

Co-Constructing Stories

Sharing Wordless Picture Books with Preschoolers

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“A wordless book doesn’t have the author’s voice—the text—telling the story. Each reader tells it in their own way.”¹

In this quotation, three-time Caldecott Medal recipient David Wiesner vividly describes the opportunity that wordless picture books provide for the reader to create their own story. The term “wordless picture books” is often used to refer to picture books completely without words throughout the set of illustrated pages, and “nearly wordless” is used for picture books presenting only a few written words across the book.

Research on picture books without words has been limited, compared to the vast literature on typical picture books. However, the burgeoning literature suggests that picture books without text may facilitate preschoolers’ emergent literacy skills, including child language production during shared reading, vocabulary, and narrative comprehension.² Wordless picture books may also promote children’s sequential thinking and visual literacy.³

Although wordless picture books are similar to typical picture books in that they strengthen young children’s language and literacy skills, those without text have an added benefit—they are a creative endeavor for parents and children. That is, considerable flexibility in story creation is possible with textless picture books as there are few to no written words to constrain the story.⁴

As emergent literacy researchers, we sought to study the ways parents and preschoolers share wordless books. Our findings may assist libraries’ promotion of wordless picture books to parents and teachers of young children, who tend to shy away from them due to their unfamiliarity.⁵

Wordless picture books have been developed for all ages, young preschoolers to middle-schoolers. William Patrick Martin lists a variety in *Wonderfully Wordless*.⁶ Targeted age level is related to the complexity of the storyline shown in



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the illustrations, themes revealed through the pictures, book length, and the level of detail in the illustrations.

For our study, data were collected from twenty-two adult-child pairs, all of whom resided in upstate New York. For this exploratory small-sample study, families were recruited from childcare centers, preschools, and public libraries. The average age of the children was four years. Child age ranged from three to five years. Eighteen of the adults indicated that their role, related to the child, was that of mother. Three of the adults were grandmothers and one was a father.

Twenty-one of the adults reported their racial/ethnic background as White; one parent described herself as Latina. The average age of the adults was 38.4 years (range 24 to 60 years). Fifty-nine percent of the child participants in the study were female. Seventeen of the children were described by their adult relative as White, three were multiethnic, one was Latina, and one was African American. These demographics are typical for the county in which the study took place, in that approximately 94 percent of county residents in the 2010 census were White.⁷

The adult participants were asked to indicate how often they share wordless picture books with their child and also how often they share typical picture books with the child. Options included “hardly ever,” “once or twice each month,” “once or twice each week,” “several times each week,” “nearly daily,” and “daily.” The most common response (59 percent of sample) for the adults with regard to sharing wordless picture books with their child was “hardly ever.” For frequency of sharing picture books with words with the child, the most common response (55 percent of sample) was “daily.” A Wilcoxon Matched Pairs Test was used to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the two types of picture books, with regard to the adults’ frequency of sharing the books with their child; the difference was significant, $z = 4.11, p < .001$.

In the study, the adult was first asked to familiarize themselves with a wordless picture book, *Wave*, by Suzy Lee.⁸ This book, which includes forty illustrated pages, has no words other than the title, author name, author dedication, and publisher information. *Wave* depicts a young girl at the beach. This book was selected for the study because the illustrations are pleasing and clear, a possible narrative is evident, and because the setting was considered likely to be familiar to families living close to Lake Erie and other lakes in Western New York. Next, the adult was asked to share *Wave* with their child, and their sharing was videotaped. Last, the adult was interviewed about their experience sharing the book with their child. The interview was also videotaped.

The videotapes of the sharing of *Wave* were transcribed verbatim and coded for instances of particular types of adult and child verbalizations. Each adult verbalization was categorized as information prompt, distancing prompt (which asks the child questions that connect the book to the child’s life),

yes/no question, request for clarification of child’s verbalization, attention motivator (e.g., “Look!,” “Wow!,” “Uh, oh!”), label/explanation, repetition of child verbalization, praise/confirmation, or other (e.g., unrelated comments). Child verbalizations were categorized as: answer, initiation, question, confirmation of adult’s verbalization, repetition of adult verbalization, attention motivator, or other (e.g., unrelated comments, unable to provide response to adult question).

The first author coded all of the transcripts, and the fourth author coded eight of the transcripts (i.e., 36 percent), to show that the transcripts could be coded similarly. Across the categories of coding, the average level of consistency was .95, using intraclass correlation, with a range between .77 and .99. Thus, in our study, we were able to make very similar decisions regarding the categorizations of adult and child verbalizations.⁹

The average length of the book sharing sessions was 6 minutes, 59 seconds, with a range between 3 minutes, 5 seconds and 15 minutes, 45 seconds. Descriptive analyses revealed that the most common types of verbalizations in adults were labels/explanations, with an average of 36.3 labels/explanations when sharing *Wave* with their child. Information prompts were also very common (average = 29.0), as were attention motivators (average = 23.9). Distancing prompts were relatively uncommon (average = 5.0). The most common type of child verbalization was answer (average = 31.4). Child initiations when sharing the picture book without words were frequent as well (average = 12.1). It is important to note that there was considerable variability across families in the frequency of the various types of verbalizations.

The results of the statistical analyses suggest a set of recommendations for use of wordless picture books with young children. The results of this study somewhat parallel the findings from studies of adult-preschooler interactions in the context of typical picture books with words.¹⁰ It is recommended that adults actively encourage children’s verbalizations when sharing a picture book without words. The adult can ask the child questions such as, “What is going on here?,” “What do you think will happen next?,” “What is this called?,” “What did we see at the beach yesterday?,” “How do you think she feels right now?,” and “Why is she running away?” These questions can help the child to practice oral language, develop empathy skills, and make connections between their own life and that of characters in a story.¹¹

Giving the child the opportunity to tell the story with increasing independence can help the child to develop narrative, or storytelling, skills. Adult questions can range from simple (e.g., “What is she doing there?”) to complex (e.g., “What do you think she feels?”). When sharing a textless picture book with a child, a large number of attention motivators such as “Wow!,” “Look!,” or “Oh, my!” may be needed, because the interaction will not have the cadence of typical picture book reading, which is often directed by the story text.

Another recommendation is that adults use repetition and praise/confirmation of children's contributions to the shared storytelling, to encourage the child to talk more. In the current study, adults' use of praise/confirmation (average 10.9) and repetition of children's verbalizations (average 7.7) were both common during the shared reading interaction.

Close examination of the transcripts of the adult-child book sessions revealed that most of the families engaged in a co-constructed story; however, some parents asked relatively few questions and instead used mostly explanations/labels to tell the child a story. The following is an example of a co-constructed story between a parent and a three-year-old child.

Parent: Now what's she doing right there?

Child: Uh blocking back.

Parent: Is she telling it to go away?

Child: Yeah.

Child: She like go away.

Parent: Yeah.

Child: If it just pushing the water.

In the following example, with a child aged five, the parent interprets the pictures with a focus on the protagonist's thoughts, and also includes questions in her book sharing.

Parent: So, she looked at the water and wasn't quite sure.

Parent: The wave came rolling in.

Parent: "Oh no," she thought.

Parent: She wondered if the water was cold or hot.

Parent: She wasn't quite sure.

Parent: What are the birds doing?

Child: They're running.

Across the group of families, we saw highly creative approaches to sharing the wordless book. Some adults chose to situate the child and the adult as characters in the story, referring to the female child in the book as "you" when discussing the book with their child, for example. Some children focused on what might be occurring outside of the illustrations (e.g., the beach being in the child's backyard, the birds flying away to go in a rocket). Adults in the study largely followed their child's interest, allowing the child a key role in the creative co-construction of a story based on the book illustrations.

Following the shared book interaction, the adult was asked a set of interview questions. Three out of the nine questions were analyzed to study the adults' perceptions of sharing a wordless picture book vs. a picture book with words with their child. The three questions were:

- "What did you like best about sharing this book with your child?"
- "Was there anything that occurred during the book interaction that was different from what you expected?"
- "What do you think you did differently with this wordless picture book versus what you would usually do in sharing a picture book with words with your child?"

Major themes regarding the adults' perceptions of the textless picture book vs. picture books with words were derived from the interviews, using the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis.¹² The process of data analysis began with the first and the third authors independently unitizing the data, identifying small units of meaning in the adults' responses to the three questions. Consensus across the two researchers was then developed on all idea units. Next, the two researchers independently categorized the idea units into potential themes. Consensus was then developed on how the various idea units fit into the proposed thematic categories. Last, the names for the themes were refined.

Eight themes focused on the adults' perceptions of wordless picture books. Each of these themes was included in the interviews of at least 25 percent of the parents. These included:

- "can develop own story"
- "allows imagination/creativity"
- "allows autonomy/choice"
- "facilitates discussion/verbal interaction"
- "interested in child contribution"
- "could relate book to personal life"
- "must rely on pictures more"
- "child wasn't very attentive/interested."

This last theme is important to consider; some children in the shared book interaction asked the parent repeatedly to "just read!" It may be that some children will find sharing of picture books without words unusual and initially more work than they would like.

Overall, however, the results of the interview data suggest that the adults found sharing a wordless picture book with their child a highly creative experience. Two themes that

Table 1. Perceptions of sharing various types of picture books with one's child

Theme	Proportion	Example
Wordless picture book Wave		
Can develop own story	50%	"You have to kind (of) come up with a story."
Allows imagination/creativity	45%	"There's more room to use imagination."
Allows autonomy/choice	45%	"You can deviate and really do whatever you like."
Facilitates discussion/interaction	41%	"You could discuss what was happening in the pictures."
Child wasn't very attentive	32%	"I was sort of having to pull him back to the book."
Must rely on pictures more	27%	"Had to rely on the pictures because the written story as far as the perspective of the author wasn't there."
Interested in child contribution	27%	"I like listening to her take on it, like how she's interpreting it."
Could relate book to personal life	27%	"We could relate it to what we do or what we have seen."
Picture book with words		
Read the words	45%	"When I'm reading the book to him I'm just focused on the words."
Experience is structured	32%	"It's already sort of pre-done."

Note: Proportion refers to the percentage of adults, out of 22, who included reference to the theme in their interview.

focused on adults' perceptions of picture books with words were also derived from the interview data. Each of these themes was included in interviews of at least 30 percent of the adults. These themes were "read the words" and "experience is structured." These results provide suggestion that for many parents, the text is salient when sharing a picture book with words with their child. An illustration of each theme, using the adult study participants' own words, and the proportion of the sample which included each theme in their interview, is included in table 1.

The findings from the interviews provide suggestions for avenues through which library staff may encourage parents to try picture books without words. Notably, 73 percent of the adults in our study indicated that they never or hardly ever shared wordless picture books with their child at home. Key messages to parents and other caregivers could include

- wordless picture books give the child the chance to develop their own story;
- shared storytelling can help develop the child's language skills; and
- picture books without words can help to develop the child's creativity in storytelling.

Library displays and booklists of wordless picture books may help to promote such resources, and they may be well-accepted by diverse language learners and low-literacy adults as well. This is particularly useful in communities in which patrons speak a wide range of languages at home.

Most public libraries do not have the budget or space for extensive picture book collections in many languages; picture books without words can supplement the library's holdings of linguistically-diverse picture books. In her 2016 article in *Children and Libraries*, Jennifer Gibson maintains that open-ended questions posed to the second language learner in the

context of wordless picture books allows the child to respond to the story in their own words and also potentially build confidence in the new language.¹³

Wordless Books in Storytime

Although parents and teachers are target populations for encouraging use of wordless picture books with children, librarians can also use textless picture books with children in storytime. This can normalize their use as librarians provide for parents and caregivers a model of how to encourage children to talk about wordless or nearly wordless picture books.

Sharing books with wordless sequences, such as Eric Carle's *Do You Want to Be My Friend?* Eric Rohmann's *My Friend Rabbit* and Jon Klassen's *This Is Not My Hat* is a good way to ease into using wordless books in storytime. Many of the questioning techniques described above are helpful when reading wordless books in a group setting, especially asking children to describe the action or to predict future events in the story.

Adult or child descriptions of events have the added benefit of ensuring that children who are less skilled at decoding wordless picture books can keep up with the rest of the group. Storytime groups can also reconstruct the events of the book after the last page, which gives children additional practice in constructing a narrative.

Many parents and preschoolers may not be familiar with wordless picture books, but libraries are the perfect context to introduce families to these rich works. Libraries can provide displays, prepare lists, and model sharing these picture books with young children in storytime.

In sharing these books, parents give their children the opportunity to develop their visual literacy, learn new vocabulary, and consider the thoughts and feelings of story characters.

Moreover, the results of this study suggest that creative, joint storytelling between parents and their young children can be facilitated by sharing wordless picture books.

Parents and children can co-construct a story that generally follows the book's illustrations or goes beyond them, connecting the illustrations with the child's life, or even to a rocket ship that could be just off the page. &

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