

## Why Father's Choice of Picture Books?

There are still many people, both men and women, who believe that the tasks of reading books to children should fall to the mother. Not surprisingly then, publishers like to publish books that will appeal to mothers.

It is often thought that picture books are a kind of “magic pill” that parents can give to children to develop their intellect, imagination and character. In other words, many parents read picture books to their children expecting that doing so will make their children more imaginative and intelligent.

I would not disagree with this as a general rule, but I would point out that when picture books are regarded merely as an educational tool, children tend to distance themselves from them, with the result that an increasing number of children are growing up without knowing the true pleasure of reading picture books and other kinds of writing.

Picture books should first of all be a tool for communication. In reality, however, it seems that parents attach more importance to getting their children to learn how to read properly and to understand the plot than they do to communicating with their children through picture books.

Another problem is that experts tend to recommend that parents read so-called “masterpieces” to their children, which I am afraid might mean they actually miss out on finding a lot of really good books by themselves, not to mention fail to develop the ability to think critically about literature.

Picture books should be chosen and given to children through multiple channels. Unlike in the past, children of today have so many distractions in the form of computer games and TV and so on, making it futile to simply insist on the importance of picture books and the value of reading masterpieces. Children should be able to just enjoy reading.

Fathers and mothers generally have different styles when it comes to both praising and scolding their children. This is also true when it comes to the way they play with their children, get them to study or decide what TV programs are appropriate. Because of these differences, fathers and mothers can alternately act as a kind of “shelter” for their children and can also teach them different skills for dealing with life's problems.

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I believe the same thing applies to picture books. Most mothers and teachers tend to choose books that are deemed “good” for children, thinking that they will be the most beneficial. The children themselves, however, might find it rather tiresome to be forced to read only “good” books. It is of course important for mothers to choose good picture books for their children, but it is also necessary that fathers contribute by choosing picture books that appeal to them. Fathers usually have broad views, a good sense of humour and a better understanding of the kinds of mischievous behaviour often described in picture books. If both mothers and fathers choose their children’s books, they will have a well-balanced collection.

Although it is important to eat a healthy diet, the occasional serving of pork cutlets, salty noodles or spicy curry will make sure life doesn’t become too boring.

A lot of households have shelves filled only with “good” picture books chosen by mothers, which is a fitting symbol for the weak presence of the father in many homes. Picture books containing nonsense, the occasional rude word, or the wild plot lines of stories of earlier times are seldom found. It is also becoming more common to see old stories revised, with offensive contents whitewashed out and happy endings tacked on.

For example, in the original text of *Saru Kani Gassen (The Monkey and the Crab)*, the monkey ends up crushed by a rice grinder. However, there is now a revised version of this story in which the monkey apologizes to the crab and they—quite unbelievably—become good friends. Those who want to make these kinds of revisions do not recognize that showing characters reconciling so easily may actually have a negative effect on the relationships children form with others by presenting them with an unrealistic model of the way people interact.

Fathers, if they choose to get involved, could select completely different types of books, the kinds that mothers and teachers would never choose.

Men are more likely to choose scary books inhabited by demons and beasts and monsters because their low voices are well-suited to these kinds of characters, books that contain a scatological reference or two, funny books full of nonsense, and impressive old tales that tell of extreme situations and deal with grief, misery and injustice. If you don’t have any of these kinds of books on your shelves at home, it’s time for dad to get out and do some shopping!

When fathers read to their children it can be a rewarding experience for everyone. If dad wants to make a habit of it, he may even find himself coming home from work a little earlier, which will allow mum, who is busy with childcare, a coffee break. As a result, all the family members will become happier.

