

active readers

by Diana Noonan *

Not all children are 'passive' readers, happy to curl up on the sofa with a book, or to sit through a story being read to them. For children who seek a more active approach to reading, drama can be the answer.

Children need almost no encouragement to perform. With the simplest of props, their everyday play is filled with drama, whether it's conducting an imaginary orchestra with a wooden spoon or turning the deck of the house into castle battlements. When supplied with 'stage curtains' (which can be as simple as a couple of rugs thrown over a broomstick), the sky's the limit where theatre is concerned. Children are simply born actors waiting for an audience.

Tapping into this natural desire to act is one way of encouraging your child to read. After all, every actor requires a script! While you may think you need to source actual plays, this isn't always necessary. The books you have around home, and which your children are already familiar with, can be turned into drama material.

reader's theatre

Take a simple traditional story such as Little Red Riding Hood, for example. Read the story together with your children to re-familiarise them with the tale. Next, choose an older child to be the narrator and the others to be the characters. Have the older child hold the book and read the story aloud, pausing for (and prompting) the other children to speak their required lines (which they can ad-lib) and directing their action. Here's an example:

Narrator: Little Red Riding Hood looked at Granny's teeth and said ...

Little Red Riding Hood: Granny, what big teeth you have!

Narrator: The big bad wolf looked at Little Red Riding Hood and said ...

Wolf: All the better to eat you with!

Narrator: The wolf jumped out of bed and chased Little Red Riding Hood around the house.

This theatrical adaptation of existing stories is known as 'reader's theatre' and is one of the simplest ways of encouraging reading in even the youngest of children.

When young children are old enough to read a script themselves, some of the best plays can be found in our very own home-grown Junior Journals, the junior version of School Journals. Many public libraries stock journals, but don't be afraid to ask your school for copies to use at home.

useful websites

Short plays are also available online and can be downloaded and printed off so each child in the play has a copy. Check out www.storiestogrowby.com for an exciting range of stories and matching scripts. Read the story aloud to your children and then let them act out the play using the script provided.

<http://pbskids.org/zoom/activities/playhouse> offers dozens of short, simple plays that even very young children can take part in.

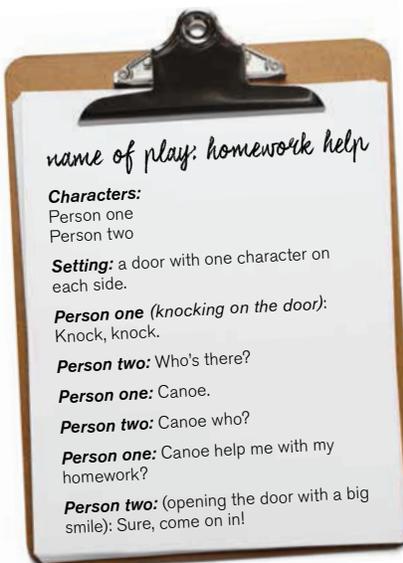
creating plays

Writing is an important part of encouraging reading. Invite your children to write and read their own plays, and photocopy them so all the actors have a copy. As inspiration for playwriting material, ask children to turn simple jokes into short plays which can then be acted out.



'Knock knock' jokes are perfect for this and can be found on a number of internet sites including www.funology.com/knock-knock-jokes.

Here's an example of how to turn a joke into a simple play:



By performing several short 'joke plays', an afternoon of theatre is so easy to organise.

props

To further encourage your children to read and perform plays, visit your local op-shop for a variety of clothes and props that can be used in a range of dramas. Look for capes, hats, long skirts and baggy pants, swords, crowns, wigs and costume jewellery. Recycle lightweight lace curtains, stringing them on twine which can be strung up across a room to form stage curtains.

stage production

Plan to stage a play after dark when reading lamps can be focused on the make-shift stage to create atmosphere while the rest of the lights in the room are switched off.

Create mood lights by covering flashlights with coloured cellophane paper held on with rubber bands, and shining them onto the stage. Use blue cellophane to indicate night, and red to show sunrises or sunsets. Appoint one child to act as the stage manager who draws back the curtains and manages the lights.

sound effects

Don't forget sound which can bring drama to life. A jar filled with rice can be shaken to indicate rain; a flexed oven tray creates the boom of distant thunder. Older children will enjoy using sound effects available online from sites such as www.dramaticpublishing.com/freesoundeffects.php

finishing touches

Encourage children to create their own theatre posters and programmes for their performances. Include info such as: title, location of performance, a list of the acts or scenes, a summary of the story and where it came from, credits (script writers, puppet makers, design, sound effects, etc). Encourage them to make their posters and programmes eye-catching using fancy lettering, colourful borders and drawings. Look online for inspiration or point out theatre posters to children when you're out. Use the opportunity to introduce words associated with theatre such as 'costume designer', 'wardrobe', 'lighting', 'stage manager', 'director' and 'cast'.

opening night

For a night of entertainment, invite other families to join in a home theatre evening. Make popcorn for the audience. Create flyers to go out to the homes of the families who will be joining in with the fun. Let children create tickets for the event, providing them with actual examples which they can read and adapt to their own use.

Drama – an activity that children are naturally inclined towards – can be the jumping off point for encouraging reading. And every bit as fun as acting out a play is reading one with friends, without even bothering about the stage or audience. Once children are hooked on drama, you may find they choose plays/scripts to read just as often as they choose a picture book or novel.

Whether your child is an avid or a reluctant reader, drama can be the way to hook them into the written word.

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