

Branching Out

Promoting Genre Diversity in Storytime

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How often do you consider genre when planning your storytimes? What percentage of the time do you think you're sharing informational, or nonfiction books, with the families that attend your programs?

If you answered only a little or not much to these questions, you are not alone. A recent study found that across all storytime age groups, informational books were being shared at a much lower rate than any other genre, both in the number shared per storytime and the time spent interacting with them.¹

Familiarizing children with a variety of genre structures and layouts prepares them for the diverse readings they will be exposed to during their school years and in the real-world. Informational titles in particular help build background knowledge and support a multitude of early literacies, scaffolding future learning and inspiring interest in a wide variety of subjects to promote holistic child development in public library storytimes. While not exhaustive, this short paper presents some ideas on how to use informational books in storytime read-alouds—both online and off—and explores the benefits of sharing diverse genres with the families in your community.

Genre Diversity and Early Learning

Children, from birth onward, benefit from exposure to different genres and story structures. Even very young children have the ability to recognize differences between genres and are able to incorporate genre-specific structures into their

play and story retellings including attributes of genre related to vocabulary, tone, text, content, and more.²

Common genres used in storytimes are storybooks (typically considered fiction), informational books (commonly equated with nonfiction), and oral stories. While each genre supports early learning and school readiness, informational books have many, often overlooked, benefits, including support for content-area knowledge, vocabulary development, and exposure to abstract language.

Picturebooks that use an informational book structure have been found to increase young children's understanding of abstract topics and subjects. As children get older, informational readings increase in school settings making it imperative to start familiarizing children with informational text structures early. In fact, other studies in early education have found a correlation between informational book exposure as



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a young child and later school success.³ Additionally, many children prefer nonfiction, being motivated to read informational books and taking pleasure in the activity.

The Library Connection

In both home and school read-alouds, young children often experience little exposure to informational books. As storytime practitioners, we are uniquely able to empower caregivers' in their role as their child's first teacher through modeling and active engagement during our programs—even virtual ones. While many of the caregivers we serve may already be familiar and comfortable with storybooks, they may be unsure of informational titles.

In fact, despite contrary findings, studies reported that caregivers often feel that children cannot understand stories within the informational genre, much less enjoy them.⁴ Providing tips, expressing the importance of, and modeling how to read different genres, especially informational titles, can bolster caregiver confidence for home read-alouds and acquaint them with a variety of quality book choices to use.

Caregivers that share stories from different genres tend to engage in more talk with their child during read-alouds—helping increase children's vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Additionally, public library storytimes, programs, and resources are often an invaluable help to getting children ready for kindergarten, especially those whose families may be underserved or experiencing disadvantages. Incorporating a wide variety of genres into your storytimes for young children provides support for the twenty-first-century skills that children and families need.

Public library outreach to daycares, preschools, and other early learning environments is another opportunity to share the good word about informational books and diverse book genres. Research from the educational field has reported very low levels of informational read-alouds in early learning settings, despite the fact that nonfiction reading loads increase as students move up in grade.⁵ With limited budgets, resources, and time, these educators may lack access to quality informational books and training on how to integrate them into their lessons. Making sure that any sort of thematic kit or recommendations you offer include informational titles and resources for how to use them effectively can continue to further your efforts in supporting holistic early learning for your community.

Incorporating informational books in library programming and storytimes for young children and families is an easy way to support holistic childhood development for everyone in your community. Narrative informational books, which share elements of both storybooks and informational books, can be an easy way to begin incorporating more genre diversity into your storytimes. Intentional story choices can make a difference in children's lives.

Recommended Informational Titles

While the following examples contain suggestions related to specific informational titles for library storytimes, similar ideas can be applied to any number of other quality informational titles.

Examine the books for accuracy of content; inclusion of diverse peoples, cultures, and experiences; quality illustrations; own voice works; engaging text; trustworthiness of source; and currency of information. Expand book content beyond just a simple reading by using applicable props, suggesting extension activities for home or the classroom, putting displays out, encouraging conversations and questions while reading, and involving caregivers.

Alexander, Kwame. *Animal Ark: Celebrating our Wild World in Poetry and Pictures*. Photos by Joel Sartore. National Geographic, 2017. 48p.

These poetic words accompany stunning photographs of animals big and small from around the world. While the words go quickly, the detailed photographs will elicit a desire to linger on each page. Before or during the story, stop on a page with a clear, up-close photograph of an animal. Have families describe, in their own words, what the animal looks like. See how many attributes everyone (including the adults!) can name.

Encourage families to think beyond simply naming colors to the more unique physical features of the animal such as size, expression, shape, and texture (i.e., "How do you think it would feel if you touched the animal's back?"). See if anyone can draw analogs to other objects or animals they might know (i.e., "The tortoises look round like a ball," or the "The tapir is black and white like a zebra").

Closely examining visual images and learning how to articulate a description are some of the building blocks of basic scientific observation. Honing a child's visual skills also relates to artistic development and reading comprehension. Taking time for a focused observation that gives young children space to concentrate and think deeply is important for socio-emotional development as well.

Bishop, Nic. *Penguin Day: A Family Story*. Photos by the author. Scholastic, 2017. 32p.

Detailed and charming photographs from a rockhopper penguin colony in the South Atlantic tell the story of a penguin family's daily life. This story draws parallels to many things young children experience in their own lives. For an easy STEM extension and endless entertainment for however long you keep it up in your library, print a life-size version of a rockhopper penguin (approximately twenty inches for a full-grown adult) for families to compare themselves too. If in-person, encourage both adults and children to try measuring the penguin together using a variety of objects such as LEGO squares and popsicle sticks. How many Popsicle sticks long is a rockhopper penguin?

For virtual storytimes, consider printing out a life-size replica of a krill, a rockhopper penguin's main food source. The krill's small two-inch size makes it easy to hold up for viewers to see. Compare the krill on screen to common household objects that families may have access to like a paper clip, an egg, teabag, or cup to give them a reference point. Have families help you figure out what's bigger and smaller than the krill and challenge them to try to find objects of their own that are about the same size the rest of the day. Supporting caregiver-child talk about relative size and proportion helps bring early math development home.

Posada, Mia. *Summer Green to Autumn Gold: Uncovering Leaves' Hidden Colors*. Illus. by the author. Millbrook, 2019. 32p.

Though this book is flexible enough to cover all the seasons, it truly shines as a fall read; walking through the scientific processes behind leaf color change in a developmentally appropriate manner—perfect for age groups that love to ask “why.”

As this book introduces slightly more advanced terminology to describe the process of leaves changing color, be mindful of the speed at which you read. This is especially important in a virtual storytimes where you may not be able to hear or see the families you're reading with. It may help to think back to early education shows such as *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*, which tend to include long pauses, slower speech patterns, and spaces for children to respond. Remember, just because you cannot hear anyone, doesn't mean they aren't answering you! Take time during the reading to ask families about what leaf shapes they may recognize in the pages. Consider doing some homework ahead of time so you are able to point out a couple leaves belonging to local trees that can be found in families' nearby community spaces (e.g., “This leaf comes from an oak tree; we have oak trees at Kiwanis Park!”).

Drawing connections to experiences families may have had can increase a child's interest in the subject and helps to link new information to pre-existing background knowledge. This

also helps to scaffold conversations that caregivers can have with their child after storytime, reinforcing new knowledge and helping draw attention to learning opportunities in their everyday lives. For those that are able to have a craft after storytime, the book ties nicely with leaf print process art. If you have a regular group of families or a daycare you visit, think about inviting your participants to gather leaves and bring them to the next storytime to share.

Thornsburg, Blair. *Skulls!* Illus. by Scott Campbell. Atheneum, 2019. 40p.

Heads-up, it's time to learn more about that space in-between our ears in this hilarious introduction to our skulls. This story can easily be tied into other thematic personal safety and healthy body programming, remaining a solid read for pre-K through young elementary. An easy way to introduce the topic and familiarize children with various parts of an informational book is to devise a guessing game using facts from the back matter (e.g., “How many bones do you think we have in our skulls?”).

Make sure to take guesses from the grown-ups in the audience too! If you're able, leverage community connections for temporary access to local fauna skulls or replicas. Many local museums or other community groups have these specifically for teacher loans or educational programming.

Another option, if available, might be your library's 3D printer. Multiple 3D animal skull designs are available for free and can be printed to size or scale; providing an easy touch point to introduce families to available library services and extend the story. If your options are limited, or you are in a virtual environment, consider projecting or printing images of animal skulls before or during the storytime, inviting families to guess what animal they think the skull belongs to. Being able to access the content in multiple ways allows for inclusive learning experiences and keeps up family engagement for a more memorable program. &

References

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3. Kociubuk and Campana, “Sharing Stories,” 52.
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5. Duke, “3.6 minutes,” 35.