

WHEN IS A CHILDREN'S BOOK a Good Book for Children?

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When our son was a toddler, my friend asked him, "Do you know what your mommy does for work?" He answered "Yes! She works in the kitchen!"

This wasn't the answer my friend expected. I had returned to my job as a lawyer after my son was born. Each morning I headed downtown to a law firm in the financial district where I worked developing civil cases for trials. But from the view of my toddler, my work happened at home. Every evening when I returned home, my son and I would spend time in the kitchen. He would play with his toys, and we'd catch up on the day as I went about getting dinner on the table. Fridays were even busier as I scurried to prepare a more festive meal. My son was right: I did work in the kitchen. His understanding of his mommy's work made perfect sense from a child's viewpoint.

The best children's book authors are keenly aware that children don't experience the world as adults do. A skilled author writes for a child's specific cognitive stage, with words and images that a child can connect to. Picture books need just the right mix of prose and illustration to create an engaging story that meets a child at their level. Some books are beautiful and inspiring from an adult's point of view but simply won't engage a child. The illustrations may be too busy, for example, or the concepts too abstract. Aspiring authors often try too hard to teach a lesson at the expense of the story itself. A book is a miss when it strays too far from how a child processes the world.

I often sit in on the PJ Library Book Selection Committee meetings. The group searches for engaging stories with beautiful and captivating illustrations that share an important aspect of the Jewish experience, and a primary consideration is whether a book will resonate with a child. The experts on the committee often discuss whether a certain book will work for a particular developmental stage. They consider everything from the visual cues in the illustrations to the quality of the cadence and the complexity of the prose. Books are often tested with children of different ages in advance of the meeting, and we hear reports on what questions they had or what captured their attention.



At a recent meeting, one of the toddler books under consideration had a scene of a mom cooking in the kitchen. A committee member noted that this was yet another book that showed a mom at the stove. While the scene was only one element of the story, it was something to consider. The committee strives to create a diverse lineup of engaging books that act as windows and mirrors, providing views into the lives of families that have different experiences than the reader, as well as families that are familiar, whether in composition, religious practice, work life, or home life. With this guiding framework in mind, the committee reviewed the toddler book in its totality. There was agreement that the prose and illustrations were warm and inviting and were likely to engage a young child. It showcased a Jewish holiday celebration in a beautiful way. The kitchen scene was happy and familiar. The illustrations were bright, and there was just the right amount of humor to make the book engaging for both kids and adults. The committee chose the book for the PJ Library lineup.

I appreciate the thought that the committee puts toward every book it considers, and I was pleased that the group selected that toddler book. It was a sweet, lovely story, and I am sure it would have resonated with my toddler when his perspective was centered at home. Plus, the joy of Jewish celebration often happens around a dinner table or festive meal, just like in the book.

As parents and caregivers, our job is to expose our children to a broader worldview as they grow. Children learn through the totality of their experiences, including through the many books they read during childhood. Some children's books will challenge stereotypes or teach important lessons in age-appropriate ways, and others are wonderful and engaging stories that children enjoy for their warmth and familiarity. Some children's books artfully accomplish both of these goals. All of these books deserve a valued place in our children's libraries.