

**Promoting Language and Literacy: Building Bridges from Classroom to Home**  
**Front Porch Series Broadcast Calls**

Gail Joseph: Hello, and welcome to the Front Porch Series. I'm Gail Joseph, Co-director of the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning. And on behalf of my colleagues here at NCQTL and the Office of Head Start, it is my pleasure to welcome you to another 45 minutes on the front porch. The Front Porch Series of broadcast conference calls provides us an opportunity to gather, really as a community of practice in Head Start and Early Head Start, and learn from national experts from around the country on topics related to high-quality teaching and learning for young children.

We are so pleased to be joined today by Dr. Kevin Cole. I'm just going to tell you a little bit about him. Dr. Kevin Cole has served as a senior researcher at the Washington Research Institute, as well as being research faculty here at the University of Washington and a principal investigator of several projects. These projects include a model demonstration to develop language, play, and early book awareness facilitation videos and materials, and these are – have been evaluated and available in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Korean, and Tagalog for children in the birth-to-four age range.

Today, we've asked Dr. Cole to present an overview of some of the simple research-based strategies that a parent can use at home to foster their child's language acquisition and reading skills; and many of these strategies can be used in the classroom as well, and so we'll ask him to talk about that. So as always, you can type in questions throughout the presentation into the little question bar on the platform there, and we'll make sure that we have some time at the end of our call today to have Dr. Cole address some of your questions. So with that, I'm going to turn it over to Dr. Cole.

Dr. Kevin Cole: Hi. Thank you, Gail. Today we're going to talk a little bit about using books as ways to facilitate language and emergent literacy. This will be primarily appropriate for kids who are – from birth to three-and-a-half or so; and we may have some suggestions for kids who are a little bit older, but developmentally, birth to three-and-a-half is the target range. And basically, our goal today is to give you some tools to help parents help their kids and also to share with other staff to get kids in your programs to talk a little bit more, listen more, and understand better.

The other thing is to help you be comfortable training other staff. And other staff could include people within your program, but in addition, sometimes high school students can volunteer in programs; sometimes you even get those really smart, mature sixth graders who can do tons of great stuff. And what we're going to share with you are techniques that they could use pretty easily with young kids.

You're going to like this. We want to make your work easier because you have a lot to do. So we're not going to say, "All you need to do is take a 12-week program and read these 457 pages to do this." We know that doesn't work as well. We'll talk a little bit about why the methods around talking about books work. We won't go into too much research, but if you have questions about specific research findings, I'd be happy to try to answer those – or Gail possibly could. And – but we'll just go through a little bit of

information about why it's important to get kids talking about books. Then, we'll share some very specific language facilitation strategies – [Clears throat] Excuse me – that are easy to use.

They're things that you're already doing, very, very likely; that most of your staff are probably already doing; and that parents sometimes are doing. And so, this won't be brand new to you at all, but it'll be ideas on how to share this with other folks. So, we'll present a little information about comfortable ways to share information about talking about books with parents and staff and about some of the questions that come up pretty frequently when you do that. Our overall goal, of course, is to encourage language and emergent literacy development in both English and the – the child's first language for younger children.

We have additional goals, as you can imagine. First is, we know you can't add too much for parents or for teachers. This has to fit into their lives. A very smart guy, Dr. Sam Odom, who I believe is at Indiana now, and his colleagues had a great model. It was called the impact model, and what it said was your outcome is based on two things: how good your methods are and whether people will use them. And if you're doing things that people – that work really well but that a parent can't do, it doesn't make much sense.

So, what we'll talk about fits into parents' lives pretty easily. It has to be fairly easy to learn. Again, a 12-week course at the university is probably not going to happen for most parents or most staff. So these are things you can share with parents and have them using them in about an hour. So, I hope that's not copyrighted. That sounds like, "Your eyeglasses will be ready in about an hour." "Your parents will be ready in about an hour." But it's true, and people have done this, and it really works.

The other thing that's a major goal for us is it has to work with all kids, including children with disabilities. So sometimes in your program you have kids on the fast track, sometimes you'll have kids who really need a lot of extra work to feel comfortable talking, and the methods around books work with both – both groups – all the groups.

Also, it has to be culturally appropriate. We don't want to ask parents to do something that seems really stupid to them. Does that make sense? And cultures are different in how they talk about kids, but we've found that most of these techniques work fairly well across different cultures. We have some studies in Korean, we've used the techniques with First People groups, and nobody's said, "Gosh, I'd never do this." So if you think that's the case, please type us a message about it, because we need to know what works and what doesn't.

The other thing is it has to be developmentally appropriate. Head Start finally kind of taught the academics what "developmentally appropriate" means, and we're getting it. We're working at it. So, we made sure that looking at books was developmentally appropriate. And let's talk about that a little bit.

The basic idea to share with parents is that using books is a developmental process. So kids start out – if it's a baby, they're going to listen. They may orient towards you, look at your face. They're probably not

going to point or nod their head to agree with you, but even babies will listen to you when you read. Kids mouth books, and that's okay up to a certain point. You know, if pages are missing, then you've got to worry. But a lot of books are made appropriately for kids to chew on, and they'll do that.

Kids will manipulate books. They won't always use them the way you do. They want to put them on their head; they'll open them. Those tough – tough books are good for little kids. You don't want to give them something that's really special when they're really young, obviously, because they'll manipulate the books, and that's what they're supposed to be doing. And you can share with parents that that's okay; that's one of the things you can do. So, that the child can actually hold the book and not always have the adult holding the book. Then, kids will point if they're interested in something, even before – way before they're talking. They can just point to the picture.

And there's more developmental steps. There are lots of developmental steps. Kids will start turning pages. They may not go the right direction, but they'll turn pages. They may turn five at once. And then it gets pretty exciting. They'll start imitating what you say, saying a few words. They'll sometimes initiate a topic. Even if they're not talking, they may point to something they're interested in.

Kids will answer questions... sometimes. And we'll talk about what good questions are a little bit and what aren't good questions. If – if you follow the child's lead and talk about things they're interested in, then they'll answer questions. One thing I read, and I – I don't have a research citation on this, but kids under two, some kids don't know that convention of adults asking them questions that the adult already knows the answer to. And some kids are kind of smart at 18 months or 20 months, and if an adult comes up and says – points to something red and says, "What color is this?" sometimes the kids will just look at them like they're nuts. It's like, "I don't want to talk to you if you don't know what red is and you're an adult." So, answering questions and asking questions are things that kids'll do.

Kids will make comments. And this is one of the key things. When your kids start making comments about books, you can really do a lot of good things. And so, if you can tune parents in to when kids are making comments, they will really be able to encourage the kids to talk.

More developmental steps. At the upper levels, when kids are three/four, they start – possibly before that – start to understand that the text in the book relates to words. So, that's the beginning of – one of the beginning steps of literacy. They see those squiggles and they know that that means you're supposed to talk. You know, and sometimes when you're really tired at night with your kid and you start to shorten what the book is, sometimes they know. "Nope, there's a lot of squiggles, I want to hear a lot of talking."

So, that's one of the key – key features that kids understand that that print means something, or start to understand it. They start knowing how a book really starts out, that you start at the beginning and you turn the pages. And then the upper levels, they start understanding that sounds are related to letters. So that's about the highest level that these techniques will take you, and there are lots of other things that will go from that point.

So if you're going to write anything down, here's what you should write down, the heart of the method. First, follow the child's lead. What a new concept. You know, just very, very basic. In using books, pick the book the child's interested in, let them go at the speed they want, follow the child's lead.

The second thing, and this is probably the hardest to share with parents, is to make a comment and just wait. And sometimes you have to wait a little while, even counting to five – one, two, three, four, five – in your head, not out loud. Makes sense. So if you say something in the book, like the child looks at the picture of Clifford the Big Red Dog, and you say, "Boy, that's a big dog," then the child can talk if they want to, but they don't have to. So, they can do it when they're comfortable.

Next thing is to ask questions and wait. Again, give the child time to think about it and talk, especially if the child is not as comfortable with language or is learning English as a second language. And this is a fun one. Respond by adding a little more. So when the child says "dog," you can say, "Yeah, big red dog. That Clifford's a big dog." So, you take what they said and you just build on it. If you're a speech language pathologist, you say recasts, expansions, and expatiations. But what regular people say is respond by adding a little bit more.

Let's talk about the research just a little bit, just so you know we're not making this stuff up. The way adults talk to kids makes a huge difference in how they learn language and get ready for school and get ready to read. And then, parents can use these ideas with just a little bit of support. Again, have your parents ready in about an hour. And the effects last.

A colleague of ours, Dr. Young Sook Lim, did her dissertation on using these techniques with Korean parents of kids who were typically developing. She did a training in about an hour and she got great results, and that was published in a bilingual journal. She did a follow-up study a year later, and she asked the parents to come in and use these techniques with their kids again, and the parents said, "Oh, no, I've forgotten about it. We don't use that. We don't do that anymore." She said, "Well, go ahead and try it."

And so she had one group that had the training and one group that didn't, and what she found out was the parents who had the training were still doing it, they had just internalized it. So, they were still using the techniques and the kids were still talking more, using more vocabulary, and so on. So it sticks with just a little bit of training, and that's – that's a nice thing. It's – it's unusual to find something that works for a long time after you do an hour or so of training. It's really unusual. And the cool thing is the methods work with kids who learn quickly and kids who need extra help.

In fact, some of the training – or, excuse me, some of the research that was originally done by Grover Whitehurst and his colleagues, the first study was done in Scarsdale, New York, which is sort of like – I don't know what place you have, but it's where everybody has two BMWs and – and the kids already have all the toys they want and tons of books. And they gave training to part of the parents and randomly assigned part of the parents to not getting the specific training. And even the kids who were

on the super fast track were using more vocabulary and longer sentences by the end of the training. So this works with kids who learn really fast.

We replicated it, Philip Dale and colleagues at the University of Washington, with kids with disabilities and found similar results; that when you train parents of kids with disabilities to use these techniques, the kids use longer sentences and have better vocabulary. So, you don't have to separate your kids out into the blue bird and red bird group to – to do the training.

Basic background. Hart and Risley, in a book called "Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children," found that there's a huge difference in exposure to language for young children. And it didn't vary by race; it didn't vary by religion; it varied by socioeconomic status. So, parents who had more money tended to talk to their kids more. I don't know what's causal there, but those are parents that you need to be aware of and work with. What they also found was that children's performance in language at age three predicted their language at ages nine and 10, which means the ability to read, the ability to do narratives, to succeed in school.

I think I might've skipped one here. Oh, another just overview about the importance of doing these kinds of things with – with kids at home. Marilyn Jager Adams, in a great book, "Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print," found that middle-class kids – again, we're talking about socioeconomics being important – come to kindergarten with 1,000 to 3,000 hours of experience with language, storybooks, magnet letters on the refrigerator, that kind of thing. One thousand hours is about the same as a year of full-time kindergarten, so you can see a huge difference when parents talk with their kids at home and use books and their readiness to perform in kindergarten.

Here are the procedures. Here's what folks need to do in the classroom and at home. Look at books with kids. One-to-one is best, or very small groups. And you can kind of figure out the reason for this. Kids who are fast talkers will talk, and kids who aren't fast talkers will sit and listen. And so, if you have a one-to-one, you can let that child who's a little bit slower to respond – because maybe they're a little shyer, maybe they don't know English as well – you can give them a chance to – to still get a few words in.

Also, follow the child's lead on the length of the session. This is important; if the child is done, let him be done. It's up to you. If the child wants to read 50 books at night to keep from going to bed, that could be another story. But this is really important to me. When we were doing our research originally at the U of W with kids with disabilities, we had to have a research protocol, because you always do, and we told parents, "Do this for about 15 minutes a day." We had one mom come back, and she said, "Well, sometimes there were tears, but we did it 15 minutes a day." And so, I feel really bad about that. And so, I'll let you know, don't do that. Let the child kind of pick the amount of time.

Let kids use the books the way they want. So if the child wants to start at the back, let them start at the back. If they want to read the same book over and over, let them do that. Sometimes they just want to hear you read it, and that's okay. Sometimes they don't want to hear you read it, and that's okay. When my son was about three-and-a-half, at about the age where he really knew that that text on there

meant there was a story and he heard the book and he knew the story and he was past just wanting to talk about it, he really also wanted to hear the story. I was doing my fancy new techniques of talking about it, making comments, and he just looked at me and said, "Dad, read." And so, he taught me pretty well. So let kids use books the way they want.

Picking books. What's a good book? What the child wants. I know one teacher who had a book, she said the student loved this book, but it was about airplane parts. And so – but that's what he wanted, so they started with that. So she talked about fuselage and aileron and everything else, and then later they moved on to other things. But if the child wants that, that's the right book.

Lots of action pictures and less text tends to be much better. Sometimes, like, the Disney books – "Lion King" and things – have pictures, but the pictures don't relate to the text and there's way too much text on the – the page for a lot of kids. So in general, lots of action pictures, less text. But you always go back to the first one, whatever the child wants. If they want "Lion King," look at "Lion King." Concrete rather than abstract pictures. So a beautiful book like "Arrow to the Sun," you know, one of the best Caldecott books, may not be good for younger kids. They're beautiful, but they're kind of hard to talk about.

So in our experience, parents had a lot of really good questions, which isn't shocking at all, and they'd ask things like – I love this one – "Does this mean I shouldn't read to my child?" Never! Stop it! Don't do that! [Laughter] No, I mean, of course, read to your kid. But when they're younger, you read a little, talk a lot. When they're older, you read a lot, talk a lot. But please don't say that Dr. Cole said you should never read to your child again.

"When's my child ready for talking about books?" We asked teachers this and we asked parents, and we got some great answers. Some people started out saying, "Well, you know, when they start talking." And other people said, "Well, even before that, you know, when they're – when they're babbling and things." And some people said, "Well, when they're born." And we had one mom who said, "I talked to him in utero. I just looked down and talked loud." And I thought, "Okay, there's – I don't know any evidence for that, but it's probably just fine."

What kind of books are best, we talked about a little bit. Mainly, whatever the child likes is the – the very best book. "When should you look at books?" This is a fun thing to talk to your – your own group about, because Head Start folks have some incredibly good ideas about how to get materials together and – and when to look at books. Toilet training is a fabulous time because you've got a captive audience; in the car; whenever the kid wants to, of course, but you can tuck books into a lot of different situations. You know, giving parents book bags for the car or for the bus is a nice – a nice strategy. So, really anytime you can squeeze it in and you're interested and the child's interested is a good time to look at books.

More questions. "How long should we look at books?" I think we talked about that. I put it here twice because I feel so guilty about that one kid where the mom made him read.

"What if my child wants to skip pages or start at the back?" That's just fine. That's not a problem at all. Let him do it. You can model, of course, starting from the front and going through the back, but let them use it the way they want.

"What if my child doesn't feel like it, or I don't?" If you don't, that's okay, too. If your child doesn't want to look at books, don't do it. If you don't feel like it, somebody else can do it. Older sibling – you know, dads can even do this. We had – as a culturally appropriate kind of issue, we had a bunch of experts tell us, "Hispanic fathers don't do this. I'm sorry, but Hispanic fathers don't do this." We heard that over and over again. And then when we were working with folks, we had some dads who were fabulous. And so, somebody told me, you know, hearing cultural – cultural relevance ideas, it's kind of like sniffing perfume: you want to sniff it and think about it, but you don't want to drink it straight out of the bottle. You know, you really have to judge people by who they are. So if – if you don't feel like it, have your partner do it, you know, have one of the kids do it.

More parent questions. This is one of my favorites. "Do I have to be a good reader to do this?" Sometimes it's better if you're not, because talking about a book is really different than reading the book, and sometimes parents who aren't comfortable with reading skills are the best people to talk about books. Sometimes people read too much and don't talk enough, in my opinion, and so we're kind of mean to them. We give them those books that don't have any words, like "Snowy Day," and then they have to talk about it, and they get more comfortable just making comments about the book. But, nope, you don't have to be a good reader at all to do it. In fact, sometimes you're better if you're not.

"Can other family members help?" Yes, absolutely. Grandmas and grandpas, of course, are wonderful at this. They seem to be better than lots of people, because they have experience, I guess. Older siblings can do a great job with this. You know, even fathers can do this. [Laughter] I say that – could you hear sarcasm in my voice? I hope you can. Fathers are great at this.

"I don't have a lot of money for new books right now. What can I do?" This, again, is, I think, a real strength of Head Start community. They taught us a lot about how you go about getting books if you don't have a lot of money. Go to the library; trade books with friends; go to used book stores, garage sales, yard sales, all that; make your own. And you guys have lots and lots of terrific ideas about using photographs and things to make up books, and then it's about the child and they love it. So it doesn't have to be, you know, a \$50 first edition of some book. You can do lots of other things.

Bilingual issues come up quite a bit. And they say, "I want my child to learn English. Shouldn't I use English at home?" There's some research on this and there's, I think, some just common sense on this. If you – if English is not a good language for you, if it's not your best language, you should use your best language at home. And the reason for that – two things: 1) if your English isn't a great model, then you're teaching your child with a model of a language that isn't great; the other part of it is it kind of says to your child, well, our culture and our language isn't as important. So if Spanish is your best language, speak Spanish. And that's – you know, some fairly good data on that. I can't think of the name

of the Canadian researcher who's done some work on that. It'll come to me later. But there's – there's some good information on that. So, use your best language at home.

"Will it be hard for my kid to learn one language at home and another at school?" Jim Creshin, that's his name. Will it be hard for my kid to learn one language at home, another at school? Kids are fairly adept at doing this. They can really switch back and forth. In fact, some families where one parent speaks one language and the other parent speaks another language, the kids know what to do when that comes up. So in most cases, it's not hard for a child to learn one language at home and another at school. The nice thing is bilingual kids also do better at vocabulary tests, they do better on IQ tests, they do better in school. It's a great gift to be bilingual. So, it's just fine to use your best language at home.

For parent engagement, there are some great materials at the National Center on Parent and Family Community Engagement. We've been talking primarily about what you might do in a Head Start classroom, but this – this site is a great resource for, in general, learning about how to work with parents, and a lot of good material on bilingual and multicultural kinds of issues. So, I would recommend that you look that up if you don't already have that. And I think that's about our last slide here.