

# Language and Literacy Experiences to Engage and Challenge All Children with Talent Potential

By Christine Carr

Compared to the other children in her class, 6-year-old Jasmine’s self-portrait was sophisticated. Her portrait was multi-dimensional, even expressive, with details including eyelashes, earrings, and nail polish. Previously, Jasmine’s talent potential had not been on anyone’s radar. Academically, her teacher described her as “middle of the pack,” and her scores on language and literacy assessments were in the lower part of the average range. But this self-portrait was, literally and figuratively, painting a different picture and revealing both an artistic and a cognitive aptitude.

Jasmine’s classmate Jamie, on the other hand, had scored among the top test-takers on his literacy assessments. Jamie showed a deep commitment to and a love of reading, always having a new book in his hand. His teacher marveled at his reading fluency but was even more impressed by his ability to understand authors’

messages, anticipate a story’s events, and make connections between stories he had read. Yet, Jamie’s self-portrait was typical of his classmates—abstract with no dimension and few details.

Although brief, these vignettes demonstrate how talent potential can (and does) manifest differently in different children. While some children display talent in one or more academic fields, other children demonstrate creative, intellectual, or artistic aptitudes.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of their field or domain of talent, all children can benefit from high-quality and engaging language and literacy experiences: Supporting language and literacy development for children like Jasmine will foster their growth across academic fields, as well as in their particular domains of aptitude. After all, if domains of aptitude serve as the content to be accessed (the “what”), language and literacy are the means by which that content is accessed (the “how”).<sup>2</sup> Even advanced readers like Jamie need rich language and literacy experiences to maximize their talents and to stave off boredom and frustration.

## The Challenge

Under the auspices of the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program (*See sidebar on page 8*), I worked on a team that developed informational sessions for parents of early-elementary children with talent potential. For these sessions, we focused on simple and affordable ways parents could provide their children with language and literacy experiences outside of school that were supportive of in-school educational experiences.

Because talent manifests differently in different children,



parents' needs in terms of supporting the development of their children's language and literacy skills likewise vary. Our challenge was to offer experiences that would be beneficial to all parents. In other words, we aimed to provide experiences that parents could use to engage and challenge their children, regardless of whether their children were more like Jasmine (with talents outside of literacy) or Jamie (highly talented linguists and readers).

### Experience 1: Wordless Picture Books, "Word-full" Discussions

A book with no words? How does that support language and literacy development? *Wordless picture books* are, as the name implies, books with pictures but little or no text. Rather than reading words, readers draw upon their background knowledge and personal experiences to create a story from the pictures in the book. In this way, the stories in wordless picture books are what readers make of them.

Wordless picture books appeal to a range of readers. Because the books' stories are subject to the reader's interpretation, reluctant or less-ready readers can capably and confidently read. Moreover, because there are no "wrong" answers, these books support *all* readers'—including advanced readers'—unabashed creative expression. Best of all, readers can enjoy wordless picture books many times over: Unlike "traditional" books, readers are not bound by authors' words, allowing them to reinvent the storyline entirely or simply take a deeper dive into individual illustrations.

#### Do It Yourself:

- Start by introducing the idea of a wordless picture book. *Do all books have words? How can a book tell a story if it doesn't have words?*
- Take turns reading the pictures with your child.
- Use open-ended questions to encourage discussion and push your child's divergent thinking. Plan questions to ask *before*, *during*, and *after* reading.

#### Before

- *Why did you choose this book?*
- *What does the cover tell us about this book? How about the title?*
- *What do you think this book will be about?*

#### During

- *What do you think about the characters so far?*
- *What do you think is going to happen next? Why? What makes you think that?*
- *If you had this problem, how would you solve it? How do you think the character is going to solve it?*

#### After

- *If you could change one thing about this book, what would it be and why?*
- *How did your feelings about the character change?*
- *What if the main character was a [substitute a different type of character] instead? How would that change your/the story?*

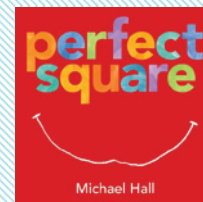
## Resources

Interested in literature that promotes divergent thinking and problem-solving? Here are some additional books you and your children can explore and discuss together.

### Perfect Square

by Michael Hall

See how a simple square can be altered to be many other things. Children can describe and even reinvent their own squares.



### Not a Box

by Antoinette Portis

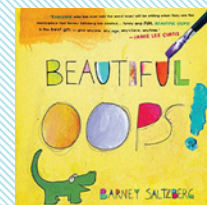
A rabbit demonstrates how a box is not just a box. Consider pairing your discussion of this book with a viewing of *Caine's Arcade* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=falFNkdq96U>), a short documentary about a child who creates an entire arcade out of old boxes.



### A Beautiful Oops!

by Barney Saltzberg

Sometimes mistakes aren't mistakes at all. What will your child see and describe when looking at a torn sheet of paper or spilled paint?



Ready to start interpreting wordless picture books with your child? Here are a few suggestions:

- Chalk* by Bill Thomson
- Inside Outside* by Lizi Boyd
- Journey* by Aaron Becker
- The Lion and the Mouse* by Jerry Pinkney
- The Red Book* by Barbara Lehman
- Sector 7* by David Wiesner
- The Snowman* by Raymond Briggs
- Tuesday* by David Wiesner
- The Umbrella* by Jan Brett
- Wave* by Suzy Lee
- What If?* by Laura Vaccaro Seeger
- Zoom* by Istvan Banyai

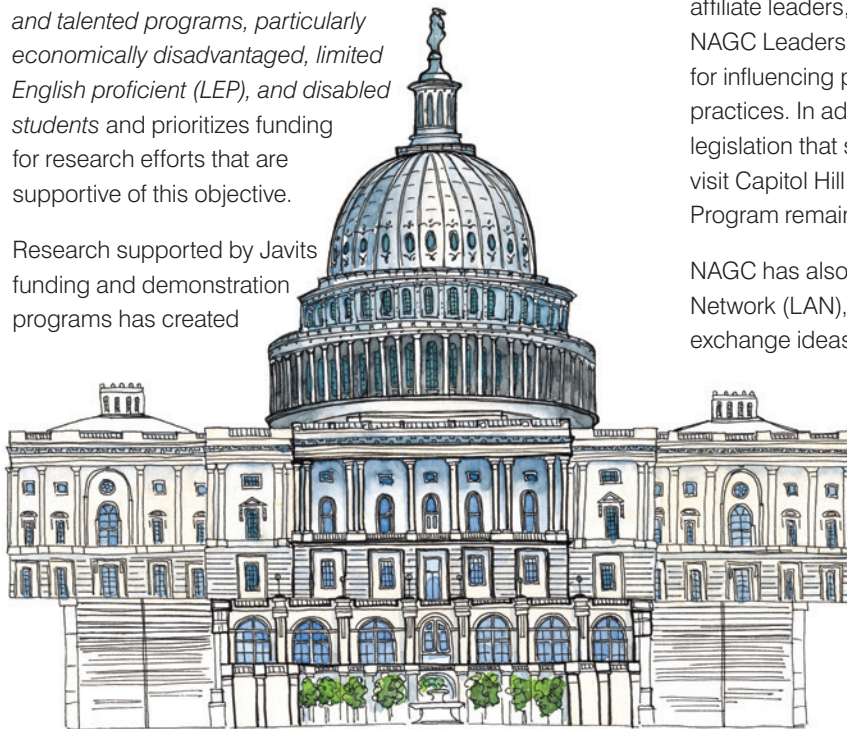


## What is a Javits Grant?

The Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act (Javits) was first passed by Congress in 1988 as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and reauthorized in 2015 through the Every Student Succeeds Act to support the development of talent in U.S. schools. The Javits Act is the only federal program dedicated specifically to gifted and talented students. It does not fund local gifted education programs.

Pursuant to the Javits Act, the U.S. Department of Education established the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program (Javits Program). The purpose of the Javits Program *is to carry out a coordinated program of evidence-based research, demonstration projects, innovative strategies, and similar activities designed to build and enhance the ability of elementary schools and secondary schools nationwide to identify gifted and talented students and meet their special educational needs.* This program emphasizes identification of and service to *students traditionally underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, particularly economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient (LEP), and disabled students* and prioritizes funding for research efforts that are supportive of this objective.

Research supported by Javits funding and demonstration programs has created



new valid and reliable ways to identify gifted students from underserved populations; produced fair and equitable observation tools for identifying gifted and talented English Language Learners; and helped teachers implement materials that result in improved performance for high-potential Black students.

Perhaps most importantly, the Javits Program has dispelled myths about what learners from diverse backgrounds can, and should be expected, to achieve. Thanks to the program's research-based interventions, numerous gifted minority and economically disadvantaged students are thriving.

Funding for the Javits Program is discretionary, so each year Congress votes to continue funding. Congress voted to provide the Javits Program \$12 million for FY19, the same amount of funding received in 2018; however, funding is never guaranteed. That's why every March, NAGC brings state affiliate leaders, educators, and parents together at the annual NAGC Leadership & Advocacy Conference to discuss goals for influencing policy and to learn best effective advocacy practices. In addition to raising awareness and advocating for legislation that serves gifted and talented children, advocates visit Capitol Hill to ask federal lawmakers to ensure the Javits Program remains funded for the upcoming fiscal year.

NAGC has also established the Legislative Action Network (LAN), a platform to share best advocacy practices, exchange ideas, and support a national (federal, state, local) framework to support all gifted and talented children. NAGC's goal is to grow the list of active advocates who will directly call for improved policy and programs to support gifted children as they reach for their personal best.

If you are interested in joining the LAN, please visit [www.nagc.org/get-involved/advocate-high-ability-learners/legislative-action-network](https://www.nagc.org/get-involved/advocate-high-ability-learners/legislative-action-network).

### Sources

National Association for Gifted Children. (n.d.). *Jacob Javits Gifted & Talented Students Education Act*. Retrieved from <https://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources-university-professionals/jacob-javits-gifted-talented-students>

United States Department of Education. (n.d.). *Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program: Purpose*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/javits/index.html>

## Experience 2: Simple Scenarios, Complex Conversations

I have a challenge for you: *Name as many things as you can that have numbers on them.* What did you come up with? Phones, computers, street signs, mailboxes, food labels...any others? We call these questions or prompts *Ponderings and Wonderings* and encourage parents to use them with their children.

Such prompts engage children in conversation while aiding in their vocabulary development and complex oral language skills. In addition, many of them require children to draw upon their divergent-thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as allowing them to connect ideas from different contexts. And the best part about this experience is that it can be done anywhere or anytime—without materials or supplies. A drive down the road may inspire a simple scenario leading to a complex conversation.

### Do It Yourself:

Create a prompt or scenario to jumpstart a conversation with your child:

- *What would you do if you found a cell phone on the playground?*
- *What would you do if you found a [five dollar bill, a pair of glasses, a notebook] at [the grocery store, in the library, in your front yard]?*
- *What would you do if everything outside turned purple? What would you do if everything outside turned [spotted, striped]?*
- *Name as many things as you can that are green. Name as many things as you can that are [blue, smaller than a toaster, bigger than a car].*
- *Name as many things as you can that can be found in a school. Name as many things as you can that can be found in a [toy store, suitcase, kitchen cabinet].*

## Experience 3: Ordinary Objects, Extraordinary Storytelling

How could a stick of gum, a brick, and a teddy bear all be part of the same story? Or what about a pair of scissors, a sock, and an action figure? For this experience, we brought with us an assortment of items that we collected from our office and homes, including tennis balls, rubber bands, Q-tips, cotton balls, paper cups, paper clips, stuffed animals, plastic toy figures, baskets, balloons, and more. We asked children to tell their parents stories using three items they selected from the group.

This experience supports literacy development by allowing children to practice both the verbal and structural elements of storytelling.

### Do It Yourself:

- Have your child select three objects to tell a story about.
- Ask questions that help your child develop a narrative.
  - **Setting:** Where and when did the story take place? *You didn't say where this happened. Can you tell me about that?*



- **Conflict:** What was the problem or issue that was presented in the story and how was it resolved? *It sounds like there was a problem between [Character A] and [Character B]. How did they solve it?*
- **Plot:** Was there a beginning, middle, and end? *Tell me a little more about what just happened.*
- Add more complexity to the activity to challenge your child.
  - Have your child tell another story with the same items.
  - Substitute one item and have your child tell another story.
  - Change the items (or characteristics of them), asking children how the story would be different under the changed circumstances. *You told me a story about an angry tiger. How would the story be different if it had been a sleepy tiger?*
  - Switch genres, and move from fiction to mystery, non-fiction, science fiction, or even poetry.

Developing children's language and literacy skills is vital for success in school. Children like Jamie, a talented linguist and reader, need opportunities to fully develop these talents, while children like Jasmine, with her artistic eye, need support to help them grow academically and to foster their creative talents. By facilitating language- and literacy-rich experiences, parents can play a meaningful role in supporting their children's success with language and literacy—and beyond. ☺

### Author's Note

**Christine Carr** is a former middle school English teacher from Atlanta, Georgia, who recently earned her doctorate in education from the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. While pursuing her degree, she worked as a graduate research assistant on a Javits-funded research grant, which afforded her opportunities to learn about supporting children with talent potential. Christine now teaches high school English.

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