learning more meaningful. Leo has little interest in learning the mechanics of reading and writing, but he is passionately interested in snakes. Ms. Bruss provides books, encyclopedias, word games, posters, and magazines with articles about snakes to help Leo develop a love of reading. In other words, Ms. Bruss uses Leo's interest as an entry point for learning to read and keeps books and written material at the center of his curiosity.

### Emotion vocabulary

Emotion vocabulary is an overlapping area between social-emotional learning and emergent literacy. Emotion vocabulary can be developed through use of dialogic reading with carefully chosen books with social-emotional themes. For example, in the first reading of *Matthew and Tilly* (Jones, 1991), Ms. Bruss uses a direct-instruction model to introduce the new vocabulary word *grouchiest*, which has just been read in the story.

Matthew and Tilly do not talk to each other in a friendly way. Their voices and bodies show that they are in bad moods; they are grouchy. *Grouchy* means feeling a little angry with others. "It was an old crayon," Matthew said in his gr\_\_\_ voice." (unpaged)

In this example, Ms. Bruss paraphrases how *grouchiest* is used in the story, offers a child-friendly definition to explain the meaning of the word as it is used in the book, and encourages children to repeat the word with a fill-in-the-blank sentence. In

**FIGURE 1**  
**Choosing books with social-emotional content**

There are many excellent books for children that convey positive social messages and promote prosocial behavior. There are also many books that, in subtle ways, sanction behaviors that are not socially constructive. When choosing books with social-emotional themes, be on the lookout for the following flaws:

- Conflicts are resolved through revenge.
- Resolutions involve power or violence.
- Children are left alone to solve difficult problems.
- Adults model inappropriate responses to children.
- Stereotypes are reinforced.
- Children's feelings are trivialized, or children are shamed by adults.
- Stories are appropriated from other cultures. For more information, see [www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org).

Here are just a few titles to help you begin your search for books with powerful social-emotional themes.

*Jamaica's Find* (1986, Houghton Mifflin) by Juanita Havill. (Available in Spanish as *El hallazgo de Jamaica*.) Includes social-emotional themes of empathy, perspective taking, feelings, inviting, friendship, and problem solving.

*The Kissing Hand* (1993, Child & Family Press) by Audrey Penn. (Available in Spanish as *Un beso en mi mano*.) Includes social-emotional themes of feelings, emotion management, coping with change, caring, and missing someone.

*Leo the Late Bloomer* (1994, HarperTrophy) by Robert Kraus. (Available in Spanish as *Leo el retoño tardío*.) Includes social-emotional themes of similarities and differences, waiting, different paces for different children, and learning differences.

*Margaret and Margarita* (1996, Rayo) by Lynn Reiser. (Available in Spanish as *Margarita y Margaret*.) Includes social-emotional themes of same and different, feelings change, feelings, communication, compliments, perspective taking, English-language learners, and cross-cultural friendship.

*Stellaluna* (1993, Harcourt Children's Books) by Janell Cannon. (Available in Spanish as *Stelaluna*.) Includes social-emotional themes of similarities and differences, missing someone, problem solving, accepting differences, making promises, friendship, helping, and being lost.

*Wemberly Worried* (2000, Greenwillow) by Kevin Henkes. (Available in Spanish as *Prudencia se preocupa*.) Includes social-emotional themes of identifying feelings, feelings change, dealing with fear, joining in, similarities and differences, and coping with worries.

*Where the Wild Things Are* (1988, HarperCollins) by Maurice Sendak. (Available in Spanish as *Donde viven los monstruos*.) Includes social-emotional themes of identifying feelings, strong feelings, feelings change, and calming down.

the second reading, she gestures and gives a phonetic prompt to the children when she gets to the part in the story where *grouchiest* is used, encouraging them to chime in. In the third reading, to encourage the children to connect the word to personal experiences, Ms. Bruss asks, "Have you ever felt grouchy like Matthew?" or, to help them understand what the emotion looks like, "How can you tell that Matthew feels grouchy?" In the final reading, as children are becoming the storytellers, they have a chance to practice the new word in the context of the story.

This emotion vocabulary growth benefits social-emotional skill development, too (Denham et al., 2003; Saarni, 1999). Throughout the school

day, Ms. Bruss encourages her students to name their feelings, perhaps using their new words (*frustrated* or *grouchy*), thus promoting vocabulary skills and helping them learn the foundational social-emotional skill of emotion identification. Research has shown that emotion vocabulary skills in preschool predict academic achievement and social competence up to four years later (Izard et al., 2001). Teachers who are working on social-emotional skills are doing important work that supports later growth in the social-emotional domain as well as the academic area. Teachers do not have to sacrifice teaching social-emotional skills to focus on academics.

## How to begin dialogic reading

Using dialogic reading with books with social-emotional content effectively blends the areas of emergent literacy and social-emotional learning. In dialogic reading, teachers ask a variety of questions (open-ended, connecting, fill-in-the-blank, and detail) at strategic points in the story and respond to children's answers by affirming, repeating, expanding, or correcting.

Teacher [reading from storybook]: "Danny was tired of waiting for his loose tooth to come out. He was getting frustrated with the long wait" (Bramwell & Normand, 2004, p. 27). [To students] What does it mean to feel frustrated?

Child 1: Sad.

Teacher: That's an interesting idea. If you are frustrated, you might feel a little bit sad. Danny might be sad about having to wait for his tooth to fall out. What else does it mean to feel frustrated?

Child 2: Scared.

Teacher: Hmm. If you were frustrated, you might feel a little scared. Are there other ideas?

Child 3: You might feel nervous.

Teacher: Nervous. If you were frustrated about your tooth, you might be nervous that it will never come out! When you are frustrated, things aren't going your way, and you feel uncomfortable. Danny wants his tooth to come out, but the tooth just isn't ready. This makes him feel fr\_\_\_\_\_.

Children: Frustrated.

(S. Corsa, personal communication, March 3, 2003)

In this example of an actual classroom practice of dialogic reading, the teacher began with a detail question and supported children's answers by repeating, affirming, and expanding in a way that validated their participation and helped them learn what *frustrated*, an important word for social-emotional growth, meant. He gave them a definition of the word and an example of how it was used in the story. Then he had them practice saying this new word in relation to the story. In subsequent readings, he might have them connect their own experiences with this new word.

## Implementation tips

Teachers who wish to incorporate dialogic reading into their practice must focus on the logistics of implementing it in the classroom. First, a teacher should consider how the classroom schedule will accommodate small groups. Some ideas follow.

- Schedule the reading groups back to back and make arrangements for additional help during that time. Alternatively, because kindergarten children are learning to work independently, teachers might choose to do the small-group readings when the rest of the children are working on their own. Teachers could arrange for them to do independent work related to the book; for example, during the readings of *Swimmy* (Lionni, 1963), a story of a fish who had a very special job due to his uniqueness, children could draw things that are special and unique about themselves.
- Schedule the reading groups simultaneously and ask other adults (such as a coteacher or a trained parent volunteer) to read to the other groups. Teachers should make sure that they rotate which groups they read to so that they can monitor the progress of all children. This provides a way for parents to participate meaningfully in their child's classroom and to help out the teacher significantly.
- Stagger the reading groups so that one or two occur in the morning and one or two occur in the afternoon.
- Experiment with different arrangements to find one that works.

Then, teachers should think about where to conduct the small-group readings. Here are some guidelines.

- Use the reading area that is already established in the classroom. Children will associate the space with books, stories, and reading.
- Arrange to use space separate from the classroom (such as a resource room, the library, an observation room, or the end of the hallway) if there are additional adults who can supervise children who are not in the reading group.

- Modify an existing area in the classroom so that it can be used for small groups, using curtains, pillows, rugs, and posters that relate to the book to enhance the area.

Next, teachers should spend some time planning how the children will be grouped to ensure that each child has many opportunities for interacting, listening, and talking. Teachers should do the following things.

- Determine how many groups are needed in order to keep the group size between four and six children.
- Decide how to cluster children in each group, keeping in mind temperaments, language skills, personalities, and social dynamics.
- Try to keep groups consistent for all three readings of a book, but consider changing them when reading the next book.
- For English-language learners, consider whether it will be better to (a) have one group made up of children who are learning English and adapt the reading, questions, and discussion to accommodate their needs or (b) interperse English-language learners into groups where they will benefit from hearing the language used by other children.

Finally, teachers should consider the management issues involved with dialogic reading.

- If a question gets little or no response from the children, teachers should consider breaking the question down into smaller pieces and using the illustrations to aid comprehension. Here is an example.

Teacher: Why did Tony feel left behind?

Children: [No response.]

Teacher: Look at this picture of Nadia and Denise. What are they doing?

Child 2: They are holding hands and walking away from Tony.

Teacher: Where is Tony?

Child 4: Behind.

Teacher: What does he have to do?

Child 1: Tony has to run after them.

- When a child interjects a comment that isn't related to the book, teachers can bring the

conversation back to the story respectfully, saying something like, "Kai, you really want to tell us about your pet. Right now it's time to listen to Isabel's idea about Gloria and the bunny. I hope you'll tell me more about your dog at snack time."

- Teachers who choose books with social-emotional content may also notice children disclosing more personal information about their feelings. A child's comment may warrant a more in-depth, one-on-one conversation with the teacher later. The teacher can say something like, "I can tell that moving to your new house made you very, very sad. I want to hear more about that at snack time."

Once teachers have thought through these considerations, they may want to try dialogic reading with a familiar book to see how the arrangement works. While teachers are experimenting with logistics, they are also developing their own dialogic reading skills by answering questions such as these: "What types of questions work best in the first reading?" "How can I correct in a way that encourages participation?" "How many questions should I ask in one reading?" "How can I keep the conversation following a connecting question tied to the book?" Finding an implementation plan that works and gaining confidence in dialogic reading will have tremendous rewards.

All teachers can grow weary from the revolving door of "new ideas" and "reforms du jour" that come into their classrooms. Dialogic reading is different. It validates what teachers already know and do—reading storybooks multiple times, asking questions, responding in ways that encourage language, and giving children individual attention—and offers them a structure in which they can continue to be strategic about how they use language with children. Furthermore, dialogic reading can be used any time, anywhere. It is a technique teachers can adopt that will become second nature quickly and stay with them. As a kindergarten teacher put it,

Other reading programs come and go. Dialogic reading is enduring. You can use this method with any book that you choose. It's a way of thinking, a way of teaching. You can grab it and adapt it to anything else. (K. Robinson, personal communication, May 12, 2004)



## Family involvement

Teachers cannot achieve the same results with their students without the partnership of families. Ms. Bruss found ready partners in Malik's parents and grandparents, who were already immersed in reading books and championing his emerging literacy skills. During a parent-teacher conference, Malik's parents described to Ms. Bruss how they used *Bedtime for Frances* (Hoban, 1964b) to talk to Malik about waking up during the night and his fear of the dark. They used the story to help them establish nighttime routines. Later in the school year, when Malik announced that he was going to have a sister, Ms. Bruss sent home a copy of *Baby Sister for Frances* (Hoban, 1964a). On weekend visits, Malik and his grandparents looked through the newspaper together while his grandparents helped him decipher the headlines. He pointed to the words as they carefully read aloud together, "Downtown Bus Tunnel to Close." Malik noticed the pride they were taking in his abilities and enthusiasm for reading.

Malik and many other students are on solid footing right from the beginning of their formal schooling because of this close family-school connection. It is likely that these early experiences and positive relationships will carry through Malik's years in school. Teachers are, however, often challenged to find the means and the time to establish and maintain this positive connection with families. One way that Ms. Bruss found was to share her love of children's books and her enthusiasm for dialogic reading with families.

Ms. Bruss was familiar with the research on dialogic reading that showed children who were read to at home using a dialogic reading technique made nearly double the language gains as those children who were read to only at school (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998). She arranged a family event at the public library, where she talked about dialogic reading and explained how parents could use it at home during reading times and during their daily routines to engage in conversations with their children. She emphasized how different the readings at home would be for the child because the families could draw on their personal and intimate knowledge of their child's experiences to ask questions and engage in conversations. She established a lending library for sending books home with chil-

dren and applied for a grant to purchase copies of the books so that children could keep them. She understood that children benefit when reading at school is reinforced at home.

## Blending complementary areas

Teachers and administrators face many demands as they meet the needs of young children: preparing children for school success, meeting increasing academic requirements for young children, promoting social-emotional competence, creating a positive school climate that values children, and inviting families to be partners in their children's education. These goals do not have to conflict. Emphasizing the overlapping areas between emergent literacy and social-emotional learning honors children's development and creates a more powerful learning experience in both domains (Izard et al., 2001; Fabes, Eisenberg, Hanish, & Spinrad, 2001). Teachers can feel confident that by blending these complementary areas, they are preparing young children for later school success.

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