A Book Is A Child’s Companion

By Jeree H. Pawl, Ph.D., *zerotothree.org,* March 2008
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When books come into one’s life in the context of human warmth, nurturance, and relevance to one's own interests and needs, they maintain this quality forever. It is not only the characters in a book that engage our shared humanness—the book itself somehow becomes a companion. For many people, just the sight of a book gives a sense of companionship: They look forward to encountering characters in a new book, look back on books previously treasured, and also remember the people who sensitively brought to life the possibilities of all the human worlds that live in books.

If we want our children to enjoy the companionship of books, we must allow the child's contribution to the relationship to be wholly salient. We want the child to know that he is relevant to the book. So as we look at a book with a child, we are flexible about how that process goes. We forget that we know it has a beginning, middle and end, and we allow the child's pleasure and interest to dictate what it is to which we will attend, and of what the interaction will consist. We attend to the child’s agenda. We do not wrestle with Martha in order to turn the page to which her attention is riveted in order to get on with the story, but we linger with her, to puzzle together as to why the little girl’s foot below the water in the bathtub appears not to exist. We do our best to explicate the demands of perspective the illustration demonstrates, and we spend the time we need to cover and uncover, make disappear and reappear, our own faces and hands, until this loses its interest for the child. Only then do we proceed in the book. It is not unlike taking our child to the beach to view the vast ocean or to admire the sunset while acknowledging that the tiny sandcrab that scurries over the toe of his sneaker and totally captures his attention is a wholly worthy competitor for our intent and deserves our closest mutual attention. We are flexible, and we care about what our small friend's interests are because only then can he bring his whole self to the encounter. And that is what we want. We want the child to know that he is relevant to the book.

Literature not only allows but asks of us that we bring our whole experience to it—that we allow it to evoke our memories and our feelings and then reach for some commonality of understanding that enriches us and enriches what we read. This is what we expect of the adult reader of literature. We must be sure then that we allow this to be true of the experience of children, especially of our infants and toddlers. They must be allowed to muse on what calls for musing, skip the scary part if they want to, name with pleasure that which is recognized (and name it again and again), and stop when they are ready. This is what preserves the mutuality and ensures the infant's and toddler's contribution of self to the process.

Many children's books are designed with just this relevancy and request for mutuality. Our job is not to interfere our author's often brilliant understanding of what is relevant to a child, what captures him in sight and sound, and how reciprocal a relationship there is between that author and the child. (It is, by the way, just this mutuality which makes children’s books so different from most children's television, which, with its formulaic, jazzed up, didactic style, overwhelms the child's whole sensorium, wanting nothing from him but a sponge-like absorption and diminishing the possible horizons of the child's own world view.)

As we move with the child from the first recognition of the image of a dog—the first enchanting triumph—to remembering with her dogs she has known—Grandma's dog who jumped up and knocked her over and the puppy on the street that licked her hand and made a puddle on the sidewalk—we make the art of the book her own. The child owns it with what she and we weave around it. It is embedded with the familiar and becomes richly and personally evocative. This process is clearly a part of the oral tradition. The story teller adapts the story to the listener, and the listener contributes his own visual images, his own understanding, and his own reactions. Even a child who has no access to books, but who is sung to and talked to, and for whom stories are created or to whom parents tell stories of their own childhood, will, if then introduced to books properly, learn to love the stories to be found in those books. In some sense, in the early years, the parent is the collaborative interpreter of the pictures or story written in a book to his own child—making sure that the book touches the child's world as he wants it to, and expanding the pictures or text with what the child brings to them. The experience of "being read to" becomes the same as being told a story—a story which is told because it is relevant to the child and because the telling is responsive to the child's desire.

As the child grows, she not only recognizes the image of the dog but also begins to identify with the dog—who is lost from his mommy, who has made a mess of his room, or who has found a scrawny chicken to be his friend. Now another’s creation has begun to touch the child's experience in a new way; the child's own experience expands to include the experience of others. Characters in books become the child's companions. Books themselves become companions.

Babies and toddlers are enriched by books. Even more important, the relationships between very young children and their parents are enriched by books. Books provide a source of mutual pleasure for parent and child that is likely to last a lifetime. We introduce infants and toddlers to books not simply because of what they will learn from them, but so that they will grow to love them. It is a gift beyond measure.

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