

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Premier's reading challenge

Children in many states of Australia have recently completed a reading 'marathon', taking up the challenge of reading a targeted number of books within a defined time period. Students, parents and teachers alike have risen to the challenge and have celebrated the joy that reading can bring.

In Victoria, in *The Age* (17th November 2008) participants' names were published, as were the names of the most popular chosen books. It was perhaps surprising to notice that the "top 3" titles on the list for young readers (Prep-2), were all titles that were originally published well over 20 years ago!

Possum Magic by Mem Fox and illustrated by Julie Vivas. 1983

The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle, 1969

Who Sank the Boat by Pamela Allen, 1982

All of these books were probably among the childhood favourites of young men and women who are now reading them to their own children! The fact that these books are still popular is not surprising but it is interesting to consider some possible reasons for their enduring success.

What are the lasting qualities of a 'good' book?

The character in the story will appeal to the reader if it

- is familiar. e.g. a friendly looking Grandma or a young child
- is a favourite or appealing animal. e.g a possum (*Possum Magic*)
- is visually interesting or unusual. e.g. a giraffe with a long coloured scarf wound around its neck
- has a quirky habit or a problem. e.g. the girl who always gets hiccups in waiting rooms
- reminds the child of someone. e.g. a neighbour

The problem to be solved in the story will engage the reader if

- it is a problem that the reader has experienced. e.g. feeling hungry (*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*)
- it is an unusual or humorous situation for the character to be in. e.g. a donkey and a cow going for a row in a boat (*Who Sank the Boat?*)

- the reader is intrigued with, interested in or even scared of, the subject matter. e.g. magic, not sharing, bullying

There will be a **desire to read on**, if the story features

- a step by step search for a solution.
- a 'revisit' to the problem to be solved - "but he was still hungry" (The Very Hungry Caterpillar).
- a gradual 'build up' towards the cause of the problem or the resolution of the problem.

The book will encourage **reflection and learning** if it

- clearly demonstrates cause and effect - what led to what, why the character behaved in a certain way or why a particular event occurred.
- reveals information about the character's feelings and thoughts, in the text and/or the illustrations - how the character felt at a particular point in the story, why this was so or what the character thought could be done to resolve the problem.

Making the most of story time

- Accept the child's choice of favourite book.
- Find a quiet space and an uninterrupted period of time in which you can share the story.
- Allow time for observation, reflection and study of the illustrations as well as the reading of the words.
- Make comments about the character, the events and the illustrations in the story, rather than always asking questions.
- Discuss a particular word that features in the story - explain its meaning and try to use the word again in a situation outside the story time. E.g. lamington (Possum Magic) - as you buy bread in the bakery you might say "Look, there are some lamingtons like the ones that Grandma Poss found in Hobart."
- Be prepared to read the story over and over again.
- Find a different story by the same author or another story that focuses on a similar key character or theme.
- Retell the story in your own words as you look at the illustrations with the child.

- Point out words in the story - a word that is repeated e.g. the character's name
 - a very long word e.g. caterpillar
 - a word that begins with the same letter as the child's name
 - a word that the child sees in everyday life, e.g. vegemite
 - words that begin with the same sound and letter, e.g. sizzling sausages

Becoming a story teller

Children who are read to consistently will gradually become familiar with the key 'ingredients' of a story. They will understand, at least at a subconscious level, that a story needs a **character*** and the events in the story take place in a certain **setting*** or situation. They will also appreciate that there is a **problem*** in the story. This problem may evolve gradually or may be presented from the outset - even in the title. (e.g. "Pig gets lost" by Heather Amery) The problem will influence the character's **feelings***, **thoughts*** and actions. Other **characters*** may appear in the story as part of the effort to solve the problem. As the story unfolds, various **events*** or episodes take place, which culminate in the **ending*** of the story and the resolution of the problem. In some stories, particularly traditional tales, there is a moral element in the concluding lines.

When children begin to tell their own 'stories' they will often omit some of the key elements. For example, they may simply relate a series of events "and then.... and then". Children's subconscious appreciation of the different parts of a familiar story will take time to be applied to their own storytelling efforts. We can assist this transition in a number of ways.

- Draw attention to story elements before or after reading a favourite story. e.g. you might ask "Do you remember what the caterpillar's problem was in this story?" "What happened at the very end of the story?"
- Close the favourite story book and "read" it by telling the story in your own words.
- Make up a story about something that you experienced when you were young.
- Create a story about the child, based on a real experience. e.g. "Once upon a time there was a small boy who wanted to wear his favourite striped jumper all of the time. His name was Billy and the jumper once belonged to Billy's Dad....".

New ways with old favourites

If you are not familiar with the three books mentioned earlier or if it has been some time since you last paid them a 'visit', perhaps you could use the holiday time to get 're-acquainted'. You can

extend the fun of storytelling by creating a sequel or a new ending or by re-enacting the story with props or puppets. You can also -

- use one of the child's favourite stories to create a 'new' story featuring the same character. e.g. the cow and the donkey from 'Who sank the boat?' decide to go for a drive in the farm truck.
- use traditional tales such as the Three Little Pigs and "rearrange" them using different characters or events. e.g. change one of the pig's houses to a tent, replace the three little pigs with three little lambs, or the wolf with a dingo.
- re-read **Newsletter 19: Shared Stories - Preparing for literacy** for some more ideas.

New favourites

Fortunately there are also many delightful new books to read and discuss. There are books with wonderful imagery, delightful language and a wicked sense of humour.

Have you tried any of the following?

- *Grandpa's Teeth* - Rod Clement (Harper Collins) 1998
- *Old Tom's Holiday* - Leigh Hobbs (ABC books) 2004
- *If I were You* - Richard Hamilton (Bloomsbury) 2008
- *The Trouble with Dogs* - Bob Graham (Walker Books) 2007
- *Lucy Goosey* - Margaret Wild (Little Hare Books) 2007
- *Cottonwool Colin* - Jeanne Willis (Anderson Press) 2007
- *The Day the Chooks Blew Away* - Alan Bowater (Jojo Publishing) 2008

Winding up....

We live in an electronic age. Children today are born into a world of buttons, switches, leads, keyboards and screens. Despite the supposed labour saving aspect of many of our newest appliances and machines we still seem to be "time poor" - often in a hurry and squeezing in a myriad of work, leisure and family based activities.

However books are just as relevant today to our children's development as they were 20 years ago. Visits to the local library could be a feature of your Summer holiday activities. Books provide us with information, increase our understanding of the world, and can touch our imaginations and our hearts. Sharing a book with a child is not only fun but it helps us grow closer. Perhaps this Christmas there is a book just right for you to share with a special young person in your life.

*These simple story elements are presented in the form of magnetic frames in *STORYTALK* (Love and Reilly 2007), along with 105 photos of characters, settings and 'story triggers', and other prompts and ideas for oral storytelling.