

# Action Guide A: Oral Language

**Oral Language is the ability to effectively understand spoken words and use them to communicate thoughts and ideas.**

Strong oral language skills provide the necessary foundation needed for future reading success. Children with strong oral language skills have an easier time learning to read than those whose oral language skills are weak. This is because it's easier to read a word that's already in their spoken vocabulary. If a child is learning to read but is continually encountering unfamiliar vocabulary words, it greatly impedes his fluency and comprehension.

## Four Ways to Enhance Oral Language

There are 4 specific ways to use *Learning to Read is a Ball* to enhance your child's oral language. Implement these strategies in a fun, interactive, and meaningful manner. Brain research<sup>2</sup> suggests when individuals enjoy the experience and are actively engaged, they more effectively retain and store information. Children also take more risks using new words and exercising their oral language when they see adults being playful in their exchanges and interactions.<sup>3</sup> So when in doubt, loosen up and be silly! It's memorable and effective.

<sup>2</sup> Willis, J. (2007). The Neuroscience of Joyful Education. *Engaging the Whole Child*. Retrieved from [www.asdc.org](http://www.asdc.org)

<sup>3</sup> Roskos, K.A., Tabors, P.O., & Lenhart, L.A. (2009). *Oral Language and Early Literacy in Preschool*. (2nd ed.). Newark: International Reading Association.

# 1. Use an appropriate reading style

Researchers<sup>4</sup> found two parental reading styles to have beneficial effects on vocabulary acquisition.

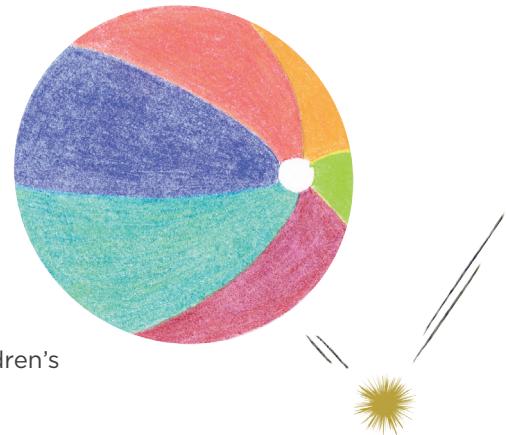
## Describer Style

A describer style concentrates on describing pictures DURING the reading. This is a less demanding approach because multiple in-the-moment opportunities are available for the child to engage with the content.

## Performance-Oriented Style

A performance-oriented style emphasizes talking about the meaning of the story AFTER reading it. Since the questions and discussion occur AFTER the book is read, this style is more challenging for the child. The book is usually introduced to the child before the reading, but few to no interruptions or comments are made during the reading.

According to this research, the describer style resulted in the greatest overall improvement in vocabulary with children who have smaller vocabularies. Though, children with a more advanced vocabulary benefited most from the performance-oriented style. Since you know your child best, you decide which style to use.



<sup>4</sup> Reese, E. & Cox, A. (1999). Quality of adult book reading affects children's emergent literacy. *Developmental Psychology*, 35(1), 20-28.

## How to Use These Styles:

### Describer Style Examples

(Comments & Questions  
DURING the reading)

“Why do you think the baseball is on the tennis court?” (see page 13)

“What time do you think the Balls Choir will play?” (see page 16)

“What is the dog eating at the Ball House Cafe?” (see page 19)

“The mouse is carrying a big, red and blue ball.” (see page 1)

“American footballs are types of balls that are curvy but not round. Can you think of any others?” (See page 17)

### Performance-Oriented Style Examples

(Introduce, read, and then comment  
& ask questions)

#### **BEFORE OR AFTER READING:**

“What does a tennis ball look and feel like?”

#### **AFTER READING:**

“What types of balls did you see in this book?”

#### **BEFORE OR AFTER READING:**

“What kind of food can be round like a ball and yummy in your tummy?”

#### **INTRODUCTION EXAMPLE:**

“This is a book about all different types of balls and the various things they do. There are also three friendly animals in this book.”

#### **AFTER READING:**

“Why do you think the author wrote: ‘All balls are curvy and most balls are round?’”

## 2. Make Connections

Meaning drives language acquisition and literacy development. Regardless of your style, describer or performance, make sure to connect what is read to your child's background, past experiences, or current life events. Doing so allows him the chance to share his thoughts, tell a story, and use more sophisticated words. Reliving past events and replaying precious memories increases a child's ability to remember and retell events and stories.

Here are some ways to make such connections: "Remember the time we had a family picnic and played football?", "You played with Jolene last week. Can you tell me what you did?", or "We went to Susan's basketball game yesterday. Do you remember when...?"

"People need a vocabulary of around 50,000 words to carry on normal adult conversations."

— McGuinness, 2004



### 3. Provide Synonyms and Antonyms

Vocabulary size is extremely important in developing reading skills. *Learning to Read is a Ball* is deliberately written using basic vocabulary. The words may already be familiar to your child and if they're not, the illustrations depict the meaning of the words. It is easier for a child to learn a new word when a parent introduces it as a synonym (a word with similar meaning) to a word she already knows. For instance, your child may know the word “yummy”, but not “scrumptious.” Since she has a concept of yummy, it is more likely she will understand scrumptious. In addition to synonyms, you can have fun with antonyms (opposites) to convey what the new word means.

The chart below offers a sample list of synonyms and antonyms for some vocabulary in *Learning to Read is a Ball*. After your child becomes familiar with the language in this book, strategically and playfully “throw in” (no pun intended!) these new “challenge” words when reading. For example, “Wow. That ball is gigantic!” or “I hope these meatballs aren’t bland!”

<b>BIG</b>	<b>SMALL</b>	<b>FUZZY</b>	<b>SHOUT</b>	<b>YUMMY</b>
<u>Synonyms</u>	<u>Synonyms</u>	<u>Synonyms</u>	<u>Synonyms</u>	<u>Synonyms</u>
huge enormous gigantic jumbo	mini bitty (“itty bitty”) teeny (“teeny tiny”) petite	furry hairy wooly frizzy	cheer scream yell shriek	tasty delicious scrumptious delectable
<u>Antonyms</u>	<u>Antonyms</u>	<u>Antonyms</u>	<u>Antonyms</u>	<u>Antonyms</u>
small tiny	big humungous	smooth velvety	whisper mutter	bland tasteless

## 4. Have Your Child Tell a Story

Telling stories, retelling stories, and describing events have many benefits. These activities improve comprehension and provide practice in: sequencing thoughts, using correct grammar (throw vs. throwing vs. threw), and experimenting with cohesive devices (see **JARGON ALERT**). Although *Learning to Read is a Ball* is a concept book of playful rhymes and does not tell a narrative story, your child can still retell portions.

### Here are some ideas:

Start by having her describe what she sees on each page. Encourage her to use the pictures as a guide. For example, on page 3, if she says something like “mouse on ball” or “The sheep is throwing balls up in the air,” gently use the following techniques to build the language skills needed for effective storytelling:

- **Expand on what your child says.** Repeat what she says but add in missing words or morphological endings (e.g. stand – standing). For the “mouse on ball” example, she has omitted the verb. Verbs are extremely important in language development because they drive the meaning of the sentence. They also lead to the development of more complex sentences. After you applaud her response, model an expanded response and say, “The mouse *is standing* on the ball”; emphasize *is standing*.
- **Elaborate on what your child says.** Elaboration means adding more meaningful information to what your child said. It also provides a way to encourage dialogue. We elaborate to facilitate understanding, to enhance memory, and to make connections to what the child already knows. To elaborate on the previous example, you could say something like, “Standing on a ball may be dangerous. I hope the mouse doesn’t fall and get hurt! Do you think he’ll get hurt, Lauren?”

### **JARGON ALERT:** **What are cohesive devices?**

Cohesive devices are words and phrases that link ideas together in a logical order. Cohesive devices also give the listener clues as to what will happen next. Examples include: Once upon a time, and, but, so, next, then, in the end, they lived happily ever after.

- **Substitute more accurate, descriptive words for weaker vocabulary.**

For instance, if your child said, “The sheep is throwing balls up in the air” (page 4), that’s not accurate. Provide the more accurate, descriptive vocabulary and say, “The sheep is juggling.” This can then lead into an entire conversation about juggling (who does it, where it takes place, can you juggle? etc.).

Next, take turns making up stories about the mouse, sheep, or the dog, Spot. Turn to any page and make up a story. If you turn to pages 19 and 20, you could say, “Let’s make up a story about Spot. I’ll go first. It was a cold and rainy night and Spot was very hungry. So he went into the Ballhouse Cafe and...” When you tell your story, use cohesive devices to help with transitions and to mark a beginning, a middle, and an end.

**BEGINNING:** *It was a cold and rainy night...*

**MIDDLE:** *Then, he ate some delicious meatballs...*

**END:** *Finally, he went home.*

After you make up a story, encourage your child to do it too: “Now it’s your turn. Tell a story about Spot.” It’s also a perfect opportunity for you and your child to create a book about the characters in the story. She can draw the illustrations and you can write down the words. The beauty about *Learning to Read is a Ball* is that you can make up a story for any page!

“When I say to a parent, ‘read to a child,’ I don’t want it to sound like medicine. I want it to sound like chocolate.”

— Mem Fox, author of *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever*