Books for children

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IF we think of a child entirely without books we think of him as very definitely deprived. Why is that so? Why do we consider books to be a vital part of a child’s life? In fact, why do children need books?

To give an all-inclusive answer to this question, children need books to help them to extend their horizons, to push out the boundaries of their private self-centred worlds so that they can see themselves and their environment more clearly. Let us see just how this expansion is achieved by the child as he matures.

One aspect of maturation is the understanding of symbols and abstract terms. The meaningful use of a word is the start of this development. The first thing a child learns from a book is that a two-dimensional, unresponsive, silent and motionless object is “pussy” just as much as the one he is used to seeing, hearing and feeling run around him. Once he has grasped the idea that a picture means the same as the real thing he has taken a big step forward. Later on, books can help him refine his concepts of colour and numbers and finally there are the letters and words themselves to be learnt.

The wider the range and variation of objects with which a child is familiar the more his appreciation of similarities and differences will develop. He learns, for example, that balls can differ in colour, size and material but not in shape. He learns the characteristics common to a species so he can recognise an animal as a “dog” even though it is different in many ways from any dog he has seen before. It is obvious that books will be a great help here.

Another important part of growing up is the development of vocabulary and memory. At 18 months the average child has a vocabulary of only 6-12 words, by the time he is 5 years old this has grown enormously to between 2,000 and 3,000 words. In everyday life a child may not hear or need to use a great number of different words, but in books the scope is limitless. Verbal memory develops to a similar extent between these ages. The
child usually begins by filling in a word or two of a nursery rhyme when the parent pauses; later complete rhymes are remembered. Many children of 5 or 6 learn whole stories by heart.

A particularly noticeable aspect of a child’s development is his ability to concentrate and his span of attention. Children vary widely in this respect and some need a lot of help to prepare them for school. Pictures and stories suitable to the child’s age-group and interests will encourage him to concentrate for longer periods.

From the use of his imagination and from play a child learns many things. He practises different activities and different roles such as parent, baby, postman, tractor-driver. There are also magic or make-believe games and both types of play need new ideas and stimulation which books can help to provide.

Children soak up knowledge of one sort or another all the time and, of course, books are a valuable source for this gathering of a store of information. One of the first things they want to learn from books is to recognise the different kinds of wild animals. Later they are intrigued by ways of life in other countries and in past ages.

Finally we must not forget the development of a sense of humour. Funny pictures, nonsense rhymes, stories of children doing outrageous things—all these can provide hours of amusement and fun.

All these aspects of development can be helped and encouraged in many other ways. Apart from real-life situations, the age-old, universal learning environment, there are, these days, television, radio, records and films.

Why is it that books are still considered of primary importance? Well, books have many qualities which are not found to the same extent in other aids to learning and development. Let us see what these qualities are.

Books Have Special Qualities

Books are Permanent

Once acquired, a book is always there to be re-examined until it is fully understood, or to be re-read whenever the need for it is felt. Many good children’s books can be enjoyed superficially by quite young children and understood at a deeper level by older children, so that they remain in use for many years.

Books are Flexible

When an adult is reading to a child, she can simplify or elaborate according to the child’s level of understanding and according to the words and behaviour with which he is familiar. The story can be read as slowly as necessary and the child can make comments or ask questions as he wishes. This is in marked contrast to most other aids to learning and entertainment, which go along at their own speed regardless of the audience.

Books are Infinitely Variable

The answers to any factual questions can be found in books and they can often help in overcoming emotional problems or stressful situations. For example careful study of a story about the arrival of a new baby in the household or of a trip to hospital can help prepare a child for such a new experience. The many valuable sex-education books fulfil another common need. The habit of turning to books as friends and servants is an invaluable one for a child to carry into later life.

Books Require Effort

At first this effort is shared by parent and child—the parent tries to attract and hold the child’s attention by reading as
expressively as she can and using the pictures to best advantage, while the child must make an effort to concentrate and sit still. If the child has learnt to love books by the time he goes to school he will be more likely to make the considerable effort required to branch out from his school-books to read others for himself.

Books are Part of our Cultural Heritage

In a rapidly changing world, books provide continuity from generation to generation and make a common point of reference for parent and child. Children are usually most interested to know what stories and poems were Mother's or Father's favourites when they were young, and books that really belonged to them then are treasures indeed. Despite the constant flow of new books, children still have the right and the need to know the childhood classics of the past.

Books for Different Age Groups

As the average child progresses from age to age his reactions to books change, as do the kind of books most suited to him. At 18 months he likes to look at colourful books with pictures of familiar things. In answer to a question such as “where's the pussy?” he can often point to, or touch the appropriate picture. He also likes to listen to short nursery rhymes, particularly those with accompanying actions like “Pat-a-Cake” or “This Little Piggy Goes to Market.” Children are still destructive at this age, so cloth or heavy cardboard books or discarded magazines are most suitable.

By 2 years a child is not so deliberately destructive although turning pages is still rather difficult. Now, when shown a familiar picture he can answer the question “what's that?” and likes slightly longer nursery rhymes such as “Baa-Baa Black Sheep” and “Sing a Song of Sixpence.” He can attend to a very short, simple story particularly if his own name is used for the hero (or heroine). Collections of Nursery Rhymes and picture books are favourites at this age.

The average child of 2½ years has very definite favourites among the simple stories he likes to hear and is often keen to “help” by filling in a word or phrase here and there. He can look at a book by himself now and there are many suitable, inexpensive books to choose from. Traditional tales such as “The Three Bears” can also be introduced at this age.

By 3 years the child’s attention span is increasing markedly and he can follow longer stories, often chiming in with questions or comments. When special favourites are read he may become quite indignant if a single word is changed or omitted. Sometimes he likes to “read,” either to himself or to other children. Beatrix Potter books are suitable for this age and a handy addition to the bookshelf is “Listening Time,” published by Angus & Robertson, which gives many of the stories used in Kindergarten of the Air.

At 4 years the child’s sense of humour is developing and he is fond of nonsense rhymes such as those of Edward Lear and A. A. Milne poems. He also likes informative books about going to the zoo or for a ride in an aeroplane. Interest in religion is beginning now and religious books are often prized.

The child of 5 years is often very demanding about being read to and is showing an interest in letters and numbers. Traditional fairy-tales such as found in Anderson and Grimm collections are suitable for this age, as well as old favourites like “Little Black Sambo” and “Amelia Anne” and new ones like “Teddy Robinson.”

At 6 years children can often “read” whole books from memory and may recognise single words. Their interest in other countries is developing and they are fond of books describing the lives of children there. “Winnie the Pooh” and “Milly Molly Mandy” remain firm favourites, along with more modern stories of children very like themselves.

Between 7 and 10 years the child’s ability to read for himself develops, as do his particular interests and tastes. Gradually the whole wonderful world of books becomes available to him.

If a child has not developed a “feeling” for books by about 10 years of age he is not likely to do so later. Whatever his destiny in life the habit of turning to books for help, relaxation, entertainment and distraction will be a useful one. Efforts made by parents to foster this habit in childhood will pay lifelong dividends.