

Turning children on to books - August 2010

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When summer schedules lead to later bedtimes or varied routines, story times can provide valuable predictability. Yet predictable story times do not mean they're always the same.

Story time was about to begin. Grandpa opened his book. Large, vibrant pictures mesmerized two-year-old Natalie who snuggled on his lap. Three-and-half year old Ben was captivated by grandpa's voice as it changed from that of a monstrous giant to a conniving young boy. Four-year-old Jake was drawn into the tale when Grandpa suggested he stomp like the giant, slap his knees like footsteps of a fleeing boy, and pretend to climb the beanstalk.

Stories have the capacity to appeal to every style of learning – styles that suggest we learn and remember best when information is presented either through our ears, eyes or sense of touch and movement. We refer to these learning styles as auditory, visual or kinesthetic. Though children are absorbing information about their world using all three styles, they will eventually show a preference for one (or two) of these styles above the others.

Young children typically have short attention spans, but children who don't attend to any part of a story may enjoy books that are shared differently.

A child who is developing a preference as an auditory learner will appreciate stories told with captivating sounds – lilting rhythms, distinctive character voices, or repeated words or tunes. Most stories by Robert Munsch have strong auditory appeal. A child with an auditory learning style may want a bedtime story told without a book. Some parents will begin with the classic opener "Once upon a time..." and ask their child to add the next idea, or use their child's name as the hero or heroine in the tale. Sometimes the story is fanciful, sometimes crazy, and sometimes it's simply a recollection of the day.

A child with strong visual preferences gravitates to books with beautiful pictures, vibrant colours or interesting details. Illustrations are as important as the storyline. Books with a variety of artistic styles are fun to look through slowly with plenty of time to study each page, especially when illustrations or photos add knowledge or humour to the written words.

Interactive stories bring a tale alive for a kinesthetic learner. There are many books written in ways that encourage a young listener to move rather than sit still. Sandra Boynton's "Barnyard Dance" is just one such example. Stories can also be interactive through use of props and puppetry. A paper towel tube can become the story's pirate spyglass or fairy godmother wand. A band-aid over the tip of each index finger can become story character finger puppets when facial features are added with a marker. Simply ensuring that it is the child who holds the book and turns the pages increases the enjoyment of story time for a kinesthetic learner.

At the cottage or after a day at the beach, sensitivity to a child's learning preferences can add spice to familiar routines and be the switch that turns young children on to books.