

THE CHECKUP

The Merits of Reading Real Books to Your Children

By Perri Klass, M.D. August 8, 2016 6:00 am

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Dr. Perri Klass on family health.

A new Harry Potter book and a new round of stories about midnight book release parties reminded me of the persistent power of words printed on a page to shape children's lives.

How do we think about a distinct role for paper, for "book-books" in children's lives? My own pediatric cause is literacy promotion for young children. I am the national medical director of the program Reach Out and Read, which follows a model of talking with the parents of babies, toddlers and preschoolers about the importance of reading aloud, and giving away a developmentally appropriate children's book at every checkup.

We are talking about very young children here, and we begin by giving out board books which are designed to be chewed and drooled on by babies who are still exploring the world orally, or thrown down (repeatedly) off the high chair by young children who are just figuring out object permanence and experimenting with ways to train their parents to fetch and retrieve. But the most essential attribute of those board books, beyond their durability, is that they pull in the parent, not only to pick them up, but to ask and answer questions, name the pictures, make the animal noises.

I love book-books. I cannot imagine living in a house without them, or putting a child to bed in a room that doesn't have shelves of books, some tattered and beloved, some new and waiting for their moment. It's what I wanted for my own children, and what I want for my patients; I think it is part of what every child needs. There's plenty that I read on the screen, from journal articles to breaking news, but I don't want books to go away.

I would never argue that the child who loves to read is worse off because those "Harry Potter" chapters turn up on the screen of an ebook reader rather than in those matched sets of thick volumes that occupy my own children's shelves. (Although I think there's something wonderful about looking at the seven books of the series and remembering a midnight party in a bookstore or two, and sometimes coming home from high school or college and taking one — or all seven — to bed with you.)

But what about the younger children, the ones who are working to master spoken language while taking the early steps in their relationships with books and stories? There's a lot of interest right now in pediatrics in figuring out how electronic media affect children's brains and children's learning styles and children's habits.

In a 2014 review of studies on electronic storybooks, researchers outlined some of the ways that such stories could help young children learn, and some of the ways that they could hurt. They pointed out that especially for children with language delays, certain features of electronic books that reinforce the connection between image and word (for example, animated pictures) may help children integrate information, but that distracting features and games may cause "cognitive overload," which gets in the way of learning. And they worried, of course, that screen time might displace parent-child time.

Dr. Jenny Radesky, a developmental behavioral pediatrician and assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, is one of the authors of the coming American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement on media use for children from birth to age 5. "Preschool children learn better when there's an adult involved," she said. "They learn better when there are not distracting digital

elements, especially when those elements are not relevant to the story line or the learning purpose.”

In a small study published in February in *JAMA Pediatrics*, researchers looked at the interactions between parents and their children, ages 10 to 16 months, and found that when they were playing with electronic toys, both parents and children used fewer words or vocalizations than they did with traditional toys. And picture books evoked even more language than traditional toys.

Words and pictures can do many things for the reader’s brain, as we know from the long and glorious and even occasionally inglorious history of the printed word. They can take you into someone else’s life and someone else’s adventure, stir your blood in any number of ways, arouse your outrage, your empathy, your sense of humor, your sense of suspense. But your brain has to take those words and run with them, in all those different directions. **Brain imaging** has suggested that hearing stories evokes visual images in children’s brains, and more strongly if those children are accustomed to being read to.

And a parent can offer questions and interpretations that take the experience beyond bells and whistles. “A parent can ask, ‘Oh, remember that duck we saw at the pond?’” Dr. Radesky said. “When a parent relates what’s on the page to the child’s experience, the child will have a richer understanding.”

Story time can also be good for the grown-ups. “Parents have said to me, ‘I need that 30 minutes of reading, it’s the only time my child snuggles with me,’” Dr. Radesky said. “We shouldn’t only think about what the child is getting from it.”

Part of what makes paper a brilliant technology may be, in fact, that it offers us so much and no more. A small child cannot tap the duck and elicit a quack; for that, the child needs to turn to a parent. And when you cannot tap the picture of the horse and watch it gallop across the page, you learn that your brain can make the horse move as fast as you want it to, just as later on it will show you the young wizards on their broomsticks, and perhaps even sneak you in among them.

Reading and being read to open unlimited stories; worlds can be described and created for you, right there on the page, or yes, on the screen, if that is where you do

your later reading. But as those early paper books offer you those unlimited stories, the pictures will move if you imagine the movement; the duck will quack if you know how to work your parent. It's all about pushing the right buttons.

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