

# ~ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS ~

An e-newsletter supporting effective adult learning practices

June 2013

MONTANA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROJECT

Issue #39

## USING CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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*Professional development is a continuum of learning and support activities designed to prepare individuals for work with and on behalf of young children and their families, as well as ongoing experiences to enhance this work. These opportunities lead to improvements in the knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions of early childhood professionals. ~ NAEYC*

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of supplying and reading high-quality children's books in early childhood programs is not even debatable. In many programs, children's books are integrated into the curriculum. Children's literature is used in multiple ways to provide and expand children's learning opportunities as well as to create a literacy rich environment.

Often, a carefully selected story or poem is one of the more effective ways to teach and reinforce positive behavior, such as being kind to others, taking care of toys, trying something new, or eating healthy foods. Teachers who value children's literature as a learning tool find all sorts of ways to use it in their teaching.

"The picture book contributes much more than something to do during a hurried storytime. Engagement with picture books while we are young forms the basis for becoming a literate adult, one who not only decodes words accurately but also enjoys reading and takes the time to read. Teachers who share quality picture books with young children are promoting literacy in the fullest sense of the word. For this reason, exemplary early childhood educators have always made high-quality children's picture books a central part of their curriculum." ~ Mary Renck Jalongo

Adult educators can use children's books in much the same way; the intent may slightly differ but their use can expand learning and retention. When you use children's books purposefully, you model appropriate practice as well as help early childhood teachers and caregivers become familiar with good children's books and meaningful ways to use them.

When you use children's books to reinforce concepts and emphasize elements of the professional development topic, you employ a valuable—yet often neglected—learning tool. A children's book can be especially effective when it is used to a) reinforce the topic; b) acknowledge challenges; and c) promote acceptance of diversity.

The key is to use children's books with purpose and intention. When you do this, you exponentially increase the effectiveness of the learning experience. How many times has the anecdote or story illustrating important concepts served as a trigger for your remembering and implementing them?

"Preservice [and inservice] teachers cannot be expected to know how to use children's literature as a purposeful and meaningful educational tool unless we teach them well." ~ Children's Literature in Teacher-Preparation Programs—An invited contribution by Allison K. Hoewisch

## REINFORCING THE TOPIC

Children's books can be used to illustrate and reinforce early childhood concepts in a way that nothing else can. This is especially true when the book is not only directly related to the training topic but when it highlights characteristics of child development as well. For example, during a session on guiding behavior, you might read "But Excuse Me That Is My Book" (2006) by Lauren Child. All kinds of relationships and emotions are displayed as Lola discovers someone else has "her" book in the library. While Lola displays both the persistence and the determination of a child her age, the resolution to her frustration is equally illustrative as she is redirected.

There seems to be no end to quality children's books from which to choose. However, be sure to use reputable book lists to ensure you are selecting high-quality children's books. Several children's book lists are available online, including the Association for Library Service to Children/American Library Association's Notable Children's Booklist, the National Education Association's Educators' Top 100 Children's Books, and the International Reading Association's Children's Choices Booklist.

Using their Facebook page, the editors of Child Care Exchange recently asked readers "What is your favorite children's book?" One of these books is likely to relate to your next training topic and may already be on your bookshelf. Below are the top ten responses:

- The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle
- There's an Alligator under My Bed by Mercer Mayer
- Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst
- Goodnight Moon by Margaret Wise Brown
- Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak
- The Paper Bag Princess by Robert Munsch
- The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein
- Charlotte's Web by E. B. White
- The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything by Linda Williams
- The Very Lazy Ladybug by Isobel Finn

What if the "perfect" book seems too long? You can set the stage and then just read a portion of the story—the portion that best illustrates your point.

## ACKNOWLEDGING CHALLENGES

When you are teaching a difficult skill or asking for extraordinary efforts, a children's book might be helpful for acknowledging the challenge and offering motivation in a playful way. For example, *The Itsy Bitsy Spider* (1998) by Iza Trapani explains six different struggles the spider faces (way more than the usual "down came the rain").

On her web site, Iza Trapani suggests one approach for using her book in a preschool classroom. She explains how to highlight the theme of *being persistent*: "This spider never gives up. Discuss all the obstacles the spider has to overcome to spin her web. Have the children discuss, draw, and write about a time they tried really hard to do something and didn't give up."

One approach to using this book in training is to count off into 6 groups and ask each group to sing one verse. Follow up by discussing what participants might do to overcome challenges as they implement the ideas they have just learned in your session.

When the topic is difficult or may trigger an emotional reaction, books can serve to soften the automatic response and open the pathway to acceptance of new ideas. For example, a favorite book of instructors promoting inclusion is "Mama Zooms" (1995) by Jane Cowen Fletcher. A primary school teacher has contributed [lesson plans](#) for using this book with young children. (They can be found by clicking on the link.) This book could also be meaningfully used in training emphasizing children's imaginations and pretend play.

"Emotional Intelligence is the ability to perceive and express emotions, to understand and use them and to manage emotions so as to foster personal growth." ~ Salovey & Mayer

## PROMOTING ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY

Well-written stories, especially children's stories, can provide a snapshot of differences and similarities among the people of the world in an inviting way. Well-drawn illustrations, well-chosen photographs, and well-composed text often describe experiences from

a perspective that appeals to the reader/listener as nothing else can.

For example, in "It's Okay to Be Different" (2009) by Todd Parr, the author uses "brightly colored, childlike figures outlined in heavy black to show readers over and over that just about anything goes. From the sensitive ('It's okay to be adopted') to the downright silly ('It's okay to eat macaroni and cheese in the bathtub'), kids of every shape, size, color, family makeup, and background [are] included in this gentle, witty book. In this simple, playful celebration of diversity, Parr doesn't need to hammer readers over the head with his message."

Can you think of ways you might use "It's Okay to Be Different" in an upcoming training event?

"Although books cannot substitute for firsthand contact with persons of diverse groups, they can certainly deepen and broaden one's understanding. Early childhood professionals may find children's books to be one more avenue to seeing, understanding, and accepting the rich variety and uniqueness of persons. Rather than pretending that the differences among us do not exist, books help children [and adults] discover what is similar and different among persons and groups of persons." ~ Barbara Kupetz, Ed.D. Early Childhood News: Professional Resource for Teachers and Parents

### SELECTING CHILDREN'S BOOKS FOR PD

No matter what book you select, scrutinize it carefully and plan its use with intention. Assess its value in terms of cost and benefit. Is the time it takes to read it equal to or greater than the outcome you wish to achieve? If this type of activity appears superficial, it will be less likely to contribute anything beneficial to the learning experience.

Once you have chosen a high-quality children's book, you can use the following questions to further assess your selection:

- Does the book represent the best of children's books?

- Does the book present a correct representation of child development and appropriate early childhood practice?
- Does the book (or the excerpt) relate directly to the topic, skills being taught, or to a disposition related to teaching in early childhood?
- Does the book have the potential to influence attitudes or beliefs related to the topic?
- Is the book you chose to showcase accessible to participants who wish to purchase it for their programs' bookshelves?

"[Adult Education] Teachers who use children's literature in their classrooms are making visible their belief that reading is for delight as well as instruction, for aesthetic purposes as well as functional uses. Of course reading is a tool for adults. But it is also an experience that feeds the soul." ~ Patricia L Bloehm

### INTEGRATING CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN PD

Now that you have selected the book and have matched its use with a worthwhile outcome, decide the best way to present it. Obviously, you could just read the book with appropriate inflection and animation, displaying the pictures as you read. Or you could be creative and use one of the following ways to integrate children's books into your session:

- Instead of reading the book to the group yourself, project it onto an overhead screen, and ask different participants to read each page. Or use a round robin where everyone reads.
- Some books lend themselves to choral reading of all or part of the text, especially when a phrase is repeated again and again.
- A number of quality children's books are featured being read on YouTube. For example, John Lithgow reads Dr. Seuss' "[Oh the Places You'll Go](#)." (Click to see it.)

No matter how you decide to present the story, here are further ideas for using children's books:

- Provide a small assortment of children's books related to the topic for participants to browse

before the session and during breaks. Make a book list for them to take home.

- Present a poem or picture book at the beginning of the session to introduce the topic.
- After reading the book, facilitate an activity that discusses how the book relates to the topic and what was learned, etc. A carefully chosen picture book can make abstract concepts come to life.
- A book could be used as the basis for multiple session activities by asking participants to expand on the text or a particular picture as a way of playing with the topic. For example, they could add sentences to the text, interview one of the characters, or use what happens in the book as the basis for role play.
- Janice J. Beaty recommends books as “lead-ins to talking” about various topics with children, especially difficult ones. This can be equally effective with adult learners. For example, she recommends “Freckleface Strawberry and the Dodgeball Bully” (2009) by Julianne Moore to tackle difficult questions about bullying and children’s learning to define themselves in relation to the rest of the world.
- Children’s books can be used to teach strategies and skills applicable to effective early childhood practice using a fictional example. Topics such as problem-solving, communication skills, self-concept, safety, verbalizing feelings, making friends, family types, culture, and so forth are addressed in one or more children’s story books.

## CONCLUSION

Children’s books are rich resources that can spark critical thinking and meaningful exploration about just about any topic. Reading a children’s book in your training event will not substitute for teaching theory and practice, but it might make the difference when it comes to attentiveness, retention, and application.

Stories like those told in children’s books often impact learners in ways that affect them deeply. This factor can sometimes make the difference in whether

or not training participants end up practicing what you “preach”—or not. ~

## \*RESOURCES

\* *Research to Practice: Bringing Children’s Books to Adult Literacy Classrooms (updated 2012)* by Patricia L. Bloem Ohio Literacy Resource Center. Questions, answers, and recommendations for using children’s books with adults who are learning a new language. <http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/Pubs/0200-12.htm>

\* *Skills for Preschool Teachers, Ninth Edition (2012)* by Janice J. Beaty. Every chapter includes children’s picture books as “lead-ins to children’s activities.” Of the 230 books described, 70 multicultural books are featured. [www.pearsonhighered.com](http://www.pearsonhighered.com)

\* *Young Children and Picture Books, Second Edition (2004)* by Mary Renck Jalongo . Washington, DC: NAEYC. Includes chapters on the importance and quality of picture books, bringing books and children together, young children’s responses to picture books, acquiring literacy, families, and linking picture books with curriculum. More than 400 different picture books for young children are mentioned, excerpted, and suggested for various purposes. [www.naeyc.org/store/files/store/TOC/160.pdf](http://www.naeyc.org/store/files/store/TOC/160.pdf)

## MORE RESOURCES

[www.earlyliteracylearning.org/](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/) The Center on Early Literacy Learning (CELL) promotes the adoption and sustained use of evidence-based early literacy learning practices. Includes resources for early childhood intervention practitioners, parents, and other caregivers of children, birth to five years of age, with identified disabilities, developmental delays, and those at-risk for poor outcomes.

[www.hopamountain.org/together/](http://www.hopamountain.org/together/) Encourage parents, grandparents, and other caregivers to take time to interact with children in simple and meaningful ways

<http://ready2readmontana.org> Help Montana’s young children get ready 2 read: songs, finger plays, activities, games, and books.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS** was established by the Early Childhood Project at Montana State University in 2004 with monies from the federal Child Care and Development Fund administered through the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services Early Childhood Services Bureau (ECSB). It is designed to support positive and effective training strategies for use in early childhood professional development.

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