SELECTING BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

by

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ABSTRAK


Many educators and parents have suggested that reading as a hobby is under siege given the proliferation of technological toys like the television, video tapes and games, laser discs and the computer. Despite this, quality books, especially written for children, are now more widely available than ever before. Although we read for the same reasons we watch television, that is to be entertained and to be educated, reading has many other advantages which can contribute to your child’s language, cognitive and emotional development.

Reading aloud to your child, in particular, is an activity that should be encouraged for a number of reasons. In the first place, hearing books read aloud whets children’s appetite for reading them. Children who have had books read to them often go back to these books and try to read them on their own. They become curious about reading, and they begin to “pretend to read” or to read from memory. Reading becomes a natural part of their world, and they develop the reading habit as well as a taste for quality literature. Children also learn about reading through observations about how reading is done; for example, they learn about such concepts of print as the function of lower and upper case letters and the directional rules for print. In addition, reading prepares children to make a link between oral and written language as they grow in their awareness that print carries meaning in a text. The books read to and by children also provide excellent language models for writing later on.

Reading aloud to children helps them to develop their concentration for listening to stories, and you can increase their attention span by reading them longer stories as they grow. The many subjects covered in books also allow for the growth of general knowledge as well as the nurturing of an imaginative mind, a quality that is not encouraged by the largely visual

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nature of the informational media. Books also contribute to a child's emotional development. When my son was younger, he was afraid of the doctor and was reluctant to go back after his first visit. I decided to read him *Corduroy goes to the doctor* to familiarize him with the routines at the clinic. After reading the book and playing doctor many times, he was fine at his next and subsequent visits. Similarly, stories like *Harry and the terrible whatzit* address children's fears and about monsters and unknown places and allows them to see that such fears can be overcome.

Research has also consistently supported the belief that children who are read to at home tend to have fewer problems when they start formal education in school. These successful children often have parents who read to them, who take time out to answer their questions, take them to the library, buy them books, and are generally encouraging their literacy efforts. These children also come from homes where there is access to an abundance of reading and writing materials.

There is thus tremendous value in books, but in themselves books cannot do these things for your child. You need to work with your child to nurture his interest and to guide his development. One way in which you can do this is to read to your child frequently at a time that is most conducive to you and your child. Reading aloud and reading together allow for personal interaction and communication and often, it is the way you choose quality books that will help hook your children onto reading.

In selecting books for children, and I refer specifically to pre-school and lower primary school children because it is best to nurture the habit from young, it is important to have a number of criteria in mind. It is useful when looking through books to ask yourself these preliminary questions:

- **Do I like this book?**

  If you do, chances are that your child will too. However, do not be upset if your child does not. Sometimes children take a while to grow into a book, so put it away and then try to introduce the book again at a later time. A good book is worth the money you pay because your child will read it over and over again.

- **Does the book arouse my emotions in any way?**

  Does the book make you laugh, for instance? Children love humourous stories, but the humour should be child-like. Or does it touch you in any other way? If you are not moved by the story, perhaps the book is not suitable. Even if the book is about a factual topic, you should have some response to the way in which the material is presented.

- **Is the story well-written?**

  Read a couple of lines at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. Does the language sound natural or is it stilted? Read the words out aloud if it is a picture book meant to be shared. Check the story line. The language should be natural sounding, simple, repetitive, and predictable especially if it is for younger children.

- **Is the book meaningful?**

  Does it treat an old subject in a contemporary manner? Does it speak to children without sounding condescending? Will your child be able to relate to the story or its theme?

In addition to these general questions, also consider the following points:

Is the theme wholesome, entertaining, and of concern to young children? Fiction should be about children and their world, and for this reason, the plot of the story should also be such that a happy ending or the promise of one is evident. Such a sense of completeness and a belief that all is right is found in such popular books like *Where the wild things are*, where Max, after a visit to the land of the wild things, finds himself safely back home in his room where a warm supper awaits him.
Characterization is another important factor. Think of the well-known story book characters like Frog and Toad in the *Frog and Toad* series, Mooty the mouse, Harry the dirty dog, George the monkey in the *Curious George* series, Arthur the aardvark, and Madeline, the little French girl. The Books are appealing because children can identify with the characters, and the characters themselves are believable. Illustrations also play a major role for many of these characters come alive from the illustrations themselves. Good illustrations enhance children’s understanding of the story by providing appropriate cues to the text. Quality children’s books are those in which the story telling is extended by the pictures.

For the very young, the print font in the text should be large and friendly. The layout should be uncluttered with each line related to the picture. Young children should have hard board books, cloth, and plastic books to reduce the problems of handling as well as those of wear and tear.

One final criterion to keep in mind, given the proliferation of children’s books from other countries, is the cultural suitability of these books. As far as possible, books should affirm children’s own culture and beliefs and be free of racial, cultural, and gender stereotypes.

Trade or non-fiction books is a genre that is particularly appealing to boys (and girls should be introduced to these too). For such books, look carefully at how the information is presented and the quality of the illustrations. A number of excellent books are now available for young children published by such companies as Dorling Kindersley (for example, *Eye Openers*, *Look closer*, *Eyewitness* *Juniors*, and *What’s inside* series) and by Usborne (First nature, and Starting point Science series).

Magazines for children such as *Highlights*, *Ladybug*, *Spider* are excellent in providing a variety of text genres for children. These often have a selection of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, as well as exciting and imaginative illustrations. Poetry can be very appealing for young children especially when they are rhythmic and are about themes and topics that are close to children. Comics can be helpful and motivating for reluctant readers, but these should not be the only kind of materials in their reading diet.

Finally, many parents argue that television can help children develop an interest in reading, but I do believe that one should use the set judiciously. Select programs wisely and do not allow indiscriminate watching. Some programs like *Doraemon*, for instance, have made readers out of some children, but children who are not inclined to read in the first place will not be motivated to do so through watching *Doraemon*. It is better to first develop the reading habit so that children will be led to extending their reading repertoires as a result of their encounters with books and stories from television programmes.

**REFERENCES**


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