

Science **Reading Buddies**

By Melissa Stewart

What is Reading Buddies?

In some communities, Reading Buddies is a program in which adult volunteers spend time reading to elementary-aged children. Both participants enjoy the experience.

More frequently, however, both buddies are young people. Sometimes the mentors are in junior high or high school, but the model that has proven most beneficial to both participants involves pairing first or second graders, who are just learning to read, with students who are a few years older.

“Reading Buddies gives emerging readers the opportunity to practice reading with a real audience,” says Avril Monro who teaches first and second graders in Portland, Oregon. “My students can see that their older buddies really are listening carefully. That makes them focus more and try harder.” As a result, the younger children develop reading skills more quickly, and both students gain enthusiasm for reading.

By fourth, fifth, and sixth grade, most students have mastered basic reading skills, but reading aloud can still help them with fluency and comprehension.

“When the fourth graders are working with their little buddies, they pay more attention to reading,” says Jessica DeJongh, a first grade teacher in Augusta, Maine. “They are more careful about things like pronunciation and expression, so both students become better readers.”

By working together, the students also develop cooperative learning behaviors, such as taking turns, listening, sharing knowledge, and praising one another’s efforts. In addition, some teachers report that older buddies, especially those who are reluctant readers or have learning disabilities, are more willing to take risks when reading with younger students. They will decode

longer words and tackle more complex texts.

“The buddies seem more relaxed when they are reading together,” says Cyrene Slegona, who has taught both first and sixth grade in Cornish, Maine, “There is less pressure. And as the students succeed, they gain self confidence in their abilities.”

From Buddy to Pal

Cathy Ogren, a former third grade teacher who now works as a school librarian in Cross Plains, Wisconsin, has seen Reading Buddies create a stronger sense of community in schools. “It fosters friendships across the grade levels,” she says. “The students begin to see each other as individuals.”

DeJongh agrees. “My first graders get so excited when they see their big buddies in the hall. When the older children wave or say hi, it sends a strong positive message to the younger students.”

“The older buddies see themselves as role models, and they want to prove themselves,” adds Ogren. “Acting like helpers empowers the students. It gives them a stronger sense of self worth.”

This feeling is especially important for children who are struggling academically or socially. “When students work with their younger buddies, the playing field is different,” says Monro. “They see that they’re really helping the younger children. They’re making a contribution. They also realize that their younger buddies look up to them. That can lead to beautiful self esteem development.”

Sneaking in Science

In recent years, many schools have scaled back on science education. They are devoting more

Reading Buddies: Tips for Getting Started

- Younger buddies should have some ability to read independently. Their buddies should be at least three years older to provide the feeling of a mentoring experience.
- The program should span several months. Meeting once a week for about 30 minutes works well in most schools.
- Buddies should have a quiet, comfortable place to read. The reading space should remain consistent so the students have a feeling of familiarity as well as security.
- Try to pair students according to needs, ability level, and personality. For example, an emerging reader in second grade might be paired with a patient, mature fifth grader. Active children with some attention difficulties would be paired with calmer, more focused students.
- It is best to let students select their own books, but be sure they have plenty of books at the appropriate level to choose from.
- Spend some time training older students and modeling how they should interact with their buddies. Periodically meet with them to discuss any problems they are having with their younger buddies.
- Have each buddy team keep a log of the books they read together. As the list grows, they will feel a sense of accomplishment.

time to language arts and math, with the goal of improving student scores on assessment tests mandated by No Child Left Behind legislation. As a result, many elementary students have received limited science instruction.

U. S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is well aware of this problem. At the 2009 National Science Teachers Association Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana, he said, “I worry a lot about the narrowing of the curriculum.” He added that if we want our students to be competitive with children in India and China, “we have to think more broadly about how

we can do a better job exposing all our young students to science.”

While sweeping changes may be on the way, for now, the best strategy may be to sneak meaningful science lessons into your school’s language arts curriculum. In the May/June 2008 issue of *Science Books & Films*, I wrote an article about adapting science-themed picture books into fun Readers Theater scripts that elementary students will love practicing and performing. Reading Buddy programs can also provide opportunities for integrating science and language arts instruction. Teaching science through literature will allow you to prepare your students for the critical reading and open response portions of assessment tests without neglecting science education.

Science Books and Reading Buddies

The good news is that it’s easy to find science-themed picture books that are perfectly suited for Reading Buddy programs. In the last decade, what some people call “list books” have become an increasingly popular way of presenting science concepts to the picture book crowd. These books include two sections of text—short, simple text in large type conveys a general idea and a longer section in smaller type presents additional details.

In books like *Beaks!* and *Wings* by Sneed Collard (Illus by Robin Brickman), the two sections of text appear on each double-page spread. This structure invites younger buddies to read the larger, simpler type and the older children to focus on the longer, smaller type. As a result, each child plays a role in “digesting” the spread, and reading becomes a shared endeavor. The buddies can then look at the art together and discuss what they’ve just learned before turning the page.

The information presented in Collard’s books is clear, straightforward, and fascinating. Books like *An Egg is Quiet* and *A Seed is Sleepy* by Dianna Hutts Aston (Illus. by Sylvia Long) offer a more poetic main text. While the language is simple, the statements are sometimes surprising and require a bit of thoughtful discussion.

For example, in *An Egg is Quiet*, the main text on one spread says, “An egg is clever.” Most children (and adults) have never thought of an egg in this way before. It is only after the older buddy reads the smaller, supporting text scattered across the page that the real meaning of the main text becomes clear. This format allows the buddies to decipher each page and each concept together.

In most of the books created by Steve Jenkins, the spare main text is masterfully illustrated with paper collage art and enhanced by an extensive backmatter full of fascinating facts. As Reading Buddies work their way through books like *Move!* and *What Would You Do with a Tail Like This?*, the younger child can read the main text. Then the buddies can flip to the back of the book, and the older child can read the relevant section of backmatter.

Because each buddy makes his or her own contribution to exploring these books and understanding their content, Jenkins’s titles—like the books discussed above as well as those included in the bibliography—accomplish many educational goals simultaneously. They strengthen reading skills, introduce and reinforce a range of science concepts, and promote cooperation and camaraderie. What could be better than that?

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Additional Resources

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