Reading *to* Children, Reading *with* Children: Parents' Interactional Practices Fostering Children's Participation in Shared Book-Reading at Home

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Abstract

Research has long demonstrated the positive effects of parent-child shared book-reading on children's development. However, despite their pedagogical relevance, parent-child shared reading activities remain underexplored as real-life, interactive achievements. Applying Conversation Analysis to a *corpus* of 13 video-recorded parent-child shared-reading sessions collected in three Italian households, this exploratory study analyzes how shared book-reading is carried out in everyday family life. Through a selection of case studies, it illustrates three practices whereby parents prompt their pre-school children's participation in shared book-reading. The article offers insights to enhance parents' awareness about narrative interactions with their children and aims to improve shared reading practices.

Keywords: shared book-reading, parent-child interactions, pre-school children, children participation, Conversation Analysis.

Abstract

Numerosi studi dimostrano gli effetti positivi della lettura condivisa sullo sviluppo dei bambini. Eppure, nonostante tale rilevanza pedagogica, le attività quotidiane di lettura tra genitori e figli sono ancora poco studiate. Applicando l'Analisi della Conversazione a un *corpus* di 13 sessioni di lettura video-registrate in tre famiglie italiane, questo studio esplorativo analizza come la lettura condivisa si svolge concretamente nel quotidiano familiare. Attraverso alcuni casi-studio, si illustrano tre pratiche con cui i genitori promuovono la partecipazione alla lettura dei figli in età prescolare. L'articolo offre spunti per promuovere la consapevolezza genitoriale circa le pratiche interattive di lettura condivisa.

Parole chiave: lettura condivisa, interazioni genitori-figli, bambini in età prescolare, partecipazione dei bambini, analisi della conversazione.

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Introduction

Previous studies have demonstrated the crucial role that shared book-reading activities play in children's development, learning, and socialization (Catarsi, 2012; Galea *et al.*, 2025). Most research highlights that shared reading has positive effects on the acquisition of linguistic abilities, particularly on the development of vocabulary (Noble *et al.*, 2019; Payne *et al.*, 1994) and grammatical competences (Cameron-Faulkner, Noble, 2013; Noble *et al.*, 2018), with clear implications for children's school results (Brice Heath, 1982; Shahaeian *et al.*, 2018). Other studies have shown that shared reading helps children develop narrative competences as well as express their own feelings and sensations (Beaupoil-Hourdel, 2017; Lever, Sénéchal, 2011). At the same time, shared reading can be effective for promoting intercultural competences and educating children to valuing individual differences (Silva, Prisco, Lencioni, 2023).

Based on this bulk of research, a variety of programs have been implemented both at the national and international level, aimed at promoting shared reading activities within the family, starting from children's early age. For example, literacy programs like "Reach out and Read" and "Born to Read" aim to promote reading aloud to young children and foster a love of books from an early age. Inspired by these pioneering initiatives, several shared-reading programs have been developed in Italy too (for a review, see Silva, Lencioni, 2023), aiming to raise awareness among educators, caregivers, and especially parents about the importance of reading to infants and young children from as early as their birth, encouraging daily shared reading as a key part of child development and family bonding (Falaschi, 2012; Valentino Merletti, Tognolini, 2015).

These studies and programs have contributed to spreading what has now become a pedagogical assumption: reading to children is extremely positive for their cognitive and emotional development (Batini, 2022; Catarsi, 2011; 2012). For many families (though not all), reading stories to and with children has thus become a daily routine, an ordinary moment of care and intimacy, a precious opportunity to spend "quality time" (i.e., moments that are pedagogically oriented and emotionally enriching, see Kremer-Sadlik, Paugh, 2007) as a family.

Surprisingly, however, despite the importance attributed to shared reading, the concrete and interactive ways in which this activity is carried out spontaneously in the home remain little investigated.

Few studies have explored how shared reading is carried out in ordinary family life, through situated parent-child interactions (but see Beaupoil-Hourdel, 2017, 2020; Beaupoil-Hourdel *et al.*, 2019; Brice-Heath, 1982). Nevertheless, investigating family shared reading practices is fundamental for understanding how this activity is experienced by parents and children, how it is realized through language in combination with the non-verbal dimensions of social interaction, and what kind of consequences it can have on children's learning and development. As such, unveiling the ordinary practices of shared reading implemented in families' real life is essential to raise parents' awareness about the relevance of this activity and suggest practical ways to accomplish daily literacy activities.

Drawing on video-recorded parent-child interactions and relying on Conversation Analysis (C.A.) (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1974), the present exploratory study contributes to this underexplored line of inquiry by analyzing in detail how shared book-reading is carried out in ordinary family life. Specifically, the article examines the practices through which parents promote their pre-school children's participation in shared reading by eliciting their verbal contributions. Indeed, while the child is – by definition – physically present during the shared-reading activity, typically sitting next to the parent, their verbal contribution is not always present; children in our data mainly remain silent, looking at the pictures and listening to their parents reading. It is also worth noting that prompting the child's verbal contribution can be particularly challenging when the child is not able to read yet – as in our data. So, how is the child's verbal contribution elicited? How do parents prompt contributions from the child, making them 'co-narrators' of the story?

After describing the data and methodology of the study (*Section 2*), we present three different practices deployed by the parents in our data to promote children's participation to the shared reading activity in the form of verbal contribution (*Section 3*). Each of these practices is illustrated in detail and in relation to the interactional context in which it naturally occurs.

In the *Conclusion*, we discuss the results and reflect on their implications for children's education as well as for promoting parents' reflexivity about their ordinary shared reading activities within the home.

1. *Data and methodology*

The data presented in this study are drawn from a *corpus* of 13 video-recorded sessions of parent-child shared reading, totaling 65,44 minutes[4]. The three families involved in the project lived in Northern Italy and were composed of two parents and at least two preschool children aged 2-5 years[5]. None of the children involved was able to read. Participants were recruited through the authors' work connections; to reduce the potential impact of the presence of the researcher and the video-recording tools on the interaction, the video-tape recording was self-administered by the parents in compliance with the researcher's guidelines. Participants' consent was obtained according to the laws regulating the handling of personal and sensitive data. For the sake of anonymity, all names have been fictionalized, participants' images have been pixelated, and other personal information has been removed.

Due to the limited size of both the *corpus* and the sample, as well as due to the sampling methods employed (i.e., non-probabilistic, convenience-based), the study does not claim to be exhaustive or statistically representative. Rather, as an exploratory study, it relies on a small selection of case studies to promote parents' reflective practices and awareness about their ordinary family interactions, particularly during shared reading activities.

The data have been analyzed adopting Conversation Analysis (C.A.) (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1974). This approach allows us to identify and analyze the micro and multimodal components of ordinary conversations. Analyzing the situated unfolding of parent-child interactions is key for educational research as through daily interactions children are socialized to the cultural and social meanings of their experiences and they elaborate their educational experiences (Bertolini, 1988; Bove, 2016; Caronia, 2011; Caselli, 2021; Colla, 2024).

Once collected, the data were first observed multiple times by adopting a 'neutral gaze', i.e., without pre-established analytical objectives ("data driven analysis"). After repeated observations, the authors identified three recurrent interactive practices whereby the parents solicited

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[4] On the use of video-recordings in educational research, see among others (Derry *et al.*, 2010).
[5] No other demographic or socioeconomic information was collected as the study aims to analyze instances of ordinary shared reading practices in the home without ascribing them to variations in demographics or other values.

their child's participation in the reading activity: 1) designedly incomplete utterances, 2) close-ended or "*wh-*" questions, 3) pointing to the pictures. In all the three practices, the verbal and/or gestural activities refer to the pages of the book that participants are reading or looking at. The interactional sequences featuring these practices have been collected and transcribed according to the transcription conventions elaborated by Jefferson (2004) for verbal and vocal productions[6]. To provide detailed descriptions of participants' bodily conduct including gaze directions, gestures, and bodily orientations to the books, multimodal components have been transcribed according to the conventions proposed by Mondada (2018; for transcription conventions see the *Appendix*).

The transcripts are presented in two lines: the original Italian transcript is followed by an idiomatic translation in American English. An arrow (→) is used to indicate the line being the focus of the analysis; italics is used to indicate the words that the parent is reading from the book page. Pictures of the book pages being read are also provided.
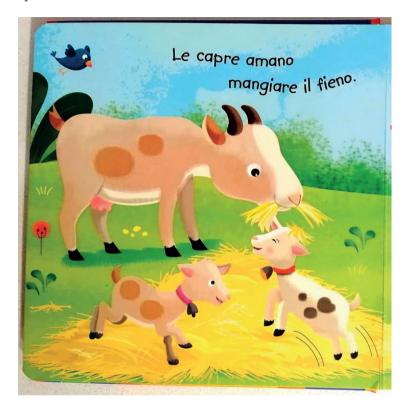

2. *Parents' interactional practices fostering children's participation in shared reading*

This section presents three excerpts, each one illustrating an interactional practice deployed by parents to solicit the child's participation to the shared reading activity in the form of a verbal contribution, i.e., 1) designedly incomplete utterances, 2) "*wh-*" questions, 3) pointing to the pictures.

The first example shows how a mother relies on a designedly incomplete utterance, i.e., a sentence intentionally constructed as syntactically and prosodically incomplete (Koshik, 2002), as a resource to prompt a contribution from her daughter Anna (2 years old). Anna and her mom are sitting on the sofa, reading a picture book about farm animals. The picture book is placed in front of both; while mom reads, Anna stares at the page looking at the pictures. *Figure 1* shows the page read by her mom in line 1.

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[6] This transcription method was chosen as it allows to make available to the reader the verbal and paraverbal details of social interaction as they naturally occur in real-life exchanges. Indeed, aspects like voice volume and silences have been shown to have a crucial impact on the sequential unfolding of social interactions (see among others, Hepburn, Bolden, 2013; Oloff, Hepburn, 2024).

Example 1 – *"Goats love to eat…?"*


```
1      →     Mom        le ca↑pre (0.6) amano mangia*: re?
                        goats           love   to  eat?
                                                    *slightly turns to
                                                                Anna-->
             Fig.                                   #fig. 2


2                       (0.4)*
             Mom        -->*

3            Anna       °f°ieo. [com:e le <mu:[cc: he>
                        hay     like cows

4            Mom                [il         [il fieno come le mu:cche
                                the         the hay    like cows
```

Fig. 1 – The page read by mom in line 1: "*Goats love to eat hay*"

Fig. 2 – Mom slightly turns to Anna

We join the interaction when the mom has already read a couple of pages of this book. Since the child is not able to read yet, the activity is led by the mom, who is reading aloud. Anna is involved in the shared reading activity through her own and her mom's bodily postures (Anna is sitting close to mom, while mom hugs her with her right arm) as well as through the book position, which allows the child to look at the pages being read (see fig. 2). In the initial turn, the mom is reading some words from a new page ("goats (0.6) love to eat?", line 1). Yet, she does not read the entire sentence written on the book page, which would be "goats love to eat hay" ("*le capre amano mangiare il fieno*", see fig. 1); rather, she omits the final word (i.e., "hay", "*il fieno*").

As such, this incomplete reading turn can be considered as an occurrence of a designedly incomplete utterance (Koshik, 2002); it is evidently incomplete both syntactically (i.e., the direct object of the verb "eat" is missing) and prosodically (i.e., it features a sharply rising prosodic contour). Such syntactic incompleteness and the rising prosodic contour, which are typical of designedly incomplete utterances, make relevant an answer by the child in the form of utterance completion. It is also worth noting that the mother turns toward Anna at the end of her turn (line 1, see fig. 2), thus unequivocally constructing her as the next speaker, i.e., the one who should complete her utterance.

Consistently, although after a brief pause (line 2), Anna takes the turn; she completes her mother's utterance with "hay" ("*fieno*", line 3), which is also the word written in the book. The child then expands her contribution by adding a comparison with cows ("like cows", line 3), probably based on her personal knowledge. By intervening in partial overlap with Anna, the mom repeats her turn, ratifying it as correct (line 4).

In sum, through an interactive practice like the designedly incomplete utterance – which is typical of formal educational settings like schools (Koshik, 2002; Margutti, 2010) –, this mother prompts the child's participation in the shared reading activity. This is a scaffolding practice which allows the child to go beyond the mere observation of the pages, providing a verbal contribution despite her inability to access the written text.

The next example shows another interactive practice deployed in the same mother-daughter reading activity. In this case, the mom prompts Anna's participation through a "*wh-*" question. *Figure 3* shows the page being read. At the moment, Anna has a pacifier in her mouth.

Example 2 – *"Who hid in the grass?"*


```
1    →    Mom            chi si è nasco↑sto fra l'er*↑ba?
                          who       hid     in the grass?
          Anna                                       *opens the pop-up
                                                              page-->
          Fig.                                       #fig. 4

2                         (2.2)*
          Anna            -->*
          Fig.              #fig. 5

3    →    Mom             ↑oh (0.4) chi c'è?
                          oh      who's there?

4                         (1.4)

5         Anna            tre <poccelli:ni>
                          three little pigs

6         Mom             t*ogliamo  il  ciuccio*     [se no
                          let's take the pacifier       otherwise
          Mom               *takes the pacifier from Anna's mouth*
```
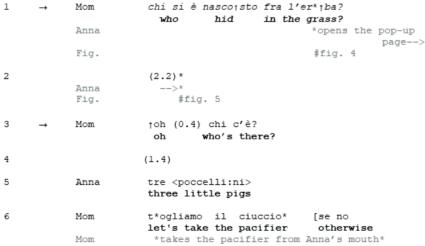
Fig. 3 – The page read by mom in line 1: *"Who hid in the grass?"*

Fig. 4 – Anna opens the pop-up page

Fig. 5 – The opened pop-up page read by mom, in line 9: *"Three little guinea pigs"*

Fig. 6 – Mom takes the pacifier from Anna's mouth

In the turn at line 1, mom is reading the question on the pop-up page ("who hid in the grass?"). Her rising intonation conveys her turn as a question, which, combined with the following pause (line 2), makes relevant a turn transition to Anna. Furthermore, the mother's question makes relevant a specific action by Anna, i.e., opening the pop-up. Indeed, to answer the question in line 1, the child needs to open the pop-up to see '*who hid in the grass*'. Consistently, Anna opens the pop-up (line 2, see fig. 4 and 5); however, she remains silent, providing no answer to the mother's initial question. At this point, the mother produces an amazed "oh" (line 3). This "change of state token" (Heritage, 1984) conveys not so much the mother's surprise but rather makes relevant a surprised reaction from the child, prompting her to notice and name the animals hidden in the grass.

After a pause, the mother continues her turn by producing a "*wh-*" question ("who's there?", line 3), which further and more explicitly prompts the child's contribution in the form of naming the animals on the page. It is interesting to notice that the mother's turn in line 3 formulates and simplifies the question she previously read (at line 1) in various ways. First, in this "*wh-*" question, the mother substitutes the verb "to hide" with the more common and easily understandable verb "to be". Second, she shifts from the past to the present tense (from "hid" in line 1 to "is" in line 3). Third, she eliminates the additional elements of the sentence (i.e., "in the grass"), thus making it shorter and easier to understand.

As a matter of fact, the question "who hid in the grass?" (line 1) presupposed the existence of a narrative plot involving a subject (i.e., the one who hides), an action (i.e., hiding), and a place (i.e., in the grass),

thus requiring a more elaborate cognitive work on the part of the child to understand and answer the question. On the contrary, by asking "who is there?" (line 3), the mother is prompting the child to make relatively simple and straightforward referential work, essentially consisting in noticing and naming what she sees on the page.

After some hesitation (line 4), Anna answers the mother's "*wh-*" question by naming the animals on the page ("three little pigs", line 5). At this point, the mother takes the pacifier out of Anna's mouth (line 6); this multimodal turn (line 6) constitutes another initiation of repair (Schegloff *et al.*, 1977), prompting the child to repeat her turn, which she does (line 7-8). The child's turn is finally ratified as correct by the mother: by reading the book text (see fig. 5), she repeats Anna's turn while adding more specific information about the kind of pigs ("three guinea pigs", line 9). After a brief silence (line 10), the mom takes the turn again and closes the sequence with a positive evaluation of the child's contribution ("exactly", line 11). As this example has shown, the use of a "*wh-*" question appears to successfully elicit the child's verbal contribution to the shared reading activity.

The next excerpt illustrates a further practice deployed by the parents in our data, i.e., pointing to the pictures on the book page. In this case, a dad is reading a picture book to her daughter Virginia (4 years old). Figure 7 shows the page being read. Dad and daughter are sitting side by side on the bed; the dad is holding the book open, making it accessible to Virginia, while she is holding another book closed (see fig. 8)

Example 3 – *Pointing*

```
1           Dad       *sai*, vorrei che crescessero=
                      you know? I'd like them to grow
                      *turns to Virginia*

2                     =così da poter fare una lunga treccia
                      so    I can   make   a  long braid

3                     (1.0)

4           Dad       con una lunga treccia, potrei calarmi dagli=
                      with a long braid I could climb down from the

5                     = alberi senza nessuna fatica.
                        trees   effortlessly

6                     (0.5)

7     →     Dad       °°guar*da°°
                      look
                           *points to a picture on the page-->
            Fig.           #fig. 8

8                     (2.5)

9           Virginia  (la) scimmi*a
                      (the) monkey
      →     Dad            -->*points to another picture on the
                                                page-->

10                    (0.8)

11          Virginia  il cocco*rillo
                      the  crocodile
            Dad            -->*
```

Fig. 7 – The page read by dad in lines 1-5: *"You know, I'd like them to grow so I can make a long braid. With a long braid I could climb down from the trees effortlessly"*

Fig. 8 – Dad points to a picture on the page

In lines 1-5, dad is reading the book text (see fig. 7), while Virginia sits next to him listening and looking at the book page. Through a falling intonation, the father conveys the end of his reading turn (line 5). After a brief pause (line 6), he takes the turn again, prompting Virginia to look at the page through a whispered directive ("look", line 7). Concurrently, he points to a picture on the book page (line 7). Through this «environmentally coupled gesture» (Goodwin, 2007, p. 55), he makes relevant a specific picture both verbally and gesturally.

The following silence (line 8), combined with the father's previous multimodal turn, makes it relevant for Virginia to take the turn, which she does by naming the picture pointed to by dad (line 9). In correspondence with the end of Virginia's turn, dad moves his hand, pointing to another picture (line 9). Through this additional pointing gesture, he implicitly acknowledges the child's contribution at line 9 as correct, while prompting her to take the turn again to name the newly indicated picture. In this case too, the dad's pointing is effective in prompting the child's contribution; Virginia names the picture indicated by dad ("the crocodile", line 11).

This practice differs from the previous two as the child's contribution is solicited to obtain a verbal contribution (the naming of two animals) which is not part of the written texts.

Conclusion

Investigating naturally occurring parent-child interactions during shared book-reading at home, the article has illustrated three interactional practices recurrently deployed by the parents: 1) designedly incomplete utterances, 2) "*wh-*" questions, and 3) pointing to the pictures, showing their effectiveness in prompting children's participation in the form of verbal contribution. The use of such practices demonstrates parents' orientation toward involving children as active participants and 'co-narrators' in the shared reading activity, which is relevant for their socialization to the activity of reading itself. The shared nature of this activity is also created through participants' embodied conduct; parents and children sit close to one another, with parents frequently hugging their children (as in ex. 1, and 2).

Through such bodily configurations, the shared book-reading activity is transformed into a precious occasion of intimacy and caring. Beyond their affective value, these exchanges have a paramount educational relevance for children. Through these interactions, children become familiar with books as material and cultural objects, they gain experience with reading as a «historically contingent, ideologically grounded, and culturally organized» activity (Sterponi, 2008, p. 555), and they have the chance to encounter interactive formats that are typical of formal educational contexts (e.g., designedly incomplete utterances) before entering the school environment.

By identifying and describing in detail the functioning of some of the practices used in shared book-reading activities within the family, the present study provides insights to promote parental awareness and reflexivity about the educational richness and implications of the practices that parents already adopt. The detailed description of parent-child behaviour may suggest concrete ways of conducting shared reading activities at home, singling out candidate practices, such as designedly incomplete utterances, "*wh-*" questions, and pointing to pictures, which can become part of a repertoire of practices used to encourage children's participation in shared reading activities. Children will encounter some of these practices later, in school, therefore children's socialization to these practices takes on a broader educational value.

Study limitations and relevance

The limited number of families involved and, relatedly, the small *corpus* used constitute the main limitations of this exploratory study. The small dimension of the *corpus* necessarily entails a limitation in the types of practices being identified as well as a limited representativeness of the study. Undoubtedly, a larger sample and *corpus* could allow us to identify a wider variety of shared reading activities and parents' practices[7].

Despite these limitations, this exploratory study contributes to valuing the educational relevance of everyday family interactions, among

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[7] A further limitation that could be attributed to this study consists in the long-debated issue that characterizes any observative study, which Labov (1972) famously called "The observer's paradox", i.e., participants could be influenced by the presence of an observer, in this case the video-camera. To counter this issue, extensive research has shown that the observer's paradox is based on the common, yet incorrect, assumption that human beings interact in a 'natural', pristine way in their everyday life. This 'original' behavior, supposedly uninfluenced by social, historical, cultural, and material conditions, would be affected by the presence of an observer. Clearly, this commonly held, neat distinction between 'natural' and 'research-affected' realms of social interaction risks to be naif. Scholars like Goffman (1959), and Sacks (1984), among others, have long argued and illustrated that social actors are constantly considering the presence of others in the management of their own conduct. In other words, human conduct is always and inevitably based on cultural worldviews and expectations (Duranti, 1997). As such, it is intrinsically and inevitably 'social' (i.e., addressed to other people) as well as cultural (i.e., informed by culture), so that the presence of an observer (either physically present on the scene or in the form of a recording tool) does not radically alter human behavior and the ways in which social interaction unfolds.

which parent-child shared reading at home. The detailed analysis of this activity shows the continuity, in terms of practices, between ordinary/ informal and institutional/formal educational contexts, demonstrating that ordinary practices, like those illustrated in this article, when used consciously and deliberately, can become powerful educational tools. Drawing readers' attention to the interactive fabric of mundane family life, the present study can not only suggest candidate practices to be used in family reading activities but also promote parental reflexivity about the educational value of mundane family conversations.

Appendix – Transcription conventions

word	Words that the parent is reading from the book page
WORD	Louder talk
[word]	Overlapping talk
(1.5)	Pause measured in seconds and tenths of a second
=	Absence of any discernable silence between two turns
<word>	Slow talk
wo:rd	Prolongation of the sound
word	Talk uttered with emphasis
.	Falling intonation
,	Slightly rising intonation
?	Strongly rising intonation (typical of questions)
↑	Rising tone
* *	Descriptions of embodied actions are delimited between two identical symbols that are synchronized with correspondent stretches of talk or time indications
@ @	
§ §	
*-->	The action described continues across subsequent lines
-->*	until the same symbol is reached
-->>	The action continues after the end of the excerpt
#Fig.	Figure representing the moment described in the transcript

Acknowledgements

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