Playing with books

Helping young children to develop the ability to read and write is a serious business because being literate is extremely important in our daily lives. But we also need to remember that we don’t have to actively teach or tell children about books and reading. Instead, we need to allow our children to learn about books by exploring them. One of the ways we can do this is by giving them opportunities to play with books. Being allowed to be playful with books helps children to become literate.

Here are some the ways that children at different stages of development might “play” with books.

Babies like to try out books by touching, patting, shaking and even chewing them! They are also great listeners and imitators. Often they make sounds and clap their hands to show how much they are enjoying us reading to them. Try giving babies board and cloth books when you want to allow them to handle books on their own, like during nappy changes. These kinds of books are tough and don’t break easily.

Older babies enjoy books with flaps, pop-ups and buttons that they can press to make sounds. They also like to paint to things on the page or try turning the page.

Many toddlers like to pretend to read aloud and older children often like to pretend to be “the teacher” and read to the class. They can be found turning the pages of a storybook telling their own story as they go, or retelling a story they have heard often – sometimes even with the book upside down! They’re practicing reading and showing you that they understand what books are about. Encourage them by making sure that there are always some books around for them to pick up and “read” when they want to.

Young children often act out stories they know, or create their own, using familiar story characters. In these imaginary play times, children learn about symbols – when they use a stick as a fairy’s magic wand or a box as a car, it means that they understand how one thing can “stand for” another. Children learn about symbols when they use a stick as a fairy’s magic wand or a box as a car, it means that they understand how one thing can “stand for” another.

This is important for literacy learning. Encourage your children’s imaginary play by reading lots of different kinds of stories to them. Playing with books offers children opportunities to learn important literacy lessons and – best of all – it’s what children do naturally when we read to them and have books to read to me. Book by book. Mpalale. Buka ka buka.

Enjoy a special story from Africa in celebration of Africa Day on 25 May! You can find it on pages 3 to 8.


This supplement is available during term times in the following Times Media newspapers: Sunday Times Express in the Western Cape; Sunday World in the Free State, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal; Daily Dispatch and The Herald in the Eastern Cape.
Create your own cut-out-and-keep book

1. Take out pages 3 to 8 of this supplement. Keep the pages together.
2. Fold them in half along the black dotted line.
3. Fold them in half again.
4. Cut along the red dotted lines.

Iketsetse bukana e-sehwang-le-ho-ipolokelwa

3. A mene ka halale nono. Mola wa matheba a matsho.
4. Seha ha fetsa ho la matheba a halale a.

In your next Nal’ibali supplement:

• How playing helps children’s literacy development
• Your story: our readers’ own writing
• A cut-out-and-keep book, Touch
• To celebrate the storyteller Aesop’s birthday, a new Story Corner story, The boy and the jackal

Looking for activities for your children? Visit the “Resource” section at www.nalibali.org for printables such as bookmarks, cards and postcards.

Find us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/nalibaliSA
Re funane ho Facebook: www.facebook.com/nalibaliSA

Tlatsetsong ya hao e latelang ya Nal’ibali:

• Kamoo ho bapala ho thuthang ntlhetsepele ya bana ya tsebo ya ho bala le ho ngola ka teng
• Pale ya hao: dinglewa tseo e leng tsa babadi ba rona
• Buka e sehwang-le-ho-ipolokelwa, Ho thetsa
• Ho keteka letsatsi la tswo la ntlhetsepele la dipale, Aesop, pale e rihla ya Hukung ya Dipale, Moshanyana le phokojwe

Na a ba thaha le diketsa halo bakeng sa bana ba hoo? 
Bela karolo ya “Resource” ho www.nalibali.org bakeng sa dintho tse hatisehang tse kung diphalaheng tsa dibuka, dikarete le diposekarete.

Supplement produced by The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) and Times Media Education. Translated by Hilda Mohale. Nal’ibali character illustrations by Rico.
The singing chameleon is from the SONGOLOLO list – a range of books celebrating both the common and diverse interests and experiences in childhood, featuring stories from Africa and beyond.

Shuter & Shooter Publishers acquired the award-winning children’s picture book imprint, SONGOLOLO in 2008. SONGOLOLO is a quality list, featuring books by some of South Africa’s foremost authors and illustrators, including Niki Daly, Gcina Mhlophe, Joan Rankin and Jude Daly. The list features several bestsellers, including Niki Daly’s Mama, Papa and Baby Joe, and Joan Rankin’s Wow! It’s Great Being a Duck and other numerous award-winning titles.

For further information, visit www.shuters.com
A very long time ago there was a big river in which there lived a great many animals. There were crocodiles, hippopotami, water buck, ducks, crabs, birds, fish of all kinds and frogs of all sizes. The animals were happy and most of them were really good friends. But there was one animal they all criticised.

The animals were always saying to the chameleon, "Chameleon, you are so ugly!"

The proud hippo said, "Because of you, this river is no longer beautiful."

"I can do this thing called music," answered the chameleon. "I have just learned to play a song I made up:"

They say that I am ugly
Everyone agrees with this
But when I sing my song,
I can do this thing called music –
Heh, heh!"

Excitedly he sang this song over and over again. He couldn't believe that he could compose a song!

"Of course you can help," said Otter. "Please understand, Chameleon. I have just learned to play a song."

But Otter insisted, "There is a lot you can do with your music! Let me take you to the village where you can sing for the people. It'll help them to forget how terrible life is right now."

"Alright, I'll try," said Chameleon, remembering his promise to the old man.

Kgalekgale ho ne ho ena le noka e kgolo eo ho yona ho neng ho phela diphoofolo lea ngenta. Ho ne ho ena le dikwena, dikubu, matsa, matata, makgala, dimonyana, dithlapa tsa metufutla tsa diphoofolo ha sebele. Le ho ho ena le phoofolo di ne di thabile le ho mongwa ho tsa tsongwa ho le mehloka ya sebele. Empe ho ne ho ena le phoofolo e le mongwa e tsa dinge di neng di e kgopa.

Diphoofolo kamelela di ne di re ho Lemwabo, "Lemwabo, o mobe hakakang!"

Kubu e ikgantshe ya re, "Ka baka la hao, noka ena ha e sa le ntle."
"What's wrong with your eyes, anyway?" questioned Bull Frog. "They're always looking forwards, looking backwards, looking everywhere."

And Crocodile criticised, "Why can't you decide what you want to look like? Precisely what colour are you? Are you green or brown or yellow? Which is it?"

Together they shouted, "You're so ugly! You're a disgrace to the river community!" How very unkind they were.

Eventually Chameleon began to believe their cruel words. He tried to hide and to be as quiet as he could so that no one would notice him.

The chief was so impressed by this brave little creature that he made the chameleon a special symbol of good luck and good fortune in his village. He asked a well-respected sculptor to make him a walking stick with the head of a chameleon carved at the top and, at the entrance to his home, he had chameleons carved on the tops of the gate posts. For many years after that the villagers honoured chameleons as a sign of good luck. They believed that you would attract good fortune if you had something carved in the shape of a chameleon in your home.

"Ebe bothata ke eng ka mahlo a hao?" ha botsa Senqanqane se Seholo. "A dula a sheba pele, a sheba mmarao, a sheba hohlile." 


"O moe e ka tla leka ka moo bophelo bo ba nyo," ha rialo Lenwabo. 

mangata le ne le lakatsa hore le ka etela hole ona. Le ne le hloname haholo. Ka matsatsi a Ka nako e telele Lenwabo la phela ka mokgwa
"Le wena o rata dintsintsi le menwang."  
"Ke wena ya ka buang!" ha nahana Lenwabo.  
ho etsa hore o nyontshe le ho feta!"

Senqanqane se neng se le shebile, sa re, "Hoo  
lehadima, le betsa – LAI! TSEKE!  
leha le ne le tsamaya butle, ha le ne le batla ho  
le ipatang teng le emetse dintsintsi le  
Lenwabo le ne le dula le hloname moo  
saw a bird.

Then, one day, as Chameleon was sitting close  
to the water’s edge looking at his reflection, he  
travelled for some time.

Chameleon would sit sadly in his hiding place  
waiting for flies and other flying insects to  
come past. Even though he moved slowly, when  
he wanted to grab an insect, his tongue was like  
lightning, striking out – TACK!  
The chief couldn’t believe it. Nobody could. So Otter said, “Come  
with us. We’ll show you!”

The friends took the villagers to the waterfall and they told them  
the whole story exactly as it had happened. The villagers were so  
happy! They wanted to hear the song that had crept into Python’s  
heart and led him to his death. Everyone sat at the waterfall  
listening to Chameleon sing his lovely song, and when he had  
finished, they cheered.

People slowly came out of their homes. They looked at each  
other wondering whether they had heard correctly.

“What are you talking about?” demanded the chief.  
“I am telling you the truth,” said Otter. “Python is dead.  
He has been killed by my good  
friend here, Chameleon!”

The chief couldn’t believe it. Nobody could. So Otter said, “Come  
with us. We’ll show you!”

The chief couldn’t believe it. Nobody could. So Otter said, “Come  
with us. We’ll show you!”

People slowly came out of their homes. They looked at each  
other wondering whether they had heard correctly.

“What are you talking about?” demanded the chief.  
“I am telling you the truth,” said Otter. “Python is dead.  
He has been killed by my good  
friend here, Chameleon!”

The chief couldn’t believe it. Nobody could. So Otter said, “Come  
with us. We’ll show you!”

The friends took the villagers to the waterfall and they told them  
the whole story exactly as it had happened. The villagers were so  
happy! They wanted to hear the song that had crept into Python’s  
heart and led him to his death. Everyone sat at the waterfall  
listening to Chameleon sing his lovely song, and when he had  
finished, they cheered.

Batho ba tswa matlong a bona butlhotlou. Ba shehanna ba  
maketsi ba ipotosa hore na ebe ba utwile hantle.

“Na o bua ka eng?” morona a batla ho tsheu.

“Ke o hollea metse,” ha riato Qibi. “Thlware o shwelo. O bolale le  
motswalle emwa wa ka wa leloho ya kgomo, Lenwabo.”

Morena o ne a sa kgoelo. Ho ne ho se a kgoelweng. Jwale Qibi ya  
re, “Thleong le rona. Re tla le bontsha!”

Motswalle eo ya isa baabi diphor Komorong mme ya ba qoqela pale  
ka ho hollehalale jwalo ka e eetshele. Baabi ba ne ba thabile  
halo! Ba ne ba batla ho itlwa pin a ekeneng poeng ya thlware  
mme ya e isa letloeng ya leona. Baobi ba dula diphoromorong ba  
mametsi Lenwabo le bina pin a leona e monate, mme ha le geta,  
bu le thoholetsa.
When he reached the old man's house, he pushed the door open quietly and crept inside. The old man turned around as if he sensed someone was there.

Chameleon said, “I’m sorry to disturb you. I know you do very good work and you’re busy but I need your help.”

The old man smiled kindly, “You’re not disturbing me. What can I do for you?”

“Please could you make me a musical instrument?” asked Chameleon. “Perhaps an imbengwe? I’d like to learn to play. Maybe you could teach me.”


Tlwere ya sheba Lenwabo mme ya re, “Ke mang ya o bolelletseng hoo? Hohang ha o mobe!”

“Tlwere ya sheba Lenwabo mme ya re, “Ke mang ya o bolelletseng hoo? Hohang ha o mobe!”

And Python? Python had eaten a whole calf that morning and so his stomach was very full. Down into the water he fell – CRASH! Rocks fell on him and Python eventually drowned in the deep pool at the bottom of the waterfall.

Chameleon and Otter cheered, “Yebo! Everybody come out! We have good news! Chameleon has killed the python!”

It was a perfect chameleon spot. There were so many insects for Chameleon to eat. The two friends ate and rested. Chameleon was just dozing off when he thought about the python.

“Maybe I should play my music. I can’t fall asleep. What if the python shows up?”

So Chameleon took his imbengwe and began to sing:

“They say that I am ugly
Everyone agrees with this
But when I sing my song,
I can do this thing called music – Heh, heh!”

When he reached the end of the song, he looked up. A creature with big eyes and a broad smile was staring at him.


Tlwere ya sheba Lenwabo mme ya re, “Ke mang ya o bolelletseng hoo? Hohang ha o mobe!”
"Every single animal here at the river says I'm ugly," answered Chameleon.

"You know what? If you believe you're ugly, then do something that will make others see you differently. Why don't you surprise them and learn to sing?" suggested Lark before he swooped off into the sky, singing merrily.

"Maybe I could learn to sing," thought Chameleon. "Hmm, I don't think I've ever heard of a singing chameleon before."

He thought about this for many hours and then suddenly smiled to himself and said, "Maybe I could learn to play a musical instrument."

With this in mind, he crawled slowly to the house of an old man who was an instrument maker. He made all kinds of musical instruments but he was particularly famous for the imbengwe, an instrument made of flat wood with long strings tied at the top of its neck.

Still singing and playing, Chameleon began to walk backwards towards the bridge as if to cross it. Python followed him, his eyes rolling and shining just as if he was in love. He swayed from side to side, moving to the beat of the song. Chameleon kept singing and walking backwards very slowly. Python kept following him with his smiling lovey-dovey eyes, getting closer and closer all the time.

Chameleon had almost reached the other side of the bridge when suddenly he felt it beginning to snap. He realised he was in danger.

Out of nowhere, Otter grabbed Chameleon and pulled his friend to safety.