

# Reading wordless storybooks to toddlers may expose them to richer language, study finds

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(Medical Xpress)—Researchers at the University of Waterloo have found that children hear more complex language from parents when they read a storybook with only pictures compared to a picture-vocabulary book. The findings appear in the latest issue of the journal *First Language*.

"Too often, parents dismiss picture storybooks, especially when they are wordless, as not real reading or just for fun," said the study's author, Professor Daniela O'Neill. "But these findings show that reading picture storybooks with kids exposes them to the kind of talk that is really important for children to hear, especially as they transition to school."

The study, by Professor O'Neill of the Department of Psychology at Waterloo, and Angela Nyhout, a [graduate student](#), recorded 25 mothers while they read to their [toddlers](#) both a wordless picture storybook and a vocabulary book with pictures.

"What we found was that [moms](#) in our study significantly more frequently used forms of complex talk when reading the picture storybook to their child than the picture vocabulary book," said Professor O'Neill.

The researchers were especially interested in looking at the language mothers use when reading both wordless picture storybooks and picture vocabulary books to see if parents provided extra information to children like relating the events of the story to the child's own [experiences](#) or

asking their child to make predictions.

"So, when reading the picture story, we would hear moms say things such as 'where do you think the squirrel is going to go?' or 'we saw a squirrel this morning in the backyard.' But we didn't hear this kind of complex talk as often with vocabulary books, where mentioning just the name of the animal, for example, was more common, " said Professor O'Neill.

The results of the study are significant for both parents and educators because vocabulary books are often marketed as being more educational. "Books of all kinds can build children's language and [literacy skills](#), but they do so perhaps in different ways," said Professor O'Neill. "It's exciting to find that even short wordless picture books provide children with exposure to the kinds of sophisticated language that they will encounter at school and that lay the foundation for later reading development."

**More information:** Nyhout, A., & O'Neill, D. K. Mothers' complex talk when sharing books with their toddlers: book genre matters. *First Language*, 33(2), 115-131, 2013.

Provided by University of Waterloo

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