

Repeat after Me!

Repetition and Early Literacy Development

BETSY DIAMANT-COHEN, TESS PRENDERGAST, AND CHRISTY ESTROVITZ



What happens when preschoolers are introduced to a book that they really like? They want their parents and caregivers to read it to them over and over again, of course!

Research about reading to children has repeatedly demonstrated this phenomenon, although researchers are not sure why some children develop such strong attachments to particular books. What seems clear, though, is that children's preferences drive learning, and repeated exposure to a story can deliver benefits in several developmental domains, including vocabulary and motor areas.¹

After the first few hundred readings, parents start to wonder if their child will ever get bored of hearing the same story, since the parents are certainly tired of it. But the preschooler will simply ask for it to be read again and again and again. Since nothing in the world happens exactly the same way twice, each time the book is read, it is slightly different. And each time the same story is read aloud, the child's connection with the story grows.² Research demonstrates that children benefit most from read-alouds that actively involve them,³ yet a child hearing a book only once has much less to say about it than a child who has experienced the same book in multiple ways.

Librarians and other early-literacy-program facilitators know that it takes a few weeks before everyone learns the words and actions to the opening and closing songs. We usually sing the same opening and closing songs to give kids a sense of the structure and routine. But if we consider that repetition is actually the developmental strategy that children take to learn new things, then we may wish to consider also repeating the books and stories we present during our storytime sets.

A few weeks before the 2012 ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim, California, a question arose on the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) electronic discussion list regarding the value of repetition in children's library programs. A lively discussion ensued, and participants were invited to join the Preschool Services Discussion Group at the conference for a conversation about repetition of books and stories in preschool storytime.

Sponsored by ALSC and run by Sue McCleaf Nespeca and Linda Ernst, the Preschool Services Discussion Group operates an electronic discussion list as well an in-person discussion group at each ALA Annual Conference. Diamant-Cohen, one of the authors of the forthcoming book *Transforming Preschool Storytime* from Neal-Schuman, agreed to facilitate this discussion, and about fifteen people joined her for a brainstorming session.



Dr. Betsy Diamant-Cohen (far left) is a children's programming consultant and trainer who has worked in children's museums and public libraries for more than thirty years. She has an MLS and a doctorate in communications design. **Tess Prendergast**, (middle) a children's librarian at Vancouver (BC) Public Library for fifteen years, has just begun working on her PhD in early literacy at the University of British Columbia. **Christy Estrovitz** (left) is the Early Literacy Specialist with the San Francisco Public Library and member of the Every Child Ready to Read Oversight Committee.

Diamant-Cohen began by putting the practice of repetition into context by telling the group that some teachers are already using the method of repetition with variety in preschool classrooms across the United States. For example, one successful technique used in special education classrooms features one book for two weeks and recreates the entire classroom based on that book to give the students multisensory experiences with the book.⁴ Circle time, snack time, nature corner, dress-up corner, recess, math activities, and music time all are tweaked to have some type of connection with the featured book. During the two-week period, children have the opportunity to experience the book on multiple levels using all of their senses. Instead of simply hearing the book being read once and briefly viewing the illustrations, the repeated exposure to the book, combined with carefully designed purposeful play activities, enables the child to integrate the various learning opportunities found in this particular book across various developmental domains, such as language skills, motor skills, and social skills.

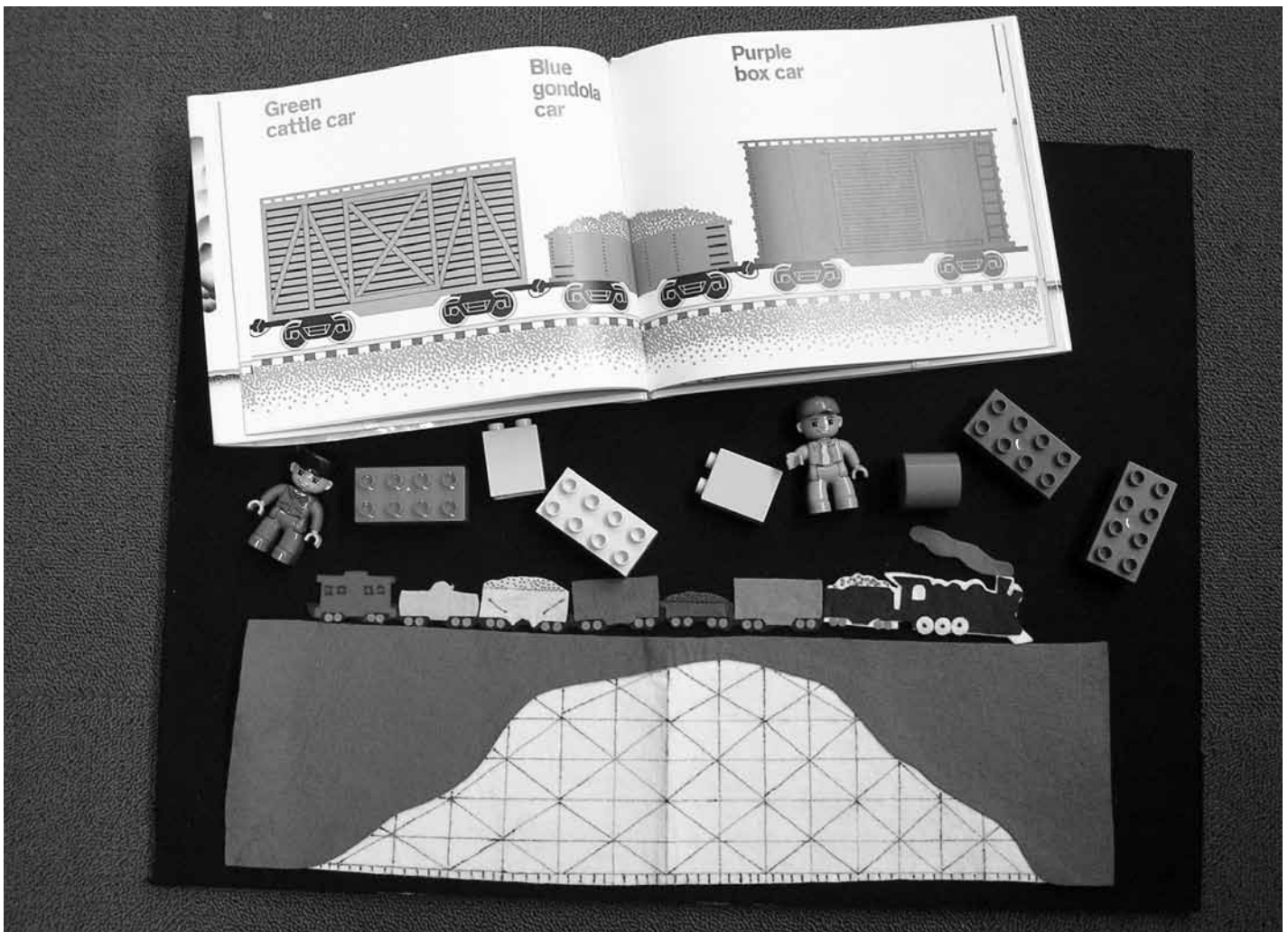
In addition, with the revised Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) at your library®, play is identified as one of the five elements essential to the development of early literacy skills. Storytime is the perfect platform to embellish program planning to include weekly activities that extend the learning experience

surrounding one book through playing, singing, talking, reading, and perhaps writing, too. You will see many of the new ECRR tenets reflected in the ideas presented below. (For more information about ECRR, visit www.everychildreadytoread.org).

The conversation started with Diamant-Cohen's brief review of the standard format for a preschool storytime. Then the group discussed this format's applicability to different learning styles, multiple intelligences, and theories of child development. A short explanation about the value of repetition was followed by the hypothesis that preschool storytime could become even more developmentally beneficial if facilitators used more repetition strategies to extend the learning opportunities that present themselves in so many of the great books shared at storytime.

Diamant-Cohen then demonstrated a model of this approach to storytime using Robert Munsch's *Angela's Airplane*. After she read the entire book aloud, she discussed and brainstormed with the group the many ways to use that same book during subsequent storytime programs.

Attendees at this discussion group were then asked to focus on the book *Freight Train* by Donald Crews and to assume that they were going to use this story as a focus for six consecutive



This flannelboard is one way to present a book.

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weeks at a preschool storytime program at a public library. Participants were told to assume that about half of the children, all aged between three and five years old, are new to storytime on any given week and that the other half are regular attendees. In a group of about twenty, participants were also asked to assume that at least one or two of the children have a delay in one or more areas of development and several children are new to the English language.

After a straightforward, traditional, oral read-aloud the first week, the idea was to present the book in different ways for each subsequent week, touching on a different “intelligence” or developmental skill area each time. A short brainstorming session followed, and in a short time, the group came up with the following ideas for repeating elements of *Freight Train* over a set of preschool storytime programs.

Idea 1 (for week one)

Read the book using traditional read-through, read-aloud method.

Idea 2

Use colors as theme when sharing the book. In preparation for an interactive component, the librarian would use an Ellison or Accucut machine to make die-cut train shapes using a different color for each train car. One complete train with a car of each color would be put in an envelope, and each child would be given an envelope when entering storytime. During the program, the librarian would reread the book and ask the children to pick and hold up the matching color/train (“the red caboose,” “the black engine”) at the appropriate time.

Idea 3

Sing the book. Make up your own tune and sing the text. In addition to being fun, singing the story slows down the sound and helps children hear the smaller sounds in words, which is great for phonological awareness. (At the session, someone demonstrated singing the book to the tune of the theme song from the TV show *The Beverly Hillbillies!*) This works well with one- and two-year-olds as well as older preschoolers.

Idea 4

Use a flannelboard. Before the program, make each train car out of a different color of felt. Then put the pieces on the flannelboard at the appropriate time as you read, tell, or sing the story.

Idea 5

Add new colors beyond primary colors; expand by introducing more sophisticated ones, such as fuchsia, magenta, violet, and bronze. Use these colors to enhance the children’s vocabulary.

An activity related to storytime might be color mixing of paint to demonstrate the color spectrum.

Idea 6

Pair the book with a nonfiction title such as *Trains* by Gail Gibbons. Talk about containers, shapes, and characteristics of the car. Ask open-ended questions to help expand a child’s general knowledge about the world of trains, such as, What does it hold? Where did the cargo come from? What is the purpose of the car? Where is it going? What’s inside the freight train? You can personalize the experience by asking, “What would you put inside the boxcar?”

Freight Train can also be connected to nonfiction books that relate to possible cargo, such as agriculture. This kind of activity builds general knowledge as well as vocabulary skills.

Idea 7

Model interactive strategies for making the media experience a rich literacy experience. Demonstrate an app to introduce age-appropriate media. Hold an iPad app day. Visit www.littleelit.com for ideas about incorporating iPad apps into group storytime sessions. Consult the International Children’s Digital Library (icdl.org) for a range of videos. Use a smartboard or overhead screen and projector if possible. Focus on the interactive elements of the app. You can also use this as an opportunity to demonstrate to adults (early childhood educators or parents) how to begin assessing quality and appropriateness of apps for kids.

Idea 8

Introduce STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Math) and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) concepts by talking about force, mixing colors, and cause-and-effect. Focus on physics using words such as “pulling” and “pushing.” Discuss the illustrations that involve steam, clouds, and temperature; these are all linked to science concepts that can be drawn out by using *Freight Train* as a jumping-off point to introduce common core to the young scientists.

Idea 9

Incorporate a Lego and/or Duplo building activity. Use *Freight Train* to inspire 3D, kid-designed creations. Integrate car play into the story. Tell the story while having the children act it out.

Idea 10

Use *Freight Train* to illustrate how children learn to read from left to right, the same direction that the train is moving in the book. Notice how the printed text progresses from phrases to full

sentences to tell the story. Ask children to contribute to the story by saying part of the phrase and inviting them to fill in the blanks.

Idea 11

Incorporate gross motor movements by acting out the train story. Demonstrate ways that moving arms can imitate moving train wheels and make chugging leg motions as you sing the “choo-choo” song while chugging around the room.

Idea 12

Foster fine motor skills and create opportunities to **practice turn-taking** by giving each child a turn to hold a felt train piece and to place it on the flannelboard as you retell selected parts (or the entire story). Manipulating flannel requires dexterity and focus.

Idea 13

Group Art Activity. Hold a “Build a Train Day.” Ask parents and children to bring big cardboard boxes and small boxes, such as tissues boxes and egg cartons, to build a community train. Have everyone make a large train sculpture together using these found art materials, and decorate it with paint and tape. Invite people to bring refreshments and turn this into a family building party. Place the sculpture on display where all library visitors can see it.

Idea 14

Create a film with props and costumes. Build a trestle out of boxes, and make a tunnel by placing a blanket over a table of some chairs in a train formation. Turn some of the bigger cardboard boxes into train costumes by cutting a big hole in the top for heads and one on each side for arms. Tell the story while children wear the train costumes and act it out; arrange to have someone videotape the activity to show later. Have the children take turns being the engine, train cars, and the caboose. Utilize teen volunteers.

Idea 15

Encourage parent-child interaction. Ask families to bring a train set from home, if they have one (have spares on hand). Sing a song that involves interaction between two people. (For example, if singing “The Eency Weency Spider,” one person could be the spider and the other could be the waterspout. The spider could climb up the waterspout by gently walking fingers up the other’s arm and tickling when being washed out by the rain.) Encourage parent and child to take turns being the engine and the train.

Idea 16

Read or tell the story backward. This more complicated way to present a book helps children understand the components

of books and reading. If you’re doing a flannelboard retelling, tell the story backward (caboose at the front, for example), and ask the children to help with placement of flannel pieces as well as retelling. Pair *Freight Train* with *The End by whom?* for a backward-themed storytime. Start with the closing, end with the greeting, and wear your clothes backward.

Idea 17

Practice Prepositions! Reinforce the proper use of verbs and prepositions such as front, back, behind, between, inside, and under.

Idea 18

Use colored and colorful scarves that match the colors shown in the book. Turn *Freight Train* into a musical activity with free-for-all dancing to train tunes, transportation songs and songs about colors. Some examples are, “Do the Locomotion,” “Little Red Caboose,” “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,” “Flight of the Bumblebee,” and “Put a Little Color on You,” but there are many more you can use.

Idea 19

Play the Freeze Game. Using the same music, read the book aloud, but ask the children to dance when the train is moving and the music is playing. However, when the music stops, that means the train has pulled into a station and everyone has to freeze. Freeze games build self-regulation and listening skills. This activity would work well with both large and small groups.

If you have a smaller group, expand the game by asking the children to use their bodies to become something that is being transported by the train when they freeze. As you walk around and tap each “frozen” child gently, they can tell the group what they are. If space allows, you can also play freeze tag.

Idea 20

Another freeze game. Read the book aloud and ask the children to be a train, but instead of playing and stopping music, use a stop/go traffic sign. When the sign is green, the train chugs along, but when the red side shows, the train must stop. This is a great way for children to have fun by following directions and paying attention.

Idea 21

Link colors of train cars to colors of clothing. Ask the children what colors they are wearing, and sing a song that requires them to stand up if they are wearing a particular color. Distribute colored scarves and repeat, first with the colors they are wearing and then with the colors of the train cars.

Recommended Websites

- nancymusic.com. Check Nancy Stewart's website for music, ideas, and free downloads.
- wiki.kcls.org/tellmeastory. Consult King County Library's Tell Me a Story storytime companion for parents, caregivers, and librarians.
- perpetualpreschool.com. Get inspired by themes, songs, crafts, games, learning activities, and more.
- thebestkidsbooksite.com. Visit the interactive media channel where children's books, apps, crafts, and web resources intersect.

Idea 22

Choose an articulate child or group of children to tell the story to the group while you hold up the book and turn the pages.

Idea 23

Channel your inner engineer through dress-up time at the library. Pull together some simple costumes using hats, nametags, and a few props. Train personnel can be an engineer, conductor, railway worker, ticket agent, porter, ticket collector, and passengers. Make tickets ahead of time out of construction paper and act out an expanded version of the story: a group of passengers going for a trip on the freight train. Narrate the story as the children act it out. If possible, have someone film the story and upload it to the library's website.

Idea 24

Since this is a good partnership opportunity with the local public transportation service, invite your local engineer to visit storytime. Ask if he can bring ticket stubs, train schedules, or any other realia connected with train travel.

As you see here, just one book generated twenty-four different ideas for harnessing the learning opportunities that presented themselves. Not only do children benefit from being given opportunities to develop skills across several different domains, but facilitators also benefit from the creative work that this strategy entails. It is great fun to think about picturebooks in this multimodal way and to see the possibilities that present themselves that one can channel to support the development of the whole child.

Choosing new books to use at preschool storytime each week is relatively easy. Using the same book but presenting it in different ways often requires more thought, preparation, and creativity,

which makes planning for this type of storytime more time-consuming and difficult. The discussion-group participants shared suggestions of useful resources for planning (see sidebar).

Brainstorming together and sharing ideas with other librarians was exhilarating. Since each person has a different way of looking at the world, the rich variety of creative ways to present the book suggested by the participants touched on different domains of healthy early child development and reflected the diversity of the group. In addition to exploring the value of repetition with variety and brainstorming ways to implement the theory of presenting the same book in six or more consecutive preschool storytimes, simply sharing ideas with fellow librarians was wonderful.

The ideas themselves were exciting, but the best part was benefiting from librarians sharing their expertise with one another. We all have a store of knowledge from our experiences, and building on that collective experience was a treat. We invite you to join the electronic discussion list or the in-person discussion so that your voice can also be heard. ☺

References

1. Karen Wilkinson, "Children's Favorite Books," *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 3, no. 3 (2003): 275–301.
2. David B. Yaden, "Understanding Stories Through Repeated Read-Alouds: How Many Does It Take?" *Reading Teacher* 41, no. 6 (1998): 556–60.
3. L. M. McGee and Judith Schickedanz, "Repeated Interactive Read-Alouds in Preschool and Kindergarten," *Reading Rockets* (2012), accessed July 14, 2012, www.readingrockets.org/article/16287. Previously published in *The Reading Teacher* 60, no. 8 (2007): 742–51, doi: 10.1598/RT.60.8.4.
4. Toni Linder, *Read, Play, and Learn! Storybook Activities for Young Children: A Teacher's Guide* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brooks, 1999).

