

## **Are You Ready For Christmas?**

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“So, are you ready for Christmas?” My eyes fall to the ground. I have not yet finished my shopping or gift wrapping. I have not baked shortbread or decorated the Christmas tree. “Ummm,” I mumble, pushing back a mixture of guilt and panic, “there’s still a bit of time before Christmas... isn’t there?” In a fast-food/ high-speed internet world my response feels totally incompetent. Even Santa provides instant delivery on Christmas Eve.

But, I know if this question was asked a little differently, I could hold my head high and answer with a smile. If I was asked, “Are you enjoying getting ready for Christmas?” my answer would be “Oh yes!”

Sometimes I think we can focus on questions with too narrow a perspective. I was reminded of this when I read a study by Mary Ann Evans and Jean Saint-Aubin called “What Children Are Looking at During Shared Storybook Reading”. In this study the researchers displayed children’s books on a computer monitor. Each child's mother or preschool teacher read the books while the child sat on the adult's lap wearing a headband that recorded the child’s visual fixations. What did the researchers discover? Children spent very little time examining print in books. Instead they focused on the pictures. Preschoolers spent, on average, five seconds per book looking at text, and three minutes looking at the illustrations. If parents think that their children are absorbing how to decode print during story times, researchers warn, they are mistaken.

But deciphering letters and knowing how words look and are spelled is only one component of literacy learning. Children have to understand that text is meaningful before they are motivated to decode print. Without comprehension, decoding skills are useless. Of course children will look at pictures when a story is read. Pictures in children’s books show the meaning of written words. Pictures help children think about the storyline and how the story relates to their own experiences. Only after children soak in the meaning, humour and nuances represented through a book’s pictures will they choose to pay attention to print.

Questions are important to ask, but it can be too easy to feel discouraged by questions that dwell on a narrow perspective. Decoding skills do require parents and educators to teach letter names and letter-sound relationships explicitly, but comprehension skills, vocabulary and narrative skills are essential literacy skills too. Children do gain emergent reading skills when someone in their life takes the time to read to them often.

Seeing the bigger picture is important. The next time someone asks “Are you ready for Christmas?” I will remember that this is a question that could be asked differently. I will remember that preparations for one day do not need to consume the pleasure of the Christmas season. There is good reason to slow our busy pace, and many good reasons for taking time this holiday to read stories your child loves to hear.