

The Skunk Sunk With a Plunk in the Moat  
Where the Boat Would Not Float  
or  
Providing Appropriate Pre-literate Services for Children:  
The Case Against Basic Readers for Toddlers

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My thesis is simple and not, I feel, especially radical: most children are normal. Even those who display exceptional talents or are labeled "gifted" early in life appear on the whole to be striving toward normalcy. Why, then, when an advertisement for a play-group at the library is run, do parents expect reading lessons for their very small children? A firm hand attached to a patient librarian must guide the proud parent past the basic readers and into the play corner.

"Play is the work of the child" might be a hackneyed phrase by now, but remembering that a new crop of parents springs like dragon's teeth from the soil of library patrons almost yearly, it remains a sentence of truth which can ring (at intervals) loud and clear, over the (muffled) din of children at quiet play in the children's area.

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### The Play Corner

Of course, picture books, board books, cloth books, and some trick books which have been carefully reinforced before processing are intermingled with the toys on the shelves of our play corner. Crayons, too, and (gasp) coloring books are within grasp of small fingers, as well. How have the children managed *not* to scribble in the library materials while doing a fine job of using up coloring books and scrap paper at a fast clip? I'm not sure, but I can attest firmly that it is not a miracle. It goes back to the main thesis that children are, on the whole, normal; they can tell the difference between coloring books and the other kind. And, more important, they enjoy manipulating both.

As for toys in the library environment, for the faint of heart and traditional of mind, one can recommend limiting the collection to those toys which echo or suggest a literary theme. For instance, three gradations of bears and a yellow haired doll might be considered; undoubtedly, other examples spring immediately to mind. Children, too, will be thinking of other uses, other possibilities, inherent in the toys and other materials provided. Less structured toys such as blocks and carpet squares will be utilized to carry out many different themes, some literary, some not so literary, but of obvious importance to the child. Three sizes of bear and a Goldilocks will not always be used to act out a folktale (even in variation). A mixture of open-ended, less structured play materials and better-defined elements, such as small figures and wheeled vehicles, yields maximum play possibilities in the library play corner. The literary themes will come naturally as the child's repertoire of story experiences is expanded. Those stories which are the dearest to young children appear to fulfill some developmental need. They should be considered a top priority for retelling upon request since they are satisfying to the child at many different levels.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, new favorites will supplant the old. In the meantime, the library play corner can provide one place where current favorites can be played out and discussed.

### Toddler Playgroup at the Library

Initially, our playgroup at the library grew as a response to a perceived need in the community. Since all ages are welcome to join our story hours, the toddlers and nursing babies often attended with their sisters and/or brothers. Always sensitive to expanding relevant services, we observed that younger siblings seemed to enjoy the more social aspects of our story hours. Using simple inquiry, we found that many of the parents of toddlers who visited our library were eager to meet together one morning a week for an hour play session. Toddlers were defined as walkers since anyone who was still crawling might

be in danger of being stepped on or fallen over. One parent or other responsible adult was expected to stay with the little ones during the playgroup. These were our only requirements.

Luckily, our playgroup numbers have remained stable, not mushrooming to the extent that registration is required, nor falling off to the point of extinction. On an average playgroup morning, four toddlers and five adults (including me!) may be observed sitting on the floor in the play corner interacting with each other, our play materials and books, and with the general environment.

All of the old arguments for playgroups hold true here: parents have a chance to exchange information about the care and feeding of their charges, developmental concerns may be aired, adults are available for conversation (a real plus for anyone who has been closeted with a small child for any length of time), children have a chance to be around other children and to interact with not-so-familiar adults. From the view point of the library, advantages are manifold. Increased library usage and an awareness of library services result from playgroup participation. Children and parents feel more at home in the library earlier. If the age range on a particular day more closely approaches two than one, a literature experience may be attempted. Some of the children may already have had stories read to them at home. When this is the case, their enthusiasm is infectious and the carefully chosen picture book is bound to be a success.

“Reading” a picture book to toddlers involves talking and pointing and looking. It involves exploring what is on the pages and verbalizing. In this communication process not only is the reader challenged to hold the attention of the listeners, s/he also is challenged to select highly appropriate materials, ones which contain information specifically attained or attainable by the child. The sort of book I tend to choose in the toddler playgroup falls in the previously mentioned categories: picture books, board books, cloth books, and trick books, all close at hand on the play corner shelves, easy to reach and to share with the toddlers and their parents. Sometimes one of the children will hand me a book to read. Having only appropriate books close at hand controls the selection process.

Eventually, children in the toddler group become such good listeners that they are ready to participate in our preschool story hour. The transition can be gradual or sudden. Some parents choose to continue with the toddler group for some time after the child has been attending story hour; others make a clean break. In either case, certain similarities in our programming make the change less traumatic.

### Preschool Story Hour

We hold an open story hour for half an hour every Friday at 10:30 and 1:30. The ratio of adults to children is usually one to three. I like to think that our parent population comes to story hour to pick up ideas to use during the week.

Our format for story hour roughly follows that suggested by Vardine Moore.<sup>2</sup> Although our schedule of show-and-tell, story, tell-and-draw or flannel board, finger play or moving to music followed by book selection, is fairly common, I am no longer surprised when parents ask if we "just read stories" at our preschool sessions. Parent education is indeed part of the responsibility shouldered by the children's librarian!

### Backing Away From The Basics

Bruno Bettelheim and Karen Zelan<sup>3</sup> have hit upon many weaknesses found in the American basic reader and point out that it is a dismal attempt to dupe young readers. Taking their tack, we try to steer well-meaning parents away from our small collection of basic readers, recommending excellent picture books as viable, preferable, alternatives for pleasure reading. If some of the words in a given picture book are too difficult for the child, an available adult can aid in interpretation. Many times, the illustrations are helpful in this regard, too. This is no secret to a visually literate pre-reader. Given the excellent resources available in even a modest Children's Department, a basic reader should seldom be the first choice for reading/listening experiences.

Children who graduate from our library programs should continue to find books and literature fascinating. An early exposure to excellence within the library sphere will go a long way in assuring this outcome.

It is our goal to give the youngest patrons only the tastiest morsels so that as they grow toward adulthood they will bring home the Bacon (and other literary giants).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a deeper understanding of this concept, see Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Knopf, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> Moore, Vardine. *Pre-School Story Hour*. New York: Scarecrow, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> Bettelheim, Bruno, and Zelan, Karen. *On Learning to Read: The Child's Fascination with Meaning*. New York: Knopf, 1982.