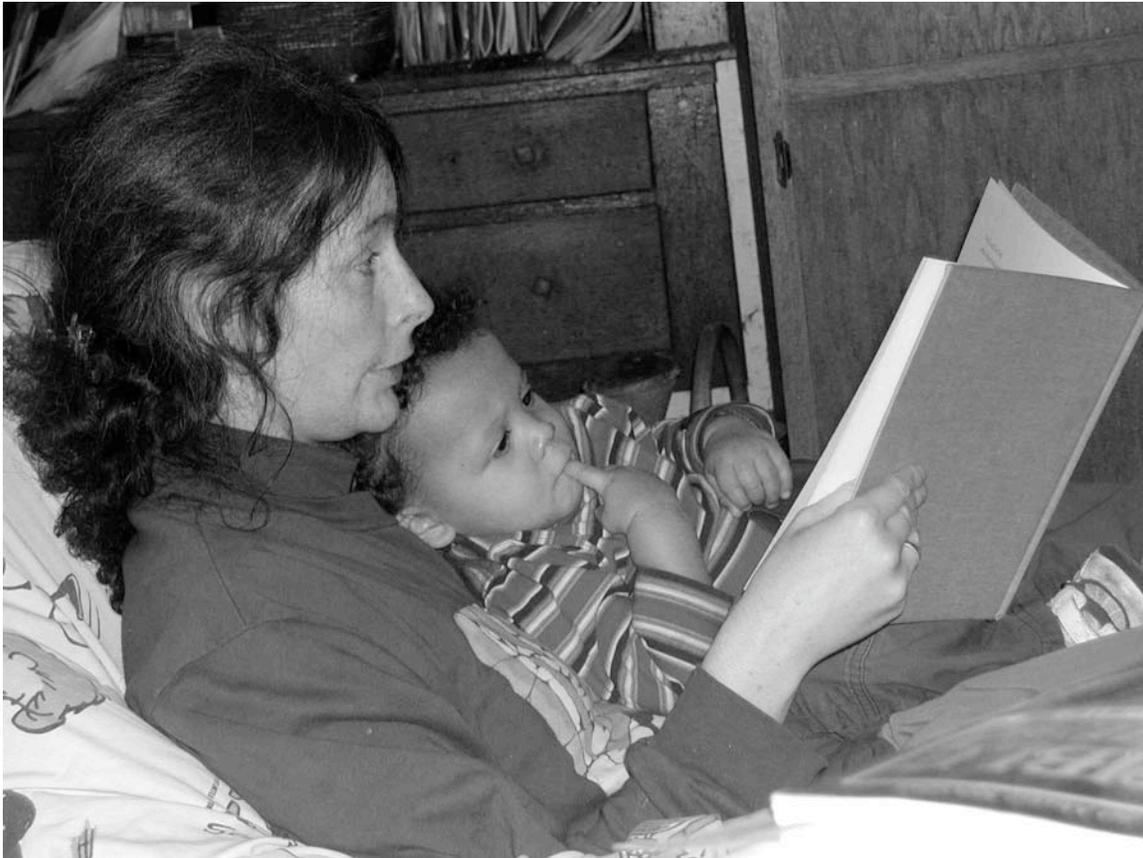


What the Dormouse said. . .

**AN ACCESSIBLE GUIDE TO THE SHADY LANDS
BETWEEN CHILD DEVELOPMENT, READING,
AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE.**



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“...And I’ll study child development—“

Ramona interrupted. “What’s child development?”

“How kids grow,” answered her father.

Why does anyone have to go to school to study a thing like that? wondered Ramona. All her life she had been told that the way to grow was to eat good food, usually food she did not like, and get plenty of sleep, usually when she had more interesting things to do than go to bed.*

— from *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*

Introduction

Selecting an “appropriate” children’s book for a particular child can be a sometimes tricky task. While you could simply pick up a “classic” work and check the “recommended ages” notation to make sure it’s in the range you seek, that may suffice for an occasional gift purchase for a child you don’t know very well. But what about when you’re looking for a book for a child you know well? You’d probably like to put more care into your purchase.

As a first step, there are many excellent places to find help, such as your local children’s librarian or a knowledgeable clerk in your local children’s bookstore. If you’re looking to learn more about what attributes to look for in children’s literature (“How do I know if this

* Cleary, Beverly. *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*. New York: Harper Trophy, 1992. pp 15–16.

is a good book for children?”), there are many excellent books, guides, and lists available to help you through that process; these are listed in the Bibliography.

Hand-in-hand with a discussion of the characteristics of quality children’s literature (and, perhaps, not-so-quality children’s literature) is child development. Children are not merely small adults, and their needs, desires, and capabilities are changing from even before they are born. These changes are not only cognitive, but motor, sensory, and social. By understanding at a basic level what is happening with children as they develop, you can consider these factors as you think about children’s books.

That is what this guide sets out to do; it covers child development in a reader-friendly, useful manner centered around the implications developmental changes have for book selection. It encourages you to think about children as thinking, feeling creatures that are not merely the passive recipients of text, but as interacting with the book. (This is even more true in storytelling situations.)

This guide is for laypeople of all types. Nascent children’s librarians, parents, doting relatives, pediatric residents...and, I hope, you! After you’ve spent a lot of time around children, you do develop a “sixth sense” about what’s appropriate for a child, but getting started is difficult. That is where this guide may help.

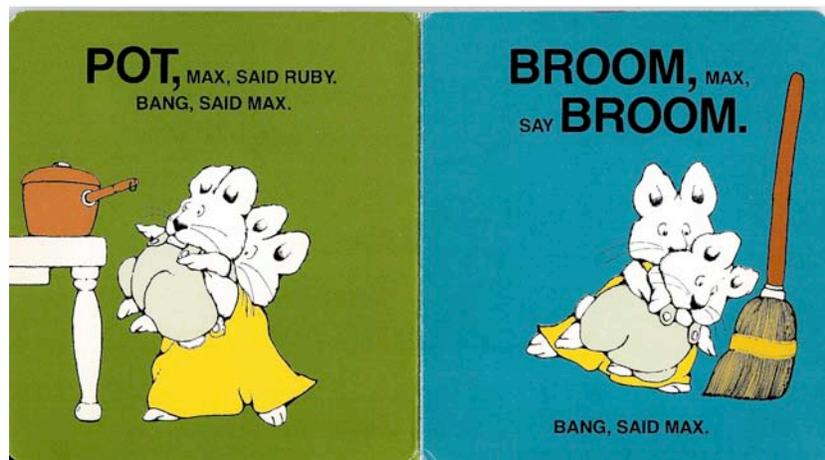
The Basics

WHAT TO KEEP IN MIND
BOOKS AT THE “WRONG LEVEL”
SELF-READING VS. BEING READ TO
SUBJECT MATTER

There are two very basic things to keep in mind when considering children’s books:

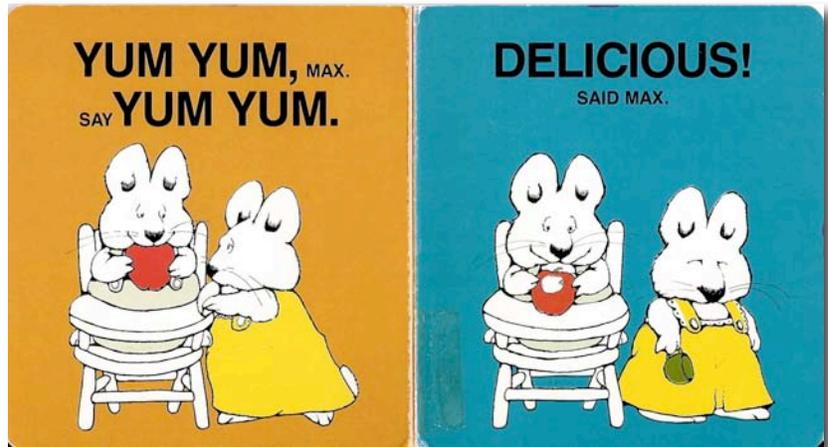
One, do **you** like it? A book that you find boring is not necessarily something a child will find as rewarding as one you find stimulating. This doesn’t imply a necessarily high reading level; even the simplest of books can have an engrossing plot. Consider, for example, the entire text of *Max’s First Word*:

Max’s one word was BANG!
No, Max, said his sister, Ruby. Say CUP. BANG, said Max.
POT, Max, said Ruby. BANG, said Max.
BROOM, Max, say BROOM. BANG, said Max.
FISH, Max, said Ruby.
EGG EGG EGG EGG [says Ruby, pointing at one.]
Back in your CHAIR, Max. BANG, said Max.
Say APPLE, Max.
YUM YUM, Max. Say YUM YUM. [says Ruby, as he eats the apple]
DELICIOUS! said Max.*



* Wells, Rosemary. *Max’s First Word*. New York: Dial Books, 1979

While the language in this book is very simple (which is appropriate for the age group it's targeted at), there is a certain mystery as to what will happen next, and when Max will finally say



something else. When he finally does, adults as well as children can appreciate the comedy in the long word he says without prompting. The illustration is also well done, and rather than serving merely as a support for the text, at points “takes over” the story and interplays well with the written word.

Compare this to the dialogue in a book intended for a somewhat older audience:

Ted liked Mrs. Murphy.
All the children did.
She knew them all by name,
And she was their friend.
When it rained hard,
She wore her bright yellow coat
So drivers could see her easily.
[...]
“Oh, poor Mrs. Murphy,” said Mary,
“all alone when she was sick.
I think we should do
Something nice for her.”
“We could collect money
and buy her a Christmas present,”
Karen said.

“That’s a long way off,
and I think we should do something sooner,” said Ted.
“I know,” said Tony,
“her birthday’s next week!
It’s on December 5. She told me.”
“Then we can get her
a birthday present,” said Jenny.
“I wish we could give her a big birthday party!”
Karen said.
“A birthday party!”
shouted the others.
[...]
There they waited
for the exciting moment
when Mr. Holden
would bring Mrs. Murphy to the party.
How surprised she was
When she came in the door!
How they cheered!
She read the birthday sign
And looked very happy.*

While I’ve left out long passages involving the planning of the party, it is probably fairly obvious to the reader that this story will involve a party and a happy ending for everyone involved. There’s simply no mystery, no unexpected twists, and no drama. The illustrations are flat and appear to be purloined from the instructions for a 1970s retro party. An adult would probably only finish this book out of a sense of morbid curiosity; children learning to read will find that their efforts at reading will have given them something of little value beyond words on a page.

While *Max* is a very simple book, it contains elements which are intriguing and entertaining. *Birthday* is boring, trite and dull. Let your own reaction guide you — particularly if you’re the one who’ll be reading the book aloud to the child. It’s preferable to be reading a book

* Hearn, Emily. *Stop! It’s a Birthday*. Champaign, Illinois: Garrard Publishing, 1972.

you're enthused about, because a child will rapidly figure out that you're not happy about reading if the book is boring.

The second consideration has to do with how the book will be used. While a twelve-month-old would clearly not be able to read the text in Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (which is marked as being appropriate for ages 4 through 8), there is absolutely nothing stopping an adult from reading it to a child of that age and letting them enjoy the illustrations and the sound of the words rolling off their tongue. Indeed, as we will see, the process of being read to is essential to a child's learning to read.¹ Don't assume, as some have, that a child needs to speak before learning how to read.

The age categorizations listed on books tend to assume that you're seeking a book for a child to read on their own and to fully appreciate all aspects of the book. However, a child may enjoy having the story read to them or looking at the pictures; a dog-obsessed toddler can derive great enjoyment from a book featuring many pictures of dogs even if the text is at the level of a fourth grader. With the exception of content which the child may find frightening or that is clearly inappropriate (i.e. a book on sex designed for adolescents), almost any book can be enjoyed by a younger audience than it was designed for. Just keep in mind that it should be *interesting*.

As a final note, as children grow older, they find that they like to read stories about children slightly older than they are. They are often fascinated by their similar but oh-so-different in just a very-special-way capabilities — clearly different, but not so advanced as to be

¹ Adams 1990, Robbins & Ehri 1994

unattainable. Books which feature a protagonist who is one or two years older than the child are often popular.

Thematic structure

AGES & STAGES

As you progress through this site, you'll find that I've used a "thematic" structure when discussing aspects of child development. For example, the section on eight months discusses stranger anxiety, which is then not referred to much later on. This should not be taken to mean that stranger anxiety is not an issue; indeed, it's a major issue for most fifteen-month-olds. Rather than go through a step-wise listing of developmental changes in each age group, I find that an "overarching theme" approach works well in helping you learn about how children think and change over time.

When discussed, each theme will, where appropriate, cover the ages at which the theme is appropriate. However, my focus is on having you understand the processes that are occurring so you may relate them to book selection and enjoyment.

Beware

MARKETING GONE WILD

Beware of the trend towards "developmentally appropriate" marketing. While there *is* research which underlies the books, toys and videos, the claims made for the benefits of these items are generally overwrought. Most of the differences found are minor and of little

consequence. The marketing is predicated on parental anxieties that their child will not succeed academically and that these products will reduce that risk. It also serves as a balm to a guilty parent's soul when their children are left in front of a video while the family dinner is being made, because at least the video is "good for them."

Don't fall for it. The most important factor in reading is *you*. No amount of black and white stripes, counting drills, or discussion questions is going to make up for that interaction. There's nothing wrong with the Baby Einstein series' *Poetry for Little Ones* in and of itself. However, there's no need for the discussion questions or the enthusiastic marketing of the "immense" developmental value of the book. There are far better collections of poetry available. Is there anything wrong with playing Mozart to your child? Of course not. Just don't do it with the intention of making your child "a genius".

Oh, and as for leaving your child in front of a video occasionally while making dinner: it's okay. Much like eating junk food, doing that occasionally is fine — and it can be very satisfying for the child to do something just because it's fun. Fun is what being a child is all about.

"Play is the work of infancy." — T. Berry Brazelton

Newborns

SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN THE NEEDS OF PARENTS

The more enthusiastic among you may have taken to lurking outside maternity wards, waiting to push quality children's literature into the hands of unsuspecting new parents. While your efforts are appreciated, this may not be the best time to be promoting reading. New parents (even experienced ones) are dealing with myriad changes. Sleep patterns are disrupted, physical spaces are changed around, and emotions are running the gamut from elation to exhaustion to sadness. Also, many parents have unclear ideas about what the capabilities of their new infant are; there's a common perception that infants can't see at all, when in actuality their ability to track a red ball or a human face is present from the moment of birth.²

Given the domestic upheaval and these misperceptions, it's fairly likely that a suggestion of reading to a child at this point will be met with a counter-suggestion that you seek psychiatric treatment. Or, at the least, politely ignored. There's quite a few things going on at this age, and now is not the time to push a reading agenda.

There are, however, two possible exceptions. For one thing, if motivated parents are already reading to their children, by all means, support them! They should be commended on their decision and be told that their actions really will be good for their child's development. Unfortunately, it's a common phenomenon that parents are given far too much unsolicited

² Brazelton & Nugent 1995.

advice and opinions, and it wouldn't be unheard of for them to be told they're wasting their time reading to a newborn. A little support for their decision can go a long way, whether you're a health care professional, librarian, or a friend or relative.

The other instance in which reading to a newborn should be encouraged is in the case of medical problems. The child who ends up in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (a premature child, or a full-term child with some other issue that requires more care than a routine nursery can provide) or a similar place has a unique set of challenges for the parents.

Perhaps the most well-known "special needs" situation is that of Cushla, documented extensively in the work *Cushla and Her Books*.³ This is the story of a developmentally delayed child who progressed beyond the expectations of medical providers, largely due to her immersion in children's literature from a very, very early stage. While much of Cushla's developmental successes can be attributed to the books and being read to, early on in her life there was another critical aspect: the value for the parents.

Cushla, at the time of writing, is four years and nine months old. Her handicaps, which will remain with her, impair her speech production, her dexterity, her capacity for responding instantaneously to the myriad facets that the world presents for the swift inspection of the alert, well-equipped child.

But the content of her speech reveals a capacity for thought that outstrips that of the average five-year-old; her concentration is intense, her determination to extract meaning unwavering. It seems clear that access to such a wealth of words and pictures, in a setting of consistent love and support, has contributed enormously to her cognitive development in general, and her language in particular.

But most of all Cushla's books have surrounded her with friends; with people and warmth and colour during the days when her life was lived in almost constant pain and frustration. The adults who have loved her and have tried to represent the world to her when she could not do this for

³ Butler 1979

herself, have played their parts. But perhaps it was the characters themselves who went with her into the dark and lonely places that only she knew.

And perhaps they will always be with her: Peter Rabbit and Grandmother Lucy, Mr Grumpy and James, James, followed by a procession of cats and kings, tigers and bears, with Davy and Emma and Naughty Agapanthus bringing up the rear. If so, she will be well fortified.

Cushla's own words, recorded on 18 August 1975, when she was three years eight months old may tell us all we need to know. They were spoke as she settled herself on the sofa, her rag doll in her arms, and the usual pile of books at her side. "Now I can read to Looby Lou, 'cause she's tired and sad, and she needs a cuddle and a bottle and a book."

Surely a prescription for any child, with or without handicaps.*

Having a child in a medically intensive situation is difficult for any parent. For an older child (even a few months), a parent can usually proffer some comfort through a favourite game or song, but a newborn is often a cipher, with a personality as yet undiscovered. Couple that with a preemie's need to be handled gently and spend many hours in an isolated incubator, and the new parent can be at a loss of what to do. On one hand, there is a terrible compulsion to want to be with your child continually. On the other hand, the "ground rules" for supporting a child through a stressful time are very different than it may be with an older child. Simply sitting there can present not only a physical and logistical challenge to the parent, but also a tremendous psychic burden. What to do?

Books can help here. Reading to a child, even one physically isolated from you in an incubator, can provide a connection and a purpose for the parent. Helping develop that bond at a stressful time is critical — and the benefits to the child of hearing their parents' voice are substantial. Mentally, for the parent, having something purposeful "to do" can make a difference.

* Butler, Dorothy. *Cushla and Her Books*. In *Signal*, January 1977, pp 32–33.

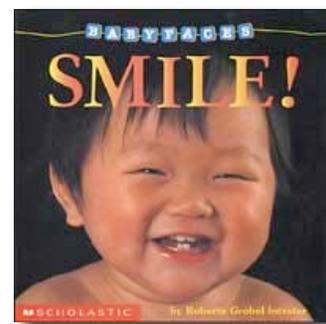
Three months

VISUAL STIMULATION DIVERSITY

At the three month age, babies have achieved a greater level of visual acuity than when they were born. While newborns are able to discern patterns of light and dark as well as recognize human faces, their capabilities by three months have extended to include finer discernment of detail and colour. Even so, black or bold colours against a white background will hold a child's interest more than something more subtle.⁴

The innate ability of a newborn to recognize a human face is primal and compelling; research has shown a great deal of emphasis on the “proper” arrangement of the facial features in neonatal recognition. Increasingly, as they approach the age of three to four months, the “reflex smile” (which is an automatic, spontaneous occurrence) is replaced by social smiling, in which they respond to a smile or human face within their visual field. This is generally accompanied by cooing, squeals, and giggles, all of which can cause an adult's heart to melt away.

An example of a book which plays off of these developments is *Smile!*^{*} While there are words on the bottom of each page, they are there more for parents to read out than for a beginning reader to parse, although obviously they can do so if they wish. The main feature are the full, beautiful faces of smiling babies.



⁴ Fantz 1963

^{*} Intrater, Roberta Grobel. *Smile!* New York: Cartwheel, 1997.

Stop and gaze at the pictures yourself for a moment; you will find yourself smiling back, at least internally if not externally.

Examine also the children themselves that are featured in the photographs; throughout the book, they are of both sexes as well as of multiple ethnicities. This is tremendously important; not only should children from a young age learn about a world in which people look different (even if their surroundings are relatively homogenous), but they should also have the experience of seeing themselves (i.e. their own general ethnic group) reflected in literature.

Six months

MOTOR DEVELOPMENT BOARD BOOKS

At six months, infants have achieved greater motor skills. They are sitting up (which means their hands are free to hold books!), and some are crawling. Of even more relevance, their fine motor skills are making great strides, moving from a simple “reach-and-grasp” where a non-directed reach makes contact with an object and grasps it to a far more sophisticated intentional, directed grasp. The child has moved beyond a simple, coincidental ability to manipulate to a world where they can not only take in sensory information but now have the ability to make changes to it that they intend. This is an absolutely tremendous development for children, and is fraught with implications for their cognitive development. For the first time, substantial changes in the world around are not only something you passively receive, but can motivate yourself.

Grasping is also changing over time; most children at this point do what we call a “palmar grasp”, where they use all their fingers as a single unit and “palm” items. Later on, at nine months, we see a pincer grasp, where the index finger and thumb are used to pick up something. This makes a big difference in dexterity — turning pages just got a lot easier!

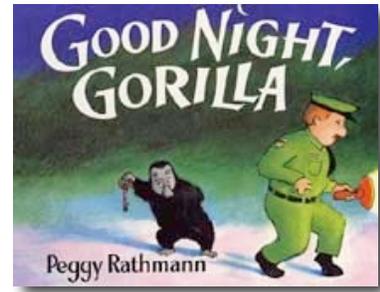
This age also features a great deal of “mouthing”; children use their mouths to explore the world and examine texture, hardness, and material. Rather than being discouraged, children should be permitted to mouth objects, as long as the objects do not pose a threat to their well-being. There is an old saying about a book being “good enough to eat”; for a child, this may be close to the truth!

Accordingly, children at this age do well with board books. These works are printed on cardboard, which has several advantages. One, the book is durable, and will not tear easily, whereas paper will give way to unknowingly destructive fingers. Two, it will stand up to a modest amount of moisture, which is an issue when books are routinely mouthed. Three, the pages are, in effect, “fat”, which are easier for a child to turn with their still-developing fine motor skills. The main negative is that board books are more expensive than an equivalent paperback.

Consider, for example, the excellent *Good Night, Gorilla*.^{*} The board book edition is small enough for a young child to hold and the pages are both thick enough to encourage manipulation but also resist gnawing. The work itself is also well-suited to infants and

^{*} Rathmann, Peggy. *Good Night, Gorilla*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1996.

toddlers since the majority of the work is visual rather than textual, so a toddler could “read to themselves” easily without having to rely on textual understand which they may not yet have.



A trend over the last few years has been to put classic works of children’s literature in board book formats, including works which are intended for somewhat older children. This in and of itself is not a bad thing; if it permits an adult to read such a work to a child and allow the child to turn pages and manipulate the books themselves, then it is a good thing. Some have noted that the board books tend to be smaller than their paper editions, and yet others wonder about having a book designed for a four year old being put in the hands of an infant, but as I noted at the outset, there is nothing inherently wrong with this.

Nine months

STRANGER ANXIETY AND SEPARATION RITUALS

The nine month old begins to exhibit a marked change from the jovial and indiscriminate smiles of the six month old; indeed, we often see the beginnings of stranger anxiety and shyness. Cognitively, the child is now able to distinguish the difference between familiar faces and those he or she is not sure of. Coupled with stranger anxiety is the emergence of the fear of separation. While you can hand a four month old to almost anyone with little or no adverse reaction from the child, a ten month old will generally have something to say

about the matter; in no uncertain terms! Different children react to separation differently, which is not unusual and has been studied in great depth.⁵

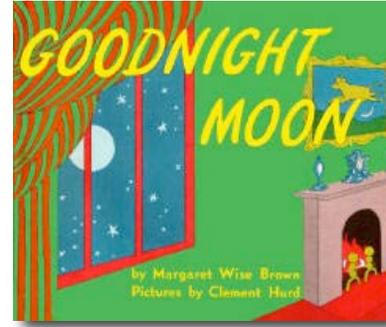
When encountering an unfamiliar child at this age, it's often best to almost completely ignore the child, aside from perhaps a brief, friendly wave. The child will size you up as you interact with his or her parents, and, hopefully, will decide that you don't represent a threat. You'll find this approach more useful than trying to go directly to the child from the beginning.

At this age, routine has become important; indeed, it allows the child to predict what is likely to happen and thereby be prepared for necessary separations such as being dropped off at day care. While we don't necessarily think of it as such, sleep, especially as generally conceived of in Western child-rearing, amounts to a substantial separation. Being alone in a limited space in the dark is a lot more daunting than one might think.

Accordingly, books can play an important role in rituals and routines. By reading before bedtime, a child can grow to expect what will happen next: sleep. When I read to my then eighteen-month-old son before bed, the last book I read him almost every time was *Goodnight Moon*. He associated this book with sleep so strongly that on occasion, when he was tired and wanted to go to bed, he would point at *Goodnight Moon* to indicate his wishes.

⁵ Ainsworth 1978

Goodnight Moon is a classic work that highlights the importance of ritual. In it, a bunny is going to bed as the room is slowly described. The second part of the book consists of the bunny individually saying “goodnight” to each of the objects, complete with little bits of wordplay.



With each alternate spread we see the room, depicted in beautifully bright colours, although as it progresses we also see the light in the room growing dimmer and dimmer. In between the spreads of the room, we see the individual objects depicted in shades of grey, allowing for a respite between the views of the room from the same perspective.

First of all, older children will identify with the bunny, who goes through this long “goodnight” ritual; many children will do their best to delay the inevitable arrival of bedtime. At the same time, seeing the ritual can serve as an excellent model for children themselves who are preparing for bed. The gentle, quiet process of going to sleep is a reassurance that this is a natural, regular process that children should not be frightened of.

Twelve to Eighteen months

ASSERTING INDEPENDENCE & PUSHING LIMITS

EMOTIONS AS IDEAS, NOT WORDS

LEARNING TO NAME

BOOK BABBLING

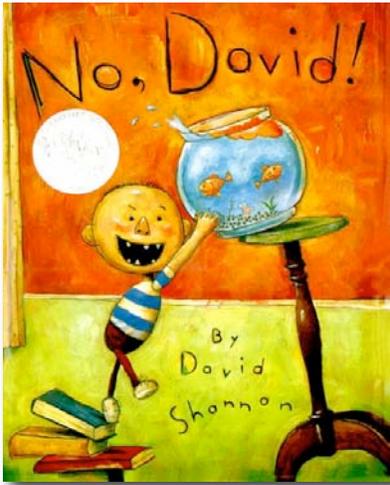
The period between twelve and eighteen months is characterized by an increasing drive to assert independence and push limits. I think most of us are familiar with the term “the

terrible twos”; the reality is that the “terrible twos” really begin around fifteen months! Children are becoming adept at a variety of abilities, not the least of which are ready mobility (walking) as well as the ability to ask for things. This is a splendid set of developments for them; imagine being able to do things which only a few months prior were impossible. At the same time, they have little knowledge of where their abilities end or what may be dangerous; this is where the role of the parent or caregiver comes in.

Limit-setting is what a child needs at this age. This will be a source of great frustration to both the child and the adult, because having to place restrictions on these wonderful new powers is unfathomable to the child, and the results can be less than pretty. At the same time, caregivers must be careful to not overly restrict a child, because it is only through allowing exploration that children will develop further.

Another concept important at this age is the fact that emotions are expressed as ideas, not words. A child doesn’t generally understand the word “angry”, but may express their own anger by getting mad at an “uncooperative toy”. A tantrum occurs because of frustration; either frustration at being unable to express an emotion, or to understand why things must be a particular way. As noted child psychiatrist Stanley Greenspan says, “Because emotions give direction to our actions and meaning to our experiences, they enable us to control our behavior, store and organize our experiences, construct new experiences, solve problems, and think.”⁶ A child that is unable to express their emotions appropriately has difficulty with all these tasks until they are able to master this skill.

⁶ Greenspan *et al.* 1998



By riding out a tantrum and then spending time reconnecting, a parent can teach a child to appropriately name feelings and use “pretend play”. Many books try to connect a child’s inability to express emotions with plot and character. *No, David** is an example of such a work. In it, a boy continually gets into trouble page after page, with an unseen maternal voice scolding him, repeatedly stating “No!” Things reach a climax when David is sent to his room and he begins to cry; it is then that his mother hugs him and tells him she loves him.

The simple words (coupled with a lot of repetition), together with entertaining images of David repeatedly getting into trouble will appeal to children who are familiar with being in David’s position. By sharing a light-hearted reading of this with a caregiver, children will learn that while discipline is necessary, the adult is not necessarily immune to the humor in these situations.

Imagine a young child who may go through this many, many times themselves. Experiencing this process in a story, complete with a reconnection at the end, can be tremendously valuable. A parent can refer back to the story later as well, stating “Do you remember when Davey started crying in the story? You must feel sad like that now as well.” By relating the present to the book as well as labeling the emotion (“sad”), the child slowly

* Shannon, David. *No, David!* New York: Blue Sky Press, 1998.

learns how to express their inner feelings and avoid the frustration associated with a lack of ability to convey emotions.

Most children will, once walking, discover that they now have the ability to bring objects to you. My own son began bringing books to me, holding them up in the air, and making a small noise; this was his way of asking me to read to him. When he does this, I ask him “Do you want me to read this to you?” In this manner, I’m hoping he’s learning the correct terms so he can ask for what he wants as he advances.

Likewise, you can follow this approach while reading. You can point to a picture and ask the child a question, such as “What’s that?” If they respond in any fashion, great! If not, after a pause, fill the answer in yourself. Providing positive reinforcement for their naming action is also good.⁷ Before long, children will start to spontaneously name the things which they know, even before you point at it. (My son was able to spot a dog on a page instantly, no matter how small; he then begins to say “oof oof!” at it.)

Other aspects of books that are popular at this age concern familiar characters — animals, other children, adults doing things they routinely see, etc. Stories now make more of an imprint on a child, but plot is not necessarily something appreciated quite yet. Books that encourage the readers to sing are also good since children begin to sing in this time period as well. Likewise, books with repetitive language (such as *Goodnight Moon* or *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*^{*}) are popular as they learn to anticipate the pattern and “read along with it”. This “book babbling” is often seen as they “read to themselves”. Interestingly enough, there are

⁷ Ninio & Bruner 1978

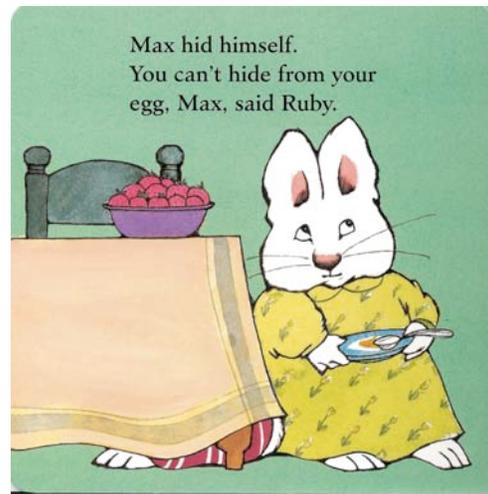
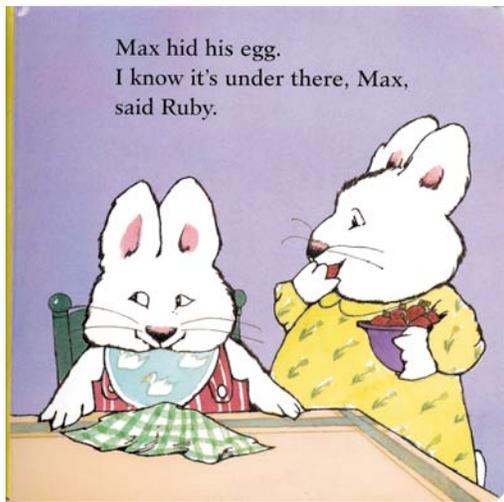
^{*} Carle, Eric. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. New York: Philomel, 1981.

differences between this and the sounds made when they imitate conversation (called “expressive jargon”). Even at this age, the diction and pattern of reading aloud has been noticed to be different.

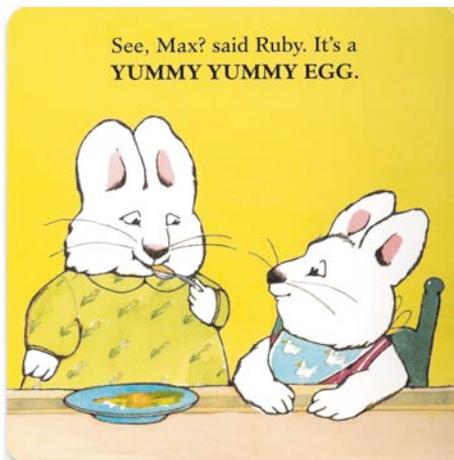
Two years

SYMBOLIC FUNCTION
RECEPTIVE & EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE
NARRATIVE

At two years, we see the emergence of language. While most children are talking (and understanding) before this, a clear sophistication begins to make itself apparent around this time period. A major theme is the use of symbolic function, where one thing stands for another. Not only is a child now able to use one item to represent another, but also at work is the concept that general rules may apply in a variety of situations. This opens up a whole new world, and leads to the world of the ever-questions, always talking two year old.

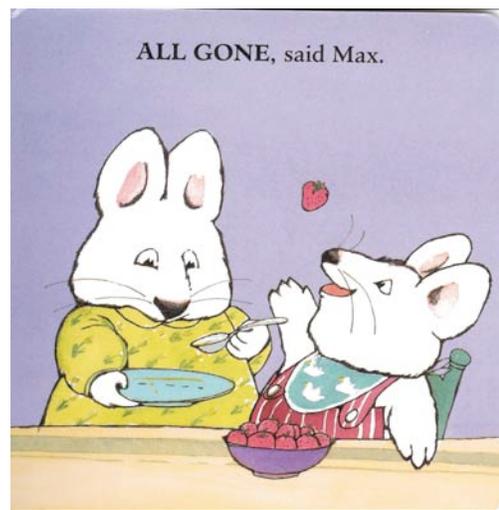


Take a look at *Max's Breakfast** as an example of this ability to understand wider meanings behind a situation. In this book, Max is being harangued by his sister Ruby to eat his egg. A



variety of hijinks ensue, including Max's apparent belief that by hiding himself from his egg he won't have to eat it since he can't see it. A child who looks at this will understand the humor since it is readily apparent that hiding from the egg doesn't change anything about its existence. Even better, the story ends with Ruby being tricked into

eating the egg for Max, who clearly knows that he has wormed himself out of having to eat the egg as he declares "All Gone!". While the format of the book may appear to be simple (short sentences, easy vocabulary, etc) the story itself is tremendously sophisticated, and will provide a good workout to a two year old's emerging cognitive skills.

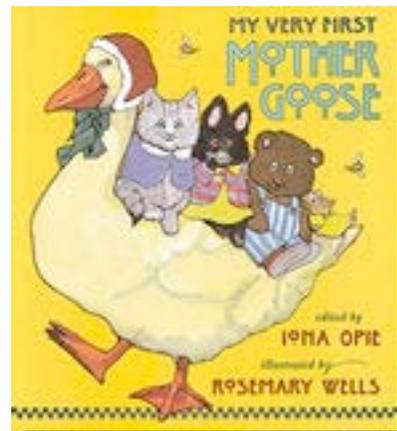


* Wells, Rosemary. *Max's Breakfast*. New York: Viking Books, 2004.

Another concept seen at this age is the difference between receptive and expressive language. Receptive language is the ability to understand language, and this generally correlates better with eventual language development. Expressive language is a child's ability to speak. While many people focus on the number of words a child has available in his or her vocabulary, the fact of the matter is that receptive language almost always is ahead of expressive language.

This has a couple of major implications. For one thing, never assume that a child can not understand what you're saying. Even if their understanding does not extend to every word, context and emotion can often fill in the blanks for them. Also, this places an important responsibility onto caregivers: they should respond to a child's utterances as if they made sense. Speaking to a child as if a full conversation was taking place will allow them to hear a model of how to express themselves.⁸

Iona Opie's *My Very First Mother Goose* has rhymes which are of considerably sophisticated vocabulary and semantic structure, some of which are difficult for literate adults to parse easily.* Yet we insist on reading these to children, and rightly so. The rhyme and rhythm of the works, together with grammatical



variation and unfamiliar words are a challenge to a child who may be used to hearing the same set of daily vocabulary words on a regular basis. Allowing a child to realize that there

⁸ Hart & Risley 1995

* Opie, Iona. *My Very First Mother Goose*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 1996.

are other possibilities out there (and that those possibilities are, at least through works like this, aimed at *them*) provides a cognitive boost at this period of language acquisition.

Children also gain skills at relating what happened to them in the recent past, called “personal narratives”. This ability moves from simple “yes/no” responses to questions to them asking questions themselves about events.⁹ This is very similar to the experience that they may have with books. There is now an increasingly complex set of skills a toddler can use to query a book about what it holds — and to query an adult about what it is they’re reading!

Since narratives often concern the experiences of being someplace or doing something, they incorporate emotions into their retelling. Likewise, emotions are likely to become a bigger theme in children’s experience of books, as they learn to name and interpret motivations and reasons for actions. In the same way that narrative is important in their own lives, quality stories are important now — a child can appreciate much more the flow of action, compared to a book where each page may have only a vague thematic relation to the previous pages.¹⁰

Finally, kids are very, very active at this point. If possible, they would experience absolutely everything simultaneously, so as to avoid missing anything. Relatively short stories will work best for the child who wants to get up and play frequently, although be warned that some children will demand to be read to *while* they play! Bedtime is often a good point for that longer book to come out, since fatigue can often be your best friend.

⁹ Fivush 1994

¹⁰ Flood 1977, Sulzby 1985

Three years

FANTASY & MAGIC

ANIMISM

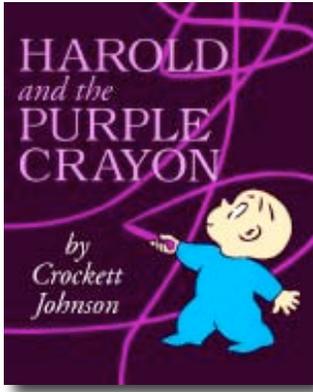
VOCABULARY

Fantasy and magic arrives for the three year old. A child at this age will frequently enter into elaborate pretend play as well as construct fantastic worlds that perhaps only make sense to him or her. This is not mere entertainment or escapist construct; rather, fantasy allows a child an outlet for further cognitive growth and can tell us about their inner hopes, fears, dreams, and wants. If you recall the emergence of “symbolic function” in the two year old, you now see that taking a fully fleshed-out form in fantasy. The world is no longer merely what is directly experienced by the senses; it’s moved on into imagination.

Through fantasy a child can process their experiences and learn to understand them. The world can often be difficult and bewildering, and by allowing fantasy to assist in this cognitive, emotional, and social sense-making, children can deconstruct their day in a manner when they have the time and mental “safety” to do so. If you’ve ever heard a children talking to themselves as they play or lie in bed, this is exactly what they’re doing.

Fantasy allows for emotional growth; children can work through strong emotions in a “safe” manner, resolve tension, and experiment with novel roles for themselves. Social growth can also take place, as children can share fantasies and learn more about the possibilities out there from each other. Finally, cognitive growth occurs through an ability to work out what happened earlier in the day and to understand the world.

In *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, a young boy creates a fantasy world solely through his magical purple crayon.* He goes for a walk, using his powers to construct an adventure for himself. However, he soon tires and finds himself unable to return home but manages to resolve the problem through some clever thinking, hence resolving the tension of being lost and in an



unfamiliar place. The artwork in this book consists of almost exclusively Harold and his purple drawings that populate his fantasy world. For Harold, of course, this world is accepted matter-of-factly, and children in this age group will fully understand that level of acceptance.

Another frequently seen theme at this age is animism, where inanimate objects (furniture, plants, stars, etc) are given feelings and motives. As Selma Fraiberg states in her book *The Magic Years*, “A child’s contact with the real world can be strengthened by periodic excursions into fantasy into a world where the deepest wishes can achieve imaginary gratification.”¹¹ Through ascribing motives and emotions to objects, children may be expressing some of their own wants and desires.

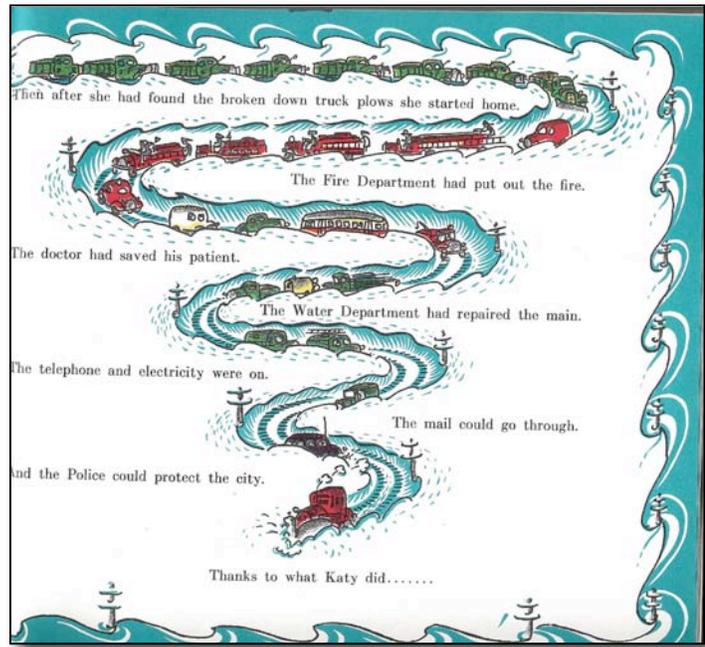
Animism is a frequent theme in children’s literature; we see it all the time in a variety of settings. In the classic work *Katy and the Big Snow**, a snow shovel named Katy saves the day by clearing the city of snow and allowing the streets to remain open. Themes of valour, heroism, and persistence are all expressed through Katy, and a child who may be experimenting with these concepts will enjoy reading about Katy’s exploits.

* Johnson, Crockett. *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. New York: Harper, 1955.

¹¹ Fraiberg 1959.

* Burton, Virginia Lee. *Katy and the Big Snow*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.

Together with symbolic function come dreams and nightmares. These also serve as an outlet for a child's need to process experiences, but it's important not to overemphasize the experience of the dream. General reassurance regarding nightmares is preferable



to a "buying in" of the child's experience, which can blur the line between reality and fantasy and confuse the child.

Vocabulary development continues at a steady pace; this process is assisted by books as they provide a context for caregivers and children to experience new words and puzzle through meanings.¹² Non-fiction books seem to work better as a tool for word-learning, not only because unfamiliar words are often explained in the text, but also because adult readers often feel a lesser obligation to narrative flow with non-fiction and are willing to stop and explain a difficult word.¹³ As mentioned before, books with repetitive, predictable patterns can be useful here, although one should be careful not to make these types of books the exclusive reading material available.

¹² Senechal, Thomas & Monker 1995.

¹³ Pellegrini *et al* 1990.

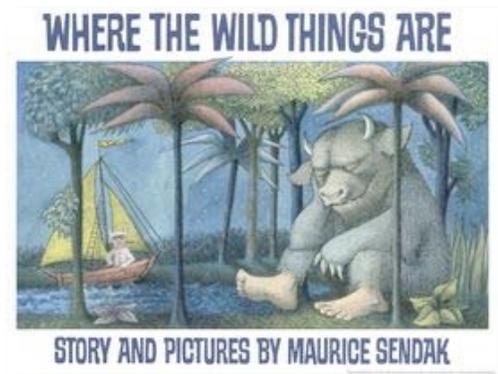
Four years

INITIATIVE VERSUS GUILT ETHNIC AND GENDER IDENTITY MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Development continues to progress as a child reaches four years of age, with new aspects becoming apparent while prior areas continue to move forward. There are multiple concepts of identity at work, and the child moves beyond fantasy and magic to more concrete ideas and concepts. There are also the initial stages of moral development at play.

One of the fundamental conflicts in children at this stage is the tension between initiative and guilt. On one hand, the child wishes to take initiative and explore, play and test the limits of the world around them. At the same time, there is a sensation of guilt if those limits are pushed too far and they do what they know they shouldn't be doing. A child with "too much" initiative may be aggressive and a bully, whereas one with a heightened sense of guilt may blame themselves for things that are beyond their control.

Examine one of the greatest of all classics, *Where The Wild Things Are*.^{*} In it, Max is sent to his room without supper because he "made mischief of one kind and another". We see a reprise of the fantasy and magic theme as he launches himself into a fantasy world where he gains control over "the wild



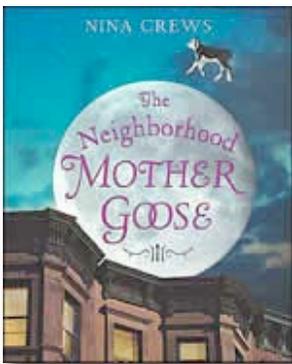
things" and sends them to bed without supper, merely because he can. However, Max is

^{*} Sendak, Maurice. *Where The Wild Things Are*. New York: HarperCollins, 1963.

seized with a sense of loneliness and guilt, and comes back home to the safety and security of his own room.

On one hand, Max is showing a lot of initiative, both in his mischievous actions as well as in his control of the wild things; at the same time, he realizes that perhaps he was not entirely in the right himself, and opts to return out of his fantasy now that he's processed what happened. Children will be able to identify with Max's desire to escape to a world where he is in charge, but will also appreciate the return to a caring, familiar, loving world (“[he] wanted to be where someone loved him best of all.”)

Two major themes also covered at this age are the development of ethnic and gender identity. Children are able to actively identify ethnic differences as early as age three. It is important that caregivers do not ignore the issue of ethnic difference, because by pretending that there is simply no difference between ethnic groups, children will be unprepared for a society in which ethnic differences are a substantial theme. Many books exist which depict a variety of ethnic characters, including not only skin colour but attire, food, and other aspects.

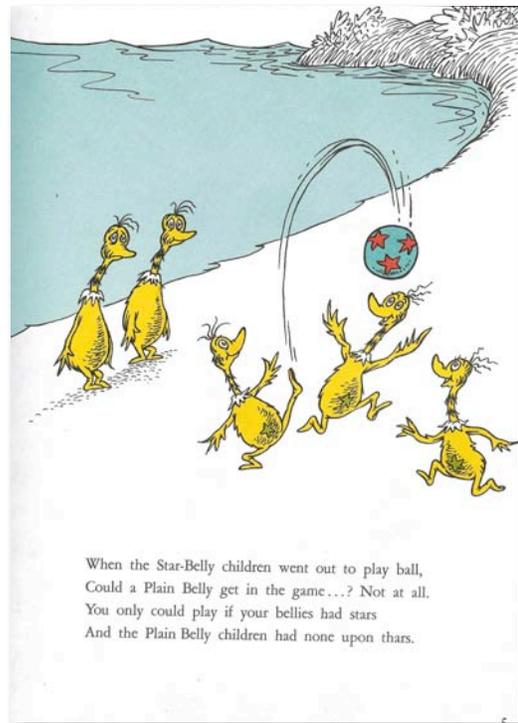
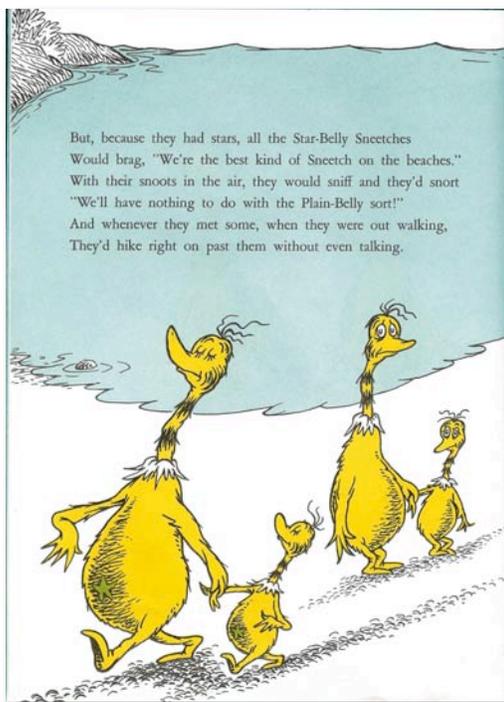


For example, the traditional Mother Goose rhymes are beautifully accompanied in *The Neighborhood Mother Goose** by photographs of ethnically-appropriate kids in a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. Children deserve to see others like them and their friends in books, and this is a low-key approach to a classic work while incorporating this aspect. Even for children who may not recognize this world (say, those

* Crews, Nina. *The Neighborhood Mother Goose*. New York: Amistad, 2004.

living in highly rural farm communities), the experience of understanding that children in other places both do things differently *as well as* the same is a critical lesson.

Other books are more emphatic in their messages about tolerance and diversity. Some are reasonably well-done, such as Dr Seuss' *Sneetches and Other Stories*.^{*} While at a higher reading level than that of a four-year-old, the story of two groups of creatures which differ by only a single, small physical characteristic and the ensuing lengths to which they go to prove that they themselves are superior to the other group is funny yet a profound allegory for all types of discrimination in our society today. On the other hand, books can also misfire terribly, such as *Who's in a Family*.^{*} This awful book, while laudably attempting to contain messages of inclusion and tolerance for all sorts of family structures, is shallow, boring, and makes thoroughly bizarre attempts at analogies with the animal world. The illustrations are flat and



^{*} Dr Seuss, *Sneetches and Other Stories*. New York: Random House Books for Young Readers, 1961.

^{*} Skutch, Robert & Laura Nienhaus. *Who's in a Family?* Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press, 1997.

the one attempt to show physical resemblance between a grandfather and his grandchild is accomplished only by their both having apparently shopped at Bob's House of Soviet Eyewear. Beware of "inclusion" and "diversity" when it's done solely for the sake of those concepts.

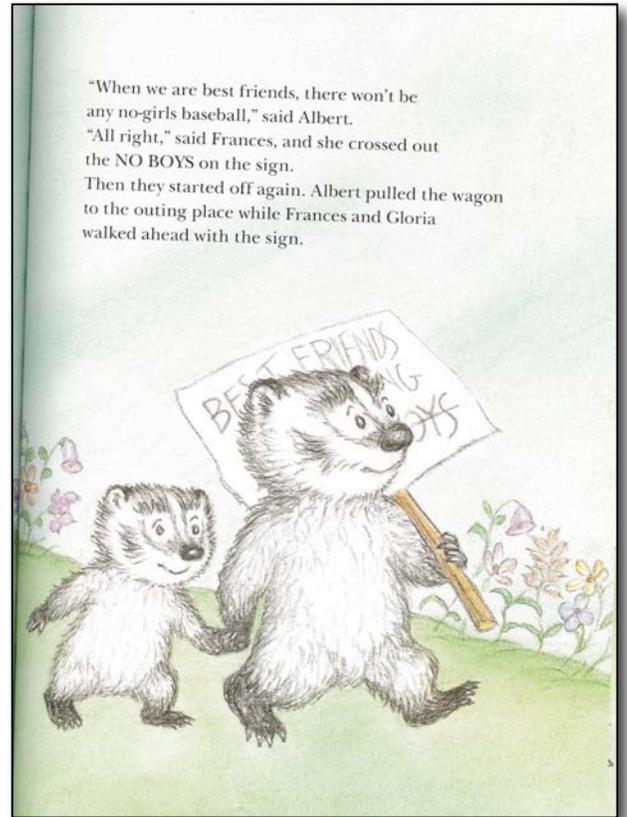
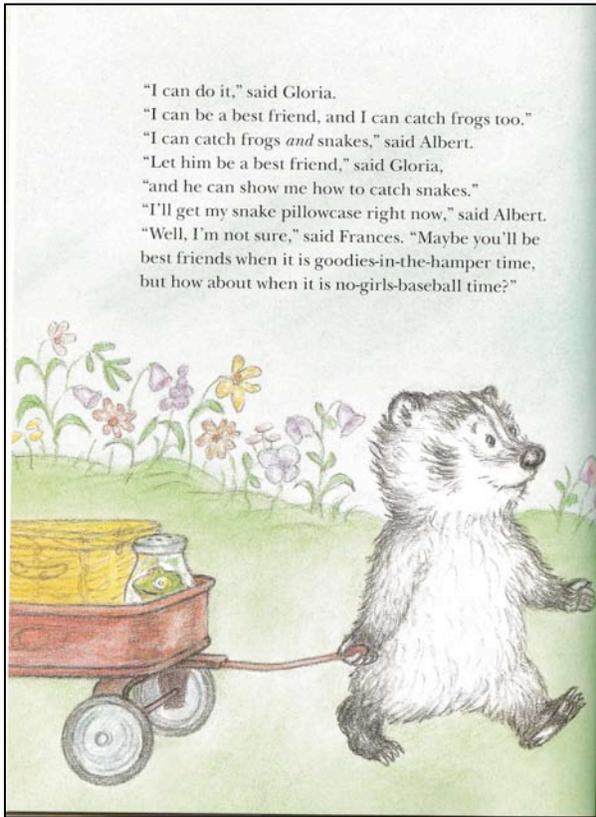
Gender identity develops over a continuum from age two, but is more clear at this point. Children are more apt to settle into a gender role, in which their behaviour reflects an inner concept of oneself as male or female. This is certainly largely mediated by societal norms and influences, and the "hidden messages" in children's literature need to be appropriately balanced. As Mem Fox states, "Everything we read constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men."¹⁴

In *Best Friends for Frances*, the title character is faced with a dilemma as her male friend organizes a "No Girls" baseball game.* This conflict, and its eventual resolution reflects well the confusion children can have over why societal norms are the way they are, as well as highlights that some gender-based exclusions simply have no good reason for existing.

And there are other things I forget,
like black and green olives and pickles and Popsicles
and probably some pretzels and things like that.
And there are salt and pepper shakers and napkins
and a checked tablecloth,
which is the way girls do it."
"Could I come along on the eating?" said Albert.
"You mean outing," said Frances.
"Outing, I mean," said Albert. "Could I come along?
That wagon looks very heavy to pull,
and you will probably get all tired out unless I help you."
"I don't know," said Frances.
"You can see from the sign that this is a no-boys outing
and it is only for best friends."
"What good is an outing without boys?" said Albert.
"It is just as good as a ball game without girls,"
said Frances, "and maybe a whole lot better."
"Can't I be a best friend?" asked Albert.
"I don't think it is the kind of thing you can do,"
said Frances, "and it would ruin my whole day
to have to explain it to you."

¹⁴ Fox 1993.

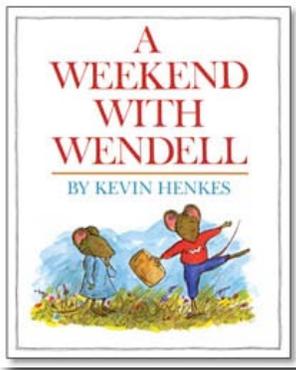
* Hoban, Russel. *Best Friends for Frances*. New York: HarperTrophy, 1976.



Finally, the foundations for moral development begin at this stage. Moral thought is still largely rule-based and justice-oriented. Rules are there to be followed (although conveniently forgotten or bent at certain points, of course), and when they are broken by someone else, the immediate cry of “that’s not fair” is raised. Children are still unable to take another person’s perspective, so adult explanations or commands should respect this, remaining concrete. (i.e. “I didn’t say you could have a cookie, so now you will go into a time-out” rather than “you should listen when I tell you to do something.”)

This question of justice and morality is explored in *A Weekend with Wendell*, where a particularly obnoxious mouse named Wendell spends the weekend with his long-suffering

cousin.* She puts up with his aggressive behaviour for most of the book, until finally she fights back, and they end up playing on an equal footing. The story covers many of the themes we've discussed in this section. Concepts of fairness and justice are explored, and



placing a child into a third-party observer role may allow him or her to begin to grasp beginning concepts of moral behaviour. Additionally, ideas of identity are turned on their head when Wendell takes over all the “good” roles in their fantasy play. Finally, the theme of initiative versus guilt is seen where Wendell’s overwrought aggressiveness pushes over his cousin’s meekness until she fights back and re-establishes the balance. There’s a lot for a child to chew on here that’s directly relevant to his or her cognitive and emotional experience.

Five years

SCHOOL READINESS

INDIVIDUALIZATION

RELATIONSHIPS AND GROUPS

A SENSE OF SELF OUTSIDE OF THE FAMILY

School readiness predominates the development of the five year old. The transition to school is a major step, even if the child was previously in day care or preschool settings. There are different rules, expectations, and skill sets necessary in order to successfully navigate the academic system, even at this early stage.

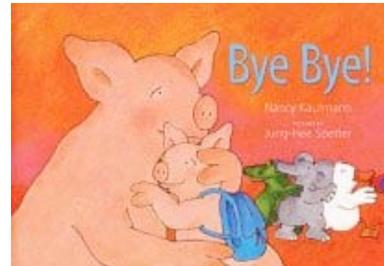
* Henkes, Kevin. *A Weekend with Wendell*. New York: HarperTrophy, 1995.

We also ask children to bring together a variety of cognitive skills necessary for reading independently. They're having to manipulate the relationship between letters and sounds; learn how to pronounce groupings of letters found in common prefixes and suffixes; and apply an increasing fund of knowledge in order to use context usefully to process meaning.¹⁵

That's a lot to master!

A new type of separation takes hold with school; while a child may have grown used to being away from parents or caregivers, school asks for something different, with less of a play-type environment than a child was used to. While a new feeling of independence and maturity can follow a child heading off to school for the first time, there can also be a sense of loss and anxiety once there.

A recent book, *Bye, Bye!*, tells the story of a piglet who has a hard time parting from his father on his first day of school.* The piglet's affectionate bonding with his father through a variety of activities contrasts nicely with his classmates, who



are engaged in typical classroom activities which the piglet is slowly drawn into. The sudden ache of separation piglet experiences will be familiar to any child who has been apart from their caregivers for even a short time, but also familiar will be the sudden realization that the day has gone by very quickly once daddy leaves.

This age is also characterized by increasing individualization. The child becomes less and less of “just another child” and is beginning to evolve into a separate and distinct individual.

¹⁵ Schickedanz 1999.

* Kaufmann, Nancy. *Bye, Bye!* Asheville, NC: Front Street, 2003

While every child has individual traits, characteristics, and personalities from even before birth, these features are now becoming apparent even to relative strangers. The developmental tasks discussed in this section all contribute further to the formation of a sense of the child's self, both within the family unit but especially outside. Parents who have been used to being present for the vast majority of the child's experience will find themselves suddenly faced with the prospect of their child exposed to a variety of stimuli that they themselves are not always present for.

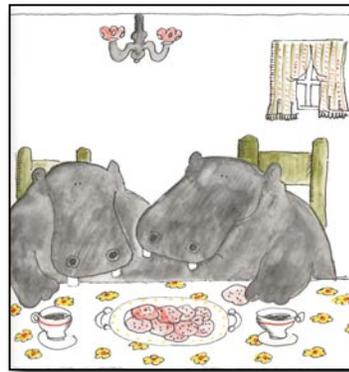
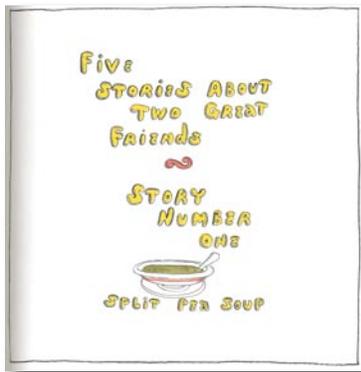
Along with the development of individualization, differences in the cognitive abilities of children become more and more apparent. Not only has enough time passed that marked differences in development are clearly seen, but children are placed side by side in the classroom setting and asked to perform a common set of tasks upon which they are evaluated. Imagine, if you will, a child that has been read to since birth: this child understands many of the basic tenets of literacy, including what books can contain, how to manipulate books, etc. Now place this child next to one who may have had limited exposure to books as a young child, and expose them to reading. The differences are likely to be apparent, but due to the nature of school, we expect that they should be able to perform at similar levels.

While much of the variation between children at this stage is normal and expected, the social pressures that these differences can place on a child can be significant. Advanced children can feel the need to pull back so they don't stand out as being different, while a child who is underperforming may suffer significant self-esteem problems, depending on the setting. In *Leo the Late Bloomer*, we are treated to the tale of a "late-blooming" tiger cub who is unable to

do the things his animal peers can.* Featured prominently are his father's worries about Leo, together with his mother's quiet reassurances that Leo will bloom in his own time. At long last, of course, Leo does spring ahead into developmental bliss, and all is well in the world. A child with similar issues will be reassured by Leo's plight, and perhaps understand the worries of parents and caregivers by the anxious mutterings of Leo's father.

Relationships and group activities become an increasing theme as children learn to work together and relate to one another. Concepts of leadership, sharing, group rules, and helping

one another have become more concrete. Fleshing out these ideas is not necessarily something easily accomplished, and the road can be rather bumpy. In *George and Martha*, we see the theme of friendship



"How do you expect to walk home with your loafers full of split pea soup?" she asked George.

"Oh dear," said George. "You saw me."

"And why didn't you tell me that you hate my split pea soup?"

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings," said George.

"That's silly," said Martha. "Friends should always tell each other the truth. As a matter of fact, I don't like split pea soup very much myself. I only like to make it. From now on, you'll never have to eat that awful soup again."

"What a relief!" George sighed.

"Would you like some chocolate chip cookies instead?" asked Martha.

"Oh, that would be lovely," said George.

"Then you shall have them," said his friend.

explored, as a pair of hippo friends argue, make up, and otherwise learn to respect each other's feelings and negotiate desires and wants.*

* Kraus, Robert. *Leo the Late Bloomer*. New York: HarperCollins, 1971.

* Marshall, James. *George and Martha*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.

Six to seven years

CONCRETE OPERATIONS

QUESTIONING MAGIC

RULES AND SCHEDULES

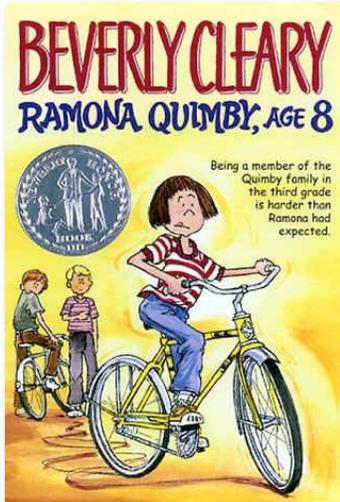
PRINT AWARENESS

The six to seven year old is at the cusp of further important cognitive changes. This is the beginning of what Piaget described as “concrete operations”. A child is now able to consider more abstract phenomenon relating to objects and situations, such as basic arithmetic, creating maps, and classification. While concepts of magical thinking will still continue, there is likely to be more and more questioning of those concepts as well as new information that is presented. This is a trend which will continue over the following years.

In addition, as a child moves through the school system, they become responsible for a new set of rules as well as schedules. Having to remember when they need to be in a certain location or when an assignment is due places an added burden on the child. There is also, for the first time, an ‘academic’ expectation: certain skills must have been mastered in order for a child to progress through the school system. This is an added source of anxiety and pressure for children and parents alike.

All of these factors are new challenges for a developing being to deal with. Beverly Cleary, in her excellent series of *Ramona* books, offers us a masterful portrayal of a young girl’s negotiation of these years and their attendant problems. In *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*, we see a scene in which Ramona has thrown up in school on the same day that her cash-strapped family has to take their car in for repairs:

Tears filled Ramona's eyes. She was not sure her legs would stand up, and how would they get home without a car? And what was her mother doing here when she was supposed to be at work? Would she lose her job?*



See also the contrast between Ramona and Willa Jean, a four year old:

“You have to be the dog,” said Willa Jean.

“Why?” Ramona kept an eye on Mrs. Kemp as she wondered how far she dared go in resisting Willa Jean's orders.

“Because I'm a beautiful rich lady and I say so,” Willa Jean informed her.

“I'm a bigger, beautifuler, richer lady,” said Ramona, who felt neither beautiful nor rich, but certainly did not want to crawl around on her hands and knees barking.

“We can't both be the lady,” said Willa Jean, “and I said it first.”

Ramona could not argue the justice of this point...+

Ramona's growing sense of rule-based ethics comes into direct conflict with her desire to ignore Willa Jean's fantasy-making.

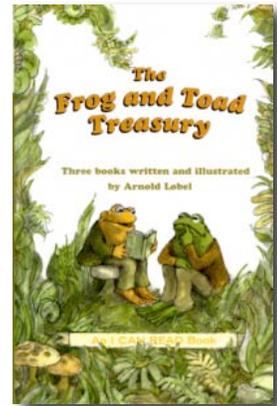
A few things have happened over the last few years of development that are also of importance to the book as a whole. Earlier, we talked about how children begin to treat the story or book as a whole, rather than as isolated pages with a loose thematic unity. However, the language used when reading also gradually changes; whereas younger children

* Cleary, Beverly. *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*. New York: Harper Trophy, 1992. p121.

+ *Ibid*, p46.

sound more like storytellers, children by this point are very strongly entrenched in a style of reading aloud that is more like, well, reading aloud.¹⁶

Also, as you can tell by the books examined in this section, we've made a big leap: *Ramona* is the first book which is mostly text, with very few pictures. Over the last few years, the child's experience of the book has shifted from a picture-focused approach to a text-focused one. This is obviously driven strongly by the child's ability to read text, which moves from a perhaps irrelevant decoration to the central focus of the act of reading. This is an excellent time to consider beginning readers such as Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad* series.* Offering these works as transitions will ease the move to text-centered reading. Children will also benefit from a sense of pride when they find themselves completing entire "chapters" in early chapter books, which break the narrative up in a style similar to adult books and allow for an understanding of this manner of publication.



This can have some interesting implications: a child who's aware of the story being told through print will be less likely to cover up the print with their hands as they hold the book. They may not be able to read yet themselves, but they'll very carefully observe what their adult reader does. Likewise, if coming across textless pages, stopping the narrative flow to discuss the pictures is something natural to a text-aware child. A younger child may have a

¹⁶ Sulzby 1985.

* Lobel, Arnold. *The Frog and Toad Treasury*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

concept of the story coming from some other source and therefore may not understand why the switch to a conversation has occurred.¹⁷

Seven to Ten years

MORAL DEVELOPMENT
ACTIVE USE OF FANTASY
SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE

The last period we will discuss is the world of the seven to ten year old. This is the era which precedes the launch into the world of the adolescent. Changes become centered increasingly around issues of social norms and ideas rather than solely on internal or family-centered motivators.

Moral development, which we discussed earlier, is still largely rule-based.¹⁸ Kohlberg defined several stages of moral development, which may be grouped into three major categories. The first stage is centered around rules and potential for immediate reward and punishment. The second stage focuses on social pressure to behave in certain manners. The third stage (which some adults never reach), bases moral reasoning around higher, abstract principles which may supersede either societal norms or established laws.

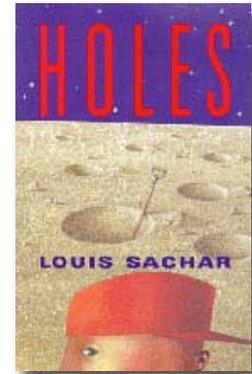
At this point, however, a child's reasoning is thus: rules, if followed, will result in a tangible reward, and if not followed, appropriate punishment may (and should!) be dealt out. However, in this period, some children begin to move to the next stage of moral

¹⁷ Schickedanz 1999.

¹⁸ Kohlberg 1973.

development, where social norms become more important. Things are often done (or not done) in order to secure the approval of adults or peers. This, in some way, can “explain” why rules are broken frequently and no consequence will result if it is a little-enforced law.

In Louis Sachar’s *Holes*, Stanley is sent to a youth detention camp for a crime he didn’t commit. (This book is more for the upper portion of this age range, but it makes the point well.) Interestingly enough, he seems to accept this on some level:



Stanley was not a bad kid. He was innocent of the crime for which he was convicted. He’d just been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It was all because of his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather!

He smiled. It was a family joke. Whenever anything went wrong, they always blamed Stanley’s no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather.

Supposedly, he had a great-great-grandfather who had stolen a pig from a one-legged Gypsy, and she put a curse on him and all his descendants. Stanley and his parents didn’t believe in curses, of course, but whenever anything went wrong, it felt good to be able to blame someone.

Things went wrong a lot. They always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.*

The dilemma between apparent rule-breaking and a larger concept of social justice is prevalent throughout the book, and does thankfully get resolved towards the end.

* Sachar, Louis. *Holes*. New York: Farar, Straus and Giroux, 1998, p8.

This increasing move towards more ‘adult’ thinking shouldn’t be interpreted as leaving behind completely the world of fantasy. In fact, children at this age make very active use of fantasy, particularly in being able to identify with the protagonist of the fantasy. This allows them to express feelings and desires that they only wish they could enact.

Roald Dahl’s *The BFG* uses a Big Friendly Giant to say things which one would otherwise not wish to say:

‘With frobscottle,’ Sophie said, ‘the bubbles in your tummy will be going *downwards* and that could have a far nastier result.’

‘Why nasty?’ asked the BFG, frowning.

‘Because,’ Sophie said, blushing a little, ‘if they go down instead of up, they’ll be coming out somewhere else with an even louder and ruder noise.’

‘A whizzpopper!’ cried the BFG, beaming at her. ‘Us giants is making whizzpoppers all the time! Whizzpopping is a sign of happiness. It is music in our ears! You surely is not telling me that a little whizzpopping is forbidden among human beans?’

‘It is considered extremely rude,’ Sophie said.

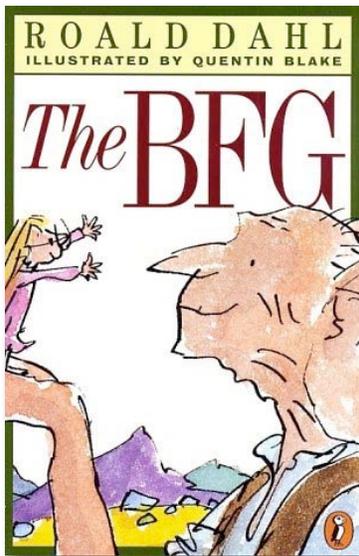
‘But you is whizzpopping, is you not, now and again?’ asked the BFG.

‘Everyone is whizzpopping, if that’s what you call it,’ Sophie said. ‘Kings and Queens are whizzpopping. Presidents are whizzpopping. Glamorous film stars are whizzpopping. Little babies are whizzpopping. But where I come from, it is not polite to talk about it.’

‘Redunculous!’ said the BFG. ‘If everyone is making whizzpoppers, then why not talk about it?...’*

Fantasy also allows for moral points which might not be as effective in another setting:

* Dahl, Roald. *The BFG*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982, p67.



‘Do not forget,’ the BFG said, ‘that human beans is disappearing everywhere all the time even *without* the giants is guzzling them up. Human beans is killing each other much quicker than the giants is doing it.’

‘But they don’t *eat* each other,’ Sophie said.

‘Giants isn’t eating each other either,’ the BFG said. ‘Nor is giants *killling* each other. Giants is not very lovely, but they is not killing each other. Nor is crockadowndillies killing other crockadowndillies. Nor is pussy-cats killing pussy-cats.’

‘They kill mice,’ Sophie said.

‘Ah, but they is not killing their own kind,’ the BFG said. ‘Human Beans is the only animals that is killing their own kind.’

‘Don’t poisonous snakes kill each other?’ Sophie asked. She was searching desperately for another creature that behaved as badly as the human.

‘Even poisonowse snakes is never killing each other,’ the BFG said. ‘Nor is the most fearsome creatures like tigers and rhinostossterisses. None of them is ever killing their own kind. Has you ever thought about that?’

Sophie kept silent.

‘I is not understanding human beans at all,’ the BFG said. ‘*You* is a human bean and you is saying it is grizzling and horrigust for giants to be eating human beans. Right or left?’

‘Right,’ Sophie said.

‘But human beans is squishing *each other* all the time,’ the BFG said. ‘They is shootling guns and going up in aerioplanes to drop their bombs on each other’s heads every week. Human beans is always killing other human beans.’

He was right. Of course he was right and Sophie knew it. She was beginning to wonder whether humans were actually any better than giants.

‘Even so,’ she said, defending her own race, ‘I think it’s rotten that those foul giants should go off every night to eat humans. Humans have never done *them* any harm.’

‘That is what the little piggy-wig is saying every day,’ the BFG answered. ‘He is saying, “I has never done any harm to the human bean so why should he be eating me?”’

‘Oh dear,’ Sophie said.

‘The human beans is making rules to suit themselves,’ the BFG went on. ‘But the rules they is making do not suit the little piggy-wiggies. Am I right or left?’

‘Right,’ Sophie said.

‘Giants is also making rules. Their rules is not suiting the human beans. Everybody is making his own rules to suit himself.’

‘But you don’t like it that those beastly giants are eating humans every night, do you?’ Sophie asked.

‘I do not,’ the BFG answered firmly. ‘One right is not making two lefts...’*

Additionally, there is the ongoing quest for social acceptance and involvement. Children find themselves immersed in the social world more and more, and the attendant pressures of operating within society can be a source of stress. In *Holes*, we see an interesting double-view of this, as Stanley considers school as well as the current situation he’s in, surrounded by “fellow delinquents”:

Stanley picked up his shovel.

The more he thought about it, the more he was glad that he agreed to let X-Ray have anything he might find. If he was going to survive at Camp Green Lake, it was far more important that X-Ray think he was a good guy than it was for him to get one day off. Besides, he didn’t expect to find

* *Ibid*, pp78–79.

anything anyway. There probably wasn't anything "of interest" out there, and even if there was, he'd never been what you could call lucky.

He slammed his blade into the ground, then dumped out another shovelful of dirt. It was a little surprising, he thought, that X-Ray was the leader of the group, since he obviously wasn't the biggest or the toughest. In fact, except for Zero, X-Ray was the smallest. Armpit was the biggest. Zigzag may have been taller than Armpit, but that was only because of his neck. Yet Armpit, and all the others, seemed to be willing to do whatever X-Ray asked of them.

As Stanley dug up another shovelful of dirt, it occurred to him that Armpit wasn't the biggest. He, the Caveman, was bigger.

He was glad they called him Caveman. It meant they accepted him as a member of the group. He would have been glad even if they'd called him Barf Bag.

It was really quite remarkable to him. At school, bullies like Derrick Dunne used to pick on him. Yet Derrick Dunne would be scared senseless by any of the boys here.

As he dug his hole, Stanley thought about what it would be like if Derrick Dunne had to fight Armpit or Squid. Derrick wouldn't stand a chance.

He imagined what it would be like if he became good friends with all of them, and then for some reason they all went with him to his school, and then Derrick Dunne tried to steal his notebook...

"Just what do you think you're doing?" asks Squid, as he slams his hands into Derrick Dunne's smug face.

"Caveman's our friend," says Armpit, grabbing him by the shirt collar.

Stanley played the scene over and over again in his mind, each time watching another boy from Group D beat up Derrick Dunne. It helped him dig his hole and ease his own suffering. Whatever pain he felt was being felt ten times worse by Derrick.*

* Sachar *op.cit.* pp53-54.

Many of the themes explored here will continue to be seen as we move up into young adult literature and the increasingly complicated world of the contemporary adolescent.

Other Matters

FEARS

HUMOR

ROLE-TAKING

WHAT READING MEANS

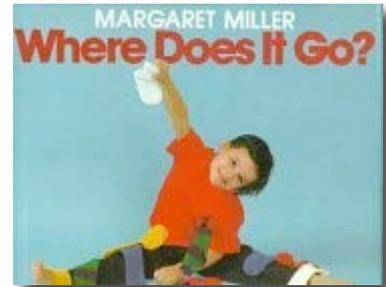
Children's fears can also take their own developmental course.¹⁹ Certainly some fears are responses to immediate dangers or potential harms, but as development proceeds, fears can grow to incorporate perceptions of threats. The growth of fantasy around age three is a rich source of wonder, but can also bring with it new avenues for fear-engendering perceptions. An important part of managing children's fears is to acknowledge them and assist with helping them adapt and cope with the fears. Books can help, particularly where the fear is specific. For example, a child who may be afraid of dogs may benefit from books in which children experience similar fears but slowly learn to adapt to living around friendly dogs. (And, for that matter, reinforce that a healthy fear of unfamiliar dogs is a *good* thing.)

Fears should not only be considered to be problems seen in the young — everyone has fears. Older children can experience fears based on violation of social expectations (such as being late for school or not knowing the answer when called upon). Pre-teens and adolescents extend this further with fears regarding to breakdown of social order (fears about mass disaster) or peer acceptance (body image, making friends, etc.) There are many

¹⁹ Lewis & Rosenblum 1975.

books that deal with these issues, and while one can't make the claim that they will solve the problem, they can certainly be part of the solution.

Just as fears develop, so does a sense of humor.²⁰ The simple peek-a-boo game that can give so much delight to a toddler is thoroughly boring to a six-year-old who would probably much prefer jokes based on wordplay. A two-year-old can understand, for example, that a bicycle belongs in a garage or on a sidewalk and not sitting in a basketball hoop — these silly, out-of-context objects are the entire theme of books such as *Where Does It Go?** In contrast, however, the dry, sophisticated humor found in chapter books for older kids would be lost on a younger child but may be a source of delight for their target audience, who will often read them over and over with glee.



Young children are very “egocentric” — this is not an insult, but an observation. They have limited understanding that there may be differences between their own emotions and those of others.²¹ Their ability to “role-take” is not great, and much frustration can arise on the part of both caregivers and the child themselves as a result. However, beginning at around age three or four, there is a realization that others may think differently due to different situations or information, although this is difficult to reconcile with one’s own perspective. Over time, this “role-taking” ability grows to understand that others may have different values, and later still is the ability to consider one’s own viewpoint at the same time as that of

²⁰ Schwartz 1999.

* Miller, Margaret. *Where Does It Go?* New York: Harper Trophy, 1992.

²¹ Selman 1980.

another. Finally, early adolescents can consider all of the above as well as the concept of what society as a whole may espouse as a position or point of view. Books can be important in supporting this process of development. The toddler who feels greatly wronged by an action can be encouraged to understand what someone else may be feeling by immersing themselves in a story. Indeed, they may feel like they can express their own frustrations through identifying with a fictional character.

There is a definite link between learning to read and what we term “school success”. This is important, because in our society, information is primarily acquired through reading. This is why the understanding of how to decode and interpret text is a fundamental necessity for further learning. However, awareness of books, text and narrative do not necessarily equal skill at reading for schooling purposes. In a well-known study, Shirley Brice Heath performed an ethnographic study of three communities, examining the relationship adults and children had together with respect to reading and narrative.²²

In this study, she found that there were differences in how three communities related to books: a Caucasian upper/middle-class community, a working-class Caucasian one, and a working-class African-American one. While the sharing of stories were universal to all, the interactions in the upper/middle-class community slowly evolved as the children grew closer to school age and encouraged the discussion of texts at pre-set times during reading and the answering of questions rather than allowing the children to simply blurt out questions. If you consider this for a moment, you realize quickly that this is remarkably similar to a school

²² Heath 1982.

setting, where children are socialized to speak at certain times (after raising a hand and being called upon) and to answer questions rather than blurt them out as they occur to them.

There were key differences in how the two working-class communities approached books and stories, though. There wasn't necessarily, as some might assume, a lack of story or narrative. Indeed, in the African-American community, narrative was prized, but often in the form of oral storytelling. Also, text was not necessarily absent — in the working-class Caucasian community, books were found, but the level of discussion regarding the books were often related more to the mechanics of reading rather than interpretation of text.

The key point to realize here is that there are many ways to approach reading. However, if one is looking solely at preparation for school, there are particular types of skills that come into play. None of this should be interpreted to mean that reading should be a less-than-enjoyable activity at home. It's meant to highlight that there's more than one way to enjoy story and narrative. To assume that a lack of reading fluency or school success automatically equals being raised in a print- or text-poor home culture may be wrong — it might just be that school is making different demands of children and their relationship with story.

Conclusion

 hildren's books are one of the most marvelous forms of art around. If you consider them for just a moment longer, you realize what an absolutely tremendous mission they have: be entertaining, educational, visually and textually sound, and accessible to a wide variety of ages, developmental levels, cultures and backgrounds. Some are successful; others are not. A clear and sound base for an appreciation and love for books should be right next to food, shelter and love in terms of a child's inalienable needs. The absolute delight with which adults approach children's books and relive those magical moments, those gripping stories, and enchanting pictures again is testament to the resounding power of story. As C.S. Lewis once said, "Some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again."

"Daddy, what are you studying?"

Once again Mr Quimby threw down his pencil. "I am studying the cognitive processes of children," he answered.

Ramona raised her head to look at him. "What does that mean?" she asked.

"How kids think," her father told her.

Ramona did not like the sound of this subject at all. "Why are you studying *that*?" she demanded. Some things should be private, and how children thought was one of them. She did not like the idea of grown-ups snooping around in thick books trying to find out.

"That is exactly what I have been asking myself." Mr Quimby was serious. "Why am I studying this stuff when we have bills to pay?"

“Well, I don’t think you should,” said Ramona. “It’s none of your business how kids think.” Then she quickly added, because she did not want her father to drop out of school and be a checker again, “There are lots of other things you could study. Things like fruit flies.”

Mr Quimby smiled at Ramona and ruffled her hair. “I doubt if anyone could figure out how you think,” he said, which made Ramona feel better, as if her secret thoughts were still safe. [p171-172]

— from *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*, by Beverly Cleary

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Colophon

This work was set in 12-point Garamond for the body text, with 36-point Party and 12-point Copperplate for the subject headings. Written and laid out on using an Apple Macintosh. Two footnote and citation styles are used, with numbered footnotes referring to academic references cited in endnotes and unnumbered footnotes referring to primary sources. Illustrations are copyright of the respective authors and publishers and are provided in accordance with “fair use” provisions of copyright law for academic and scholarly purposes.

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