The joy of shared reading

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Art psychotherapist Fransie Frandsen on how sharing stories and pictures fosters emotional intelligence

Young children often find it difficult to express their feelings, mostly because they do not really know what they are feeling. Making children aware of the multitude of emotions they can experience, and teaching them to recognise and name them, cultivates emotional intelligence. During my career as an art psychotherapist working with children, I found the idea of artwork becoming a "third person" in the session particularly helpful in developing this understanding. The triangular dialogue between therapist, child and artwork helps to make the process feel safe, as feelings can be explored through the work, rather than in a two-way dialogue focusing directly on the child.

However, you do not have to be a qualified art therapist to practise some of these principles at home. Parents, grandparents or carers can help children express and name their feelings by engaging in creative activities such as reading, drawing and art, which are not only bonding, but also build trust and encourage dialogue about each other's inner worlds.

"Reading a picture book together with your child is a feast for the senses."

The benefits of reading with children of all ages are well documented, including increased vocabulary, literacy, language skills, concentration, imagination, empathy, and mental wellbeing. Even for babies and toddlers, the action of paging through a book and experiencing the difference in temperature and feel in the texture of paper is valuable in sensory development. In short, reading a picture book together with your child is a feast for the senses, building positive brain pathways through touch, sight and hearing.

Little did I know, when I started reading with my own children as babies, what a valuable investment I was making, not only in these benefits, but also in my future relationship with my children.

Reading with children at any time during the day is beneficial, but from my professional and personal
experience a bedtime story is invaluable in the relationship between parent and child. Snuggling up with a book at bedtime when children are tired and ready to go to sleep is not only a peaceful way to end the day, but a perfect opportunity gently to explore your child's feelings. Children do not always respond well to "what" and "why" questions, and so the story and illustrations can become a friendly third person through which questions can be asked.

For example, "I wonder how the bear felt when he was lost in the wood?", or "How do you think the bear will feel when he finds his house again?" In this way, the child can safely explore his or her own feelings through the story and the characters in the book, and learn how to name personal feelings. Additionally, associating and relating to characters helps children learn to empathise with others and, not surprisingly, this helps to bring their own experiences, fears and questions into the discussion, giving a welcome glimpse into this inner world. Children feel that they are being heard, and learn that it is safe to express your feelings, which in turn leads to healthy attachment and bonding. The ability safely to voice emotions are valuable tools in times of stress, and these skills will be carried forward into adulthood and ultimately into parenthood.

I had expected that this bedtime ritual with my own children would slowly fizzle out by the time they started reading chapter books by themselves. But this time together has become so valuable to us all that even now, when they're teenagers, we still snuggle up in bed to talk about the day, before they drift off to sleep after reading by themselves.

Drawing on my experience as an art psychotherapist and work as an artist, I decided to write and illustrate my own children's books, in which the characters are seen to be listening to one another - the basis for bonding. The busy, layered illustrations - which I create through collage - give opportunity for exploration and discussion. The process of writing and illustrating my books has, in many ways, been a family effort too, with my children eager to give their input and even my husband and two Westies, The Barkingtons, agreeing to be drawn.

I am convinced that these early creative childhood experiences spent together are irreplaceable building blocks in forming positive relationships for life, and help develop emotionally intelligent individuals with empathy for the world and those around them.

Fransie Frandsen is the author and illustrator of Do Grannies Have Green Fingers?, out from Artfox.Bookwolf today, 11 June, priced £7.99.

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