



The best stories for children

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Who doesn't love a great story?

The best stories for young children are genuinely entertaining, fun and of course interesting to them. Ideally, stories should capture the young listener's attention and hold on to their interest.

Great stories may also be inspiring, insightful and may even convey information. Parents and caregivers sometimes use stories to influence children emotionally, teach moral lessons, and to provide instruction.

Commonly found in Central Asia, Pakistan and the Middle East, but less-well known in this part of the world, is the "teaching- story". These multi-layered stories come from a rich tradition of storytelling especially prevalent in Afghanistan. Teaching-stories are ancient universal tales passed on through generations over thousands of years. They have been told to young and old alike to help us understand ourselves and our world.

These rich stories have multiple levels of meaning which can promote children's language, thinking abilities and perceptions. Stories like these help to develop cognitive abilities enabling our children to be more flexible and critical in their thinking. Many of the stories suggest calmer ways to look at difficulties and offer fresh new perspectives. They are carefully and creatively designed to show effective ways of defining and responding to our most common life experiences.

While a story may help children deal with difficult situations or problems, it may also stimulate a deeper understanding in adults. Teaching-stories can be experienced on many levels-from simply listening and enjoying a read-aloud opportunity to analyzing the hidden messages in a more sophisticated way. Many parents and children find richer meanings and insights with each repeated reading discovering alternative ways of seeing and coping with their complex world.

At first glance you may think these stories are the same as fairy tales or folk tales but they are richer in characters, plots and imagery creating patterns and relationships that nurture a part of the mind that is not as easily reached in direct ways. They increase our vision and understanding, while encouraging development of critical thinking and self-confidence.

Psychologist Robert Ornstein tells us that reading teaching-stories activates the right side of the brain much more than does reading normal prose. "The right side of the brain provides 'context' the essential function of putting together the different components of experience," he says. "The left side provides the 'text' or the pieces themselves." He points out that stories are the key to our basic cognitive development and lead the child and then the adult to learn more about what happens in the world, when

and how events come together.

He also states that through research it is clear that the same story seems to occur time and again in different cultures. Certain traditional stories are specifically designed to nurture not only the intellect, but also the emotional, social, intuitive and perspective abilities in ourselves and our children.

Thanks to the Afghan author Idries Shah, we can access many of these teaching-stories for our children. He has spent thirty years collecting, translating and selecting these stories for a Western audience. His collection acknowledges a child's uniqueness and individuality encouraging a sense of confidence, responsibility and purpose. His books encourage thinking outside the box and analogical thought-flexible and inventive minds that are able to meet challenges in life. When children make analogies, they are constructing meaning by relating something that is intellectually and emotionally familiar to them with new information they are experiencing. It's a very powerful way to learn. This is real learning that lasts.

You can check out www.hoopoekids.com for more about teaching stories offered through Hoopoe Books for children. Under the young readers tab you can access the tumblepad to read along with a story called "The Clever Boy and the Terrible Dangerous Animal".

For book related activities, reading tips and information about the Institute for Cross-Cultural Exchange (ICE) visit www.iceeducation.org. [Note that you are already on this website.] They are a Canadian charity dedicated to promoting cross-cultural education and children's literacy.

I have a limited quantity of the storybook "The Boy without a Name". Contact me if you would like to give your child an illustrated tale from the rich storytelling tradition of Afghanistan.

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