A favorite book of Julia, age three, was *The Little Engine That Could*. When her teacher asked her if she could eat nicely with the class next door, she replied, “I think I can, I think I can.” As Jenny tramped across a bridge on a bike, she called to her mom, “Hey, mom, trip trap trip trap; I hope there’s no ugly troll down there.” One of her favorite bedtime stories at age four was “The Three Billy Goats Gruff.”

Young children have individual styles of response to books (Purves, 1972) based on their previous experiences, cultural backgrounds, developmental levels, and personalities. Children from varied cultural groups have distinct ways of taking meaning from the environment in general and from literary events in particular (Heath, 1983; Scollon and Scollon, 1981), impacting the way they respond to literacy activities when they enter day care or preschool. Some children in our classrooms come from homes where little language is directed at young children and stories are told orally, rather than read aloud. In some homes children are read concept and information books almost exclusively, while fantasy books and folktales are avoided. Children from other homes are read a wide variety of books and are encouraged to incorporate the language of books in their play and daily activities (Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith, 1984). Parents in these homes provide props and support enactment, drawing and writing, and other responses to literature. When these children enter school, they continue to incorporate the language and concepts of books into their learning experiences. Examples from one study (Halsall and Green, 1988) with children from homes where books and literacy activities had a high priority showed that these children engaged in book play, word play, story enactment, art, and writing in response to books. These responses have been associated with later school achievement in general, and with reading achievement in particular.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) *Developmentally Appropriate Practices* can be summarized:

Reading is essential to the development of the whole child. One of the most important premises of human development is that all domains of development — physical, social, emotional, and cognitive — are integrated. (Bredenkamp, 1988).

Literature integrates all domains of development in a way that is both meaningful and appealing to young children. Social interaction is enhanced when children engage in pretend play in response to literature, read to each other, and share books. Physical development is promoted when children use their bodies to coordinate the actions of book characters during enactment. Emotional development is supported through story sharing with peers, parents, and teachers. This, in turn, builds self-esteem because children see positive models in
books and learn to cope with new situations and deal with emotions through the characters they see in books. For example, some children work toward resolving their fantasies and fears by choosing certain books. A book about conquering monsters would be appropriate for a child who is working through fears of the night (Bauman, 1987). Arraine, age two-and-a-half, comforted a doll she was putting to bed by saying, "I think there’s a nightmare in my closet, but that’s OK, he’s nice." She had recently heard There’s a Nightmare in My Closet (Mayer, 1968). In the cognitive domain, children develop symbolic representation, learn to solve problems, and develop concepts and language skills.

Book experiences provide children with motivation for learning to read, opportunities for prediction based on language patterns and story structure, and opportunities to learn print conventions (Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith, 1984). The skills that children develop naturally through early book experiences translate to symbolic representational skills as they advance to more complex reading tasks. Early experiences provide a model for communication skills such as oral storytelling and later writing.

Children come to school with a wide range of experiences with literature and individual styles of response to literature. The teacher is crucial in expanding a young child’s repertoire of responses to literature. Three observational studies over a two-year period demonstrated that children from literate homes respond to books in a variety of ways (Halsall & Green, 1988). The parents and teachers of these children were skilled observers who adjusted their interactions to the individual styles of the children. The results of these studies support the importance of teacher practices in facilitating emergent literacy. The following teacher practices can be integrated into the daily activities of any quality early-childhood program. Good observational skills will be useful to teachers in personalizing their practices for individual children.

Cognitive and Language Responses

Expand children’s language and cognitive processes through literature.

Teachers can greatly enhance literature experiences for young children by providing children with meaningful encounters with books and storytelling. Teachers can:

• Ask open-ended questions which children might answer any number of ways. “Why do you think the stepsisters were so mean to Cinderella?” “How would you feel if the fairy godmother appeared in your back yard?” (Perrault, 1954).

• Expand on children’s responses by recasting sentences and adding new vocabulary words (Whitehurst, 1988). Extension means restating a child’s words as a complete sentence. (The child says, “Doggy woof.” The adult says, “The doggy went ‘woof.’” After reading The Little Engine That Could [1954], the child might look at the pictures in the book and say, “Chug, Chug!” The teacher might expand this by saying, “The little engine went chug-chugging up the mountain.”)

• Encourage children to talk about books and share their personal reactions to the stories by giving specific feedback. (“You are picking many colors of flowers just like the little girl in The Gunniwolf” (Harper, 1967). “It looks as if you’ve built a boat to sail the sea, just like Baby Ben”, (Lindgren, 1983).

• Ask children to predict, project, reason, and imagine in relation to the story. (What would you do if you were alone in the house like the children in this story?)

• Provide the time and space for drawing and writing. Felt-tip markers, pencils, pens, paint, and various sizes and shapes of paper should be available after story reading or storytelling.

Affective responses

Respond to children’s individual needs and interests through literature.

In any one classroom children vary in development and self-esteem. Specific books can help children work through crises and enhance their self-concept. Teachers can:

• Select books based on children’s needs. For example, a child who had been in a foster home played out nurturing-mother-baby themes every day in the housekeeping corner. The teacher read her books and stories about typical mother-baby relationships. This practice took into consideration the child’s developing sense of self and expanded her notions of appropriate mothering.

• Select books based on children’s interests. One child who had seen a building burn down became fascinated with fires, putting out fires, and rebuilding. His teacher and parents provided books and props (such as blocks and rubber tubing) to help him understand these ideas.

• Select books for specific crises children might be experiencing (e.g., divorce, a death in family, moving, or the birth of a sibling).

• Read folktales and fairy tales that address the social and emotional needs of young children (e.g., separation, identity, and risk taking) (Bettleheim, 1976; Howarth, 1989).