Better book buddies

Cathy Collins Block
Robyn J. Dellamura

Buddy reading, or "book buddies," is an activity designed to increase emergent or less able readers' literacy. Usually it involves pairing underachieving readers with older, more advanced students. Book buddies can also be formed between students in the same classroom. The typical format is for the more able student to select books from the kindergarten to second-grade readability level and share them with his or her buddy once a week for 30 minutes. Most often during these sharing periods the older or more able reader holds a book so that the younger reader can follow along silently as it is read aloud. Both book buddies ask and answer questions about the content. Primary-grade teachers meet with intermediate-grade teachers to schedule time for their teams of book buddies to read. They also identify locations on the school campus where these buddy interactions can occur in a relaxed atmosphere.

Benefits of book buddies

The value of buddy reading is well documented (for a review of research see Block, in press b; Johnston, Invernizzi, & Juel, 1998). Many benefits extend to the tutor, the early reader, and the teacher. Specifically, tutors develop dramatic modulations and inflections in their oral reading abilities. They also learn to use other vocal qualities to sustain their young readers' interest, such as pronouncing individual words with wide-ranging pitches, using variant paces, and creating distinct voices to depict each character in a story. In addition, by choosing a book to share, tutors gain a sense of accomplishment. They realize that their own reading abilities have improved when they examine the book they chose for their buddy and recognize how much easier it is for them to read now than it was in the recent past. This realizing how far they have come as a reader leads to growth in other subject areas, as we have documented through more than 100 pairs of book buddies with whom we have worked.

A book buddies program also helps tutors to verbalize comprehension strategies. We have witnessed how such explanations enable tutors to realize that they have unknowingly used these same strategies in their own reading. After several book buddy sessions, we have observed that tutors begin to purposely search out books with which they can teach their buddies how to apply specific comprehension strategies.

For instance, David, a fifth-grade student, contemplated and considered many books for his buddy before selecting *The Stinky Cheese Man* by Jon Scieszka (Viking, 1993). This was his "all-time favorite book," and he was excited with his choice. (All students' names are pseudonyms.) Then he stated that he wanted to look for a second book. The goal that his teacher had established for this particular book buddy session was to increase Sam's (his buddy's) prediction abilities. After carefully surveying several titles, David added *If You Give a Moose a Muffin* by Laura Numeroff (HarperCollins, 1991) to his buddy's reading plan. As David stated, "For a kindergarten child, this book will be better at illustrating the concept of prediction that I want to teach today."

Photo by Robyn J. Dellamura

After this book buddy lesson (captured in the photo), David reported that through teaching the concept of predictive thinking during reading to Sam that he was now able to better understand prediction making himself. By being required to examine this difficult skill (prediction of a story line) and apply that strategy to *If You Give a Moose a Muffin*, David had increased his abilities to make predictions when he read. Verbalizing the predictive thinking process by teaching with think-alouds and repeated examples made this strategy more automatic for him.

Tutees realize many benefits from buddy reading as well. First, they instantly obtain an older student in the school to befriend them. In Sam's case, he had come to enjoy David's visits almost as much as his recess periods. He would see David in the hall, wave, and proudly announce to anyone within earshot, "That's my buddy!" Not only did Sam's self-esteem, feeling of belonging, and pride increase, but his literacy abilities grew at a rapid pace. This acceleration was marked not only in measurable rises in readability levels but in Sam's deep, internalized value for literacy in his life.

One measure of the impact of the book buddies program on his affective literacy growth became evident when he presented David with a treasured Christmas present. Sam walked into the library with this gift hidden behind his back in a paper sack that he had decorated. Before he handed it to David, he whispered to us that he had selected this present with special care because he wanted David to have the very best present in the world. When David opened his package, we saw Sam's treasured gift: a book for David to keep forever. Having a book of one's own was something that Sam had come to value. This is a goal that almost every reading program strives to achieve.

The third person to benefit from a buddy reading program is the classroom teacher. Such one-on-one tutoring would be impossible for a classroom teacher to deliver weekly to numerous students. If a single teacher were to share a book for 30 minutes with each student (in a class of 25 pupils) the teacher would do nothing else except buddy reading for 2 full days every week. Moreover, book buddy activities enable teachers to provide less able readers with opportunities to receive the benefits of exclusive attention, interesting reading experiences, and personalized instruction from people other than their teachers. Also, book buddies enable younger readers to pose more questions and hear literacy strategies

explained in words that are more closely attuned to their own oral vocabularies. Elementary-aged tutors create examples to communicate difficult concepts through the rapidly changing, colorful everyday vernacular of children.

How to extend and enrich the benefits of book buddies

Traditionally, individual book buddy sessions unfold with a tutor reading a story aloud and then asking questions. Then, the younger buddy in each pair shares his or her thoughts and responses to the book. Most often, these exchanges are not documented with written records of the questions asked and answers given, and it is difficult for teachers to chart each child's progress. We recommend the following types of writing activities, which can eliminate these deficiencies and significantly increase the effects of buddy reading. The following six writing applications are also easy to implement.

Buddy journals. Studies have shown that when buddy reading is coupled with writing activities, writing abilities, comprehension, and reading retention increase (Block, 2000). For this reason, book buddies can achieve more success when book buddy journals are kept. File folders, which contain single sheets of notebook paper, can be created with each tutor and tutee's name written on

Figure 1
Book buddy journals reflection sheet

Name _____

Buddy's name _____

Directions: When you and your partner have completed six buddy journal entries, discuss and grade them. If you agree with the grade, check "yes" and write why. If you don't agree, check "no" and write why.

Buddy's evaluation	Partner's response	
	Yes	No
1. Reading lessons were clear, interesting, and helped me improve my reading abilities. Grade _____ Specific examples:		
2. Opening and closing discussions were captivating and increased my comprehension. Grade _____ Specific examples:		
3. I increased my vocabulary. I now use and can read more vivid words—adjectives, nouns, and verbs. Grade _____ Specific examples:		
4. I do not repeat words or ideas unnecessarily when I read orally, write, or share my responses. Grade _____ Specific examples:		
5. I can comprehend more difficult sentences. Grade _____ Specific examples:		
6. I can decode better. Grade _____ Specific examples:		

Additional comments and things I would like to add about our buddy readings:

Figure 2
Book buddies reading record

Name _____ My buddy reading record

Date started	Title	Author	Date finished	Rating
				☆☆☆☆☆
				☆☆☆☆☆
				☆☆☆☆☆
				☆☆☆☆☆
				☆☆☆☆☆
				☆☆☆☆☆
				☆☆☆☆☆
				☆☆☆☆☆
				☆☆☆☆☆
				☆☆☆☆☆

Created by Julie DiBona, second-grade teacher, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA. Reprinted with permission.

the folder's label and cover. Prior to each book buddy session, tutors record the date, titles of books to be read, and questions or activities that they want to cover. Below each question the tutor leaves space to write the answers given by the tutee. As a closing activity, on the back of each page tutors write the free response answers that their tutees give to one or more of the following questions (or questions that their teachers use to assess individual tutees' reading progress): (a) What did you learn today that helped you to read better? (b) Is there anything else that you would like to share or say about this book? or (c) What do you want to learn at the next book buddies session?

Reflection form. The second writing application employs the form shown in Figure 1. After six sessions, tutors (and tutees if they are old enough to write independently) record descriptions of all that they (and their tutees) have learned during this grading period. If tutees cannot write independently, tutors can read what they wrote and tutees can voice their agreement or disagreement with statements written. Tutees can also answer each question on Figure 1 orally, and tutors then can write these answers on a separate form. After such one-page descriptive writings are finalized, tutors (and tutees) can grade their growth by referring to the criteria in Figure 1. These objectives can change each grading period to reflect the goals that have been taught. Through these shared reflections, tutors and tutees can help each other improve their literacy and discuss ways that the next 6 weeks' work together can be strengthened.

Reading records. Another type of writing activity is depicted in Figure 2. Tutees can list the titles of all the books that they have shared on "My Buddy Reading Record." At the end of each book buddy session, tutees can rate each book on a 5-to-1-star scale like the one movie critics use. This reading record documents tutees' depth and breadth of reading interests. In time, this easy-to-reference form helps tutors and teachers select more advanced

books by interest so as to enhance each individual's reading appreciation and power.

Strategies checklist. A fourth type of writing is a form that reminds both pupils of the decoding and comprehension strategies that they can use to prompt each other when they encounter difficult words or ideas. Strategy names should be spaced on the paper so that tutors have room to write the words and sentences that gave them trouble during a shared reading. Teachers then have a record of both students' knowledge, frequency of use, and effective application of each strategy. As shown in Figure 3, tutors can place a checkmark whenever they prompt their tutees with a strategy on this form, and below that strategy write the words or sentences to which that strategy was applied. Tutors enjoy this form because they have a record of all the strategies that were taught in a book buddies session, and emergent readers profit by having a sheet to read of the numerous strategies from which they can choose when reading difficulties arise.

This form also adds variety to book buddy sessions. For example, sometimes the tutor can ask the tutee to read a book orally. As the tutee reads, the tutor can check each decoding strategy on

Figure 3
Buddy reading strategies checklist form

Name _____

Buddy's name _____

Directions: When your partner needs your help with a hard word, suggest one of these strategies. Check whether your suggestion worked.

	Yes	No
1. Think of what makes sense.		
2. Sound it out.		
3. Look for chunks in the word.		
4. Look at the picture.		
5. Look for endings you know.		
6. Look at another page where you saw the word.		
7. Go back and get a running start		

Comments on my buddy's retelling of the part that was read:

Comments on my buddy's use of the strategies:

the buddy reading form that the tutee demonstrates or reports to use. This form also enables the tutor to stay more thoroughly engaged as the younger student reads the book, and it sharpens the tutor's writing skills and ability to document exactly how much his or her buddy's reading has improved.

Question game. In this game, a blank copy of the spinner in Figure 4 is enlarged, laminated, and affixed to the middle of the game board. Then, before a book is to be read at a book buddy session, questions based on that book are written in each quadrant of the spinner by the tutor, one of the teachers involved in the book buddies program, or the school's librarian. After the reading, the tutee spins and answers the question upon which the spinner lands. If the answer is correct, the tutee receives the total number of points designated for that quadrant. Next, the tutor spins and receives the designated points for a correct answer to the query posed in the quadrant in which the spinner lands. If a pair of book buddies wants to have more than two spins each, they can request that up to four questions be written in each quadrant. In this way, both students can receive eight turns apiece until all questions are answered. At the end of the game, the student with the most points wins.

To vary this contest, writing assignments can be designated in each quadrant. When the game is used in this manner, during the reading of a chosen book, both tutor and tutee stop after sharing approximately 10 pages and take turns spinning the spinner. Next, they engage in the designated writing activity. After their writings are complete, book buddies read and discuss their answers with each other. The writing activities in each space vary according to the specific literacy abilities taught in a particular grading period. Some suggestions are to write (or draw depending on the skill level of prekindergarten through first-grade tutees) about (a) the student's favorite character thus far in the story, (b) a summary of the story's unfolding plot, (c) the cause/effect relationships that have occurred to that point in the story, (d) what will happen next, or (e) a "mystery question." The mystery question gives tutors and tutees an opportunity to ask

Figure 4
Model of spinner for writing activity game

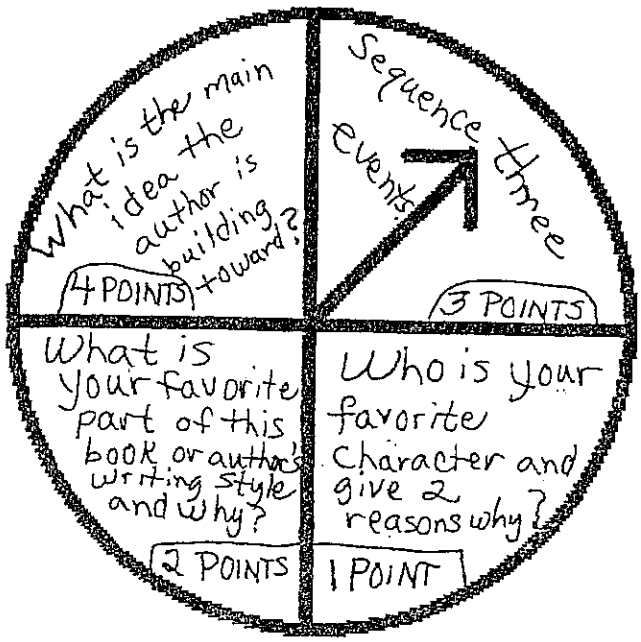
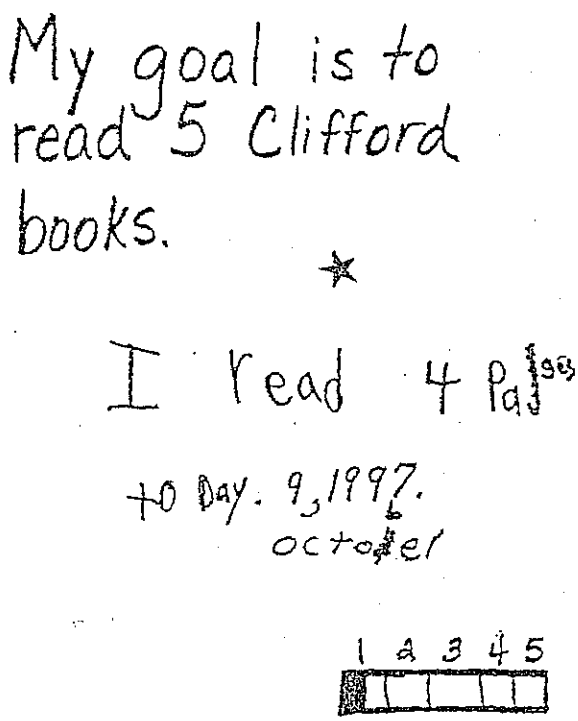


Figure 5
A child's book buddies goal sheet



for their partner's opinion and reflection on a question that they have about the reading. This spinner game enhances the pleasure and retention of material read during book buddy sessions.

Goal books. The final step in extending book buddies is to chart progress through goal books. Book buddy pairs design booklets to depict progress on their self-selected literacy goals. These reflect students' creativity and personalities (e.g., Chan, an 8-year-old, cut his goal book out in the shape of a football; Shandra, a 6-year-old, drew a picture on the cover of Clifford the big, red dog who was her favorite book character). Inside these goal books, young readers note their daily progress, and tutors provide praise and validation when goals are attained. Stickers placed on daily sheets can denote the completion of each day's work and enhance the tutee's sense of accomplishment. Figure 5 is a page from Shandra's goal book, showing her progress over 2 weeks.

In summary, the book buddies activities enable tutors and tutees to reach new heights in their literacy abilities. By incorporating record-keeping and writing activities, teachers can significantly increase the benefits of such a program. Through journals, reflection forms, reading records, strategies checklists, question games, and goal books, tutors' and tutees' reading and writing abilities grow in depth and breadth (Block, in press a; Block, Shaller, Joy, & Gaines, in press). We offer these activities to help teachers, tutors, and tutees savor the joys of sharing and growing together that we have personally and repeatedly experienced with our book buddies program.

Block teaches graduate and undergraduate literacy courses at Texas Christian University (PO Box 29700, School of Education, Fort Worth, TX 76129, USA). Dellamura teaches reading at Tanglewood Elementary School in Fort Worth.

References

Block, C.C. (in press a). A spotlight on exemplary practices that significantly increase students' literacy even when they enter first grade without the precursors for literacy success. In T. Shanahan (Ed.), *National Reading Conference yearbook.* Chicago: National Reading Conference.

Block, C.C. (in press b). *Teaching the language arts: Expanding thinking through student-centered instruction, Third edition.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Block, C. C. (2000). *How can we teach all students to comprehend well.* New York: Scholastic.

Block, C.C., Schaller, J., Joy, J., & Gaines, P. (in press). Teaching comprehension as a process and more than strategies. In M. Pressley & C.C. Block (Eds.), *Reading comprehension.* New York: Guilford.

Johnston, J., Invernizzi, M., & Juel, C. (1998). *Book buddies.* New York: Guilford.