

WOULD YOU SEE BEYOND? WHAT STRENGTHENS VISUAL UNDERSTANDING OF A CHILD (0-5 YEARS)?

Into what process does an adult enter, when a child asks questions? How does a "stimulusmeter" work, while reading an image? When to start with books? And how? Picture books are an important genre for beginning readers. However, reading is not a matter of course for a child. And, just like gaining other skills (such as motor or speech skills), it develops on the basis of stimulation. The concept of relationship here also plays a key role. There is a relationship we have with a child, and then there is a relationship that the child creates with physical reality. And the story between us and the book may begin!

"Knock, knock, knock! Will you see beyond?" (Let's open Elena Rabčanová)



What did you feel when I asked this question? Did you feel joy, curiosity, a desire for interaction? Or did you feel like I was addressing you with the intention to instruct you? Did you feel the inner distance between us? Was I closer or further away from you? These are significant questions that are important to be asked, when we communicate as well as when we communicate through a book. Have you noticed that a sincere, whole-hearted question can be like a pleasant perfume or a beam of light? It is like opening the door of interest. My nephew, Daniel Jonathan, will be looking forward to see whether

or not we find a hedgehog behind the window. He will also be excited from the fact that we are looking for the hedgehog together. My dear Emma loves this question, as a ritual. This light beam hidden in a question has a lot of meaning for a child.

Asking a child of an early age a question is stimulating in particular for two reasons: the child perceives intonation, colour, and emotion, and associates it with our voice, even before fully understanding the question. Therefore, while reading, I ask the child a question. I try to put my heart into it, in a way that the child can hear, even if it is a stereotypical formulation. The child may not even understand the question. I am not worried if it is the same question that I asked, because I know that for the child, identical, repetitive stimulus is associated with a sense of harmony and safety. And I really want children around me to experience safety. So, I put my whole heart into the questions I ask. Even in their early life, children particularly remember things that are associated with emotional experience. So, the emotional contact with me will help them to remember the connection between the picture and the question. The question set as a ritual also opens up other internal process. It tells the children that

they may think about the picture, and it allows them to create an inner image associated with the experience.

Why is it important for children to feel close to us and to the world (we mediate the world to them) even when working with a book? Are we not coddling them? After all, they should be learning things! The feeling of closeness is a significant stimulus for children. Since they were in the mother's womb, closeness has always lead them to connect with the reality. In addition, a close relationship is associated with their life functions. Let's imagine feeding nurslings. A loving, close relationship suggests to the children that they are safe to receive, even on a symbolic level. The feeling of inner intimacy is also an important stimulus for mental development and growth. In early childhood, and even later on, the feelings of safety and inner closeness motivate children to perceive and receive stimuli. And thus, children grow and develop. It's fascinating when we realise that thanks to the sense of closeness and love, we learn to receive to know (the same goes for us, adults, as well). Does it not give us value? And does it not reveal the process of learning from a completely different perspective? In addition, it gives us the opportunity to create a relationship between children and a book much earlier than they can perceive the book. In Italy, the organisation Natti per leggere (Born to read) begins to work with picture books for children as soon as they are 6 months old. From the point of view of the psychosocial development of the child, that is definitely the right time. But let's keep in mind that the baby starts reading indirectly much earlier by experiencing various natural stimuli, by recognising the stimuli, and by internal processing it. There are various factors that help: songs, our touch, or our face that children see and are learning to read. In short: love, safety, deep connections, and relationships are expressed through the WORD and the STORY.

Stories are important for a child. After all, it is the story that also helps children to perceive much earlier than they are able to recognise the story itself. A mother who appears immediately when a baby cries does not represent a word to a child, but she represents a story of fragrances and sounds, pleasant touches, and mother's milk. Based on this, our perceptions are developing throughout our whole lives. Therefore, when I knock, "Knock, knock, knock! Will you see beyond?"



We will see a mole, and my 2.5 year-old Daniel Jonathan will check to see if it is the "upper" mole or the "bottom" mole (this book is supposed to be a Match Match card game), because he is a very socially receptive boy and looks forward to have the brothers moles talk together. He is not interested in the picture as far as it stands

for a word, but he is interested in the picture when it tells a story about the mole. I know that one story crosses his mind: a story about a mole who travels in an elevator, because he has already made a few animals travel there. Another story that he remembers is about their dog Punto who was digging holes to find the mole.

Emma, a 2.4 months old girl, is quite discouraged when I show her a scheme of corridors: the labyrinth, through which the mole travels to get into his bed. She needs to dig the path together with me, dynamically, slowly, and then quickly, playing that we do it in real ground until we find his house and celebrate it. The point is not to entertain Emma with a change of speed and a victorious shout. Maybe it looks like that. Well, Emma, like every child while playing, is working very diligently. She is learning. In this case, she processes the feelings and flashes of stories that relate not only to moles, lines, directions, and geometric shapes, but also to the context of sounds, fragrances, and her own thoughts. She also learns that the visual character in the book is connected with all those various things that exist outside in the physical world. (She needs us, as we are those who can show it to her). She would certainly not be able to summarise it now in this way. However, all those stimuli will be later connected when she receives them into her consciousness and subconsciousness, and they will represent the small seeds of more complex imagination. Though she does not understand reality as we do, and will not understand it until she is 6 years old, she has an idea about it, and this idea is created by her fantasy. Let me ask you: how did the mole prepare breakfast today? Have you been small enough in order to move into a mole hole and watch him during his breakfast? You haven't? But then you do not know much about the reality regarding the life of a mole. And thus, though you are adults, you are in the same situation as the little Emma. Mrs. Fantasy has to help you. How do you get out of a hole and into the light to find out if you have a chance to have delicious earthworm meat? How does the earthworm smell? How do you pull it into the hole? Let's try to play it. Are you going to grumble like a mole? Or sigh? Or sing? How are we to do it MO-LE-ISH-LY? Try a few sounds. Notice, that it is not important whether they are real. It is the feeling that we experience while going through the situation that is important. Let's try to go on. As a mole, how do you prepare an earthworm? Which one do you like the most? It is the feeling the child involves in the game that extends their imagination. E.g., the perception that to get through a narrow corridor is difficult. Do you know that it is not very easy to fully understand the word difficult? Not only for a child, but also for many adults. We see that they have problems estimating the difficulty of a task or situation. Or that they do not know what attitude they should have toward difficult tasks. Actually, it is a demanding concept regarding our existence. The awareness of "difficulty" is being created in us and has been modifying throughout our whole lives. Many mental and physical processes are involved in the creation of our imagination. New stimuli will always surprise us, and our imagination will be modified. But now we are speaking about the early childhood of our little ones. And by playing and reading about the mole, we sigh and sing at the same time, and thus the foundation to process and perceive the concept of difficulties is created in them. It's all about making our children internally healthy, strong, and creative even in real life situations! During such games, a child receives seeds, which will lead them later to the fact that it is normal in life when some tasks are difficult. In this way the WORD becomes part of us, part of MY REAL ME, the story of our heart.

So let's summarise: Which processes have been activated in you in this KNOCK, KNOCK game? Would you see beyond? Which senses? How did thinking get involved?

To extend the story context means to search for stories that refer to the picture. They become a child's bridge that links an image with its own experience in reality. If we are able to evoke such a process in the child, we help them immensely to build up the ability to read and read picture books in general. Additionally, in picture books the plot line is often simple, especially in some picture books with text. This is only to enable us, the readers, to have more expanded space to work with the pictures by inserting our own stories. This is the role of adults: to stimulate children in this process.

Among the classic collections of favourite picture books in Slovakia is the folding picture book *Môj macík* (My Little Teddy Bear), a well-known translation of Maria Rázusová-Martáková.



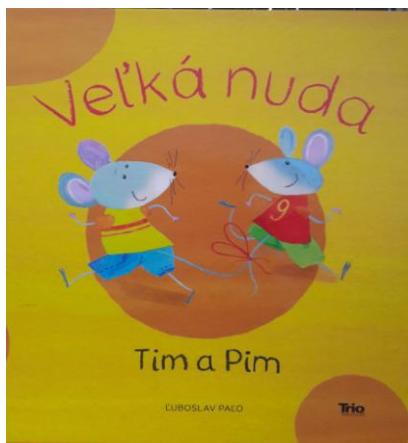
Let's see how the bear is preparing himself for eating: he sticks to hygienic habits and washes his paws. The poem linked to the picture describes the picture in a simple way: washing and drying. This is an example of a book where images are greatly supported by poetic texts. It is symbiosis with the picture; they are mutually supportive. The child can enjoy

both. The text is poetic. Each quartet represents a closed episode. At the same time, it naturally engages a larger context: the theme of a daily routine. Such an order has both a useful and enjoyable effect on the child, because they learn these things enthusiastically: what is Daniel Jonathan going to do this morning? Eat his breakfast. And then wash his eyes and his hands. The child is happy, as he learns and understands. The text in the picture book is poetic. The rhyme sounds nice and is emotionally pleasant for a child at this age. It is related to the developmental process of speech. The overall emotional tuning of the text, in which the harmonic contact is expressed, is stimulating as well. We include in it playful sounds, diminutives, naming of activities, and the feeling that no paw has been forgotten. The picture in the picture book usually extends the episode context outlined in the text. And this expanded context is a great prerequisite for working with the book, because it helps to animate and revive the image through questions, improvised dialogues, movement, and singing. Through questions, we can open up other events associated with the details of the image that the child will develop in themselves. It is enough to say "hello" to both the teddy bear and the little girl (even singing). "Wow, who drew a picture on the wall, the teddy bear or the little girl? You, teddy bear, you are very smart! How did the bear get on the table? First he crawled on his four paws on the carpet. (I show it like this: I motion it with my hand or I get down on the carpet. Both movements are important movements. I may even crawl with my hand on another hand). This is the method that helps the child not only to revive the picture and make it comprehensible, but also have fun. Playing and having fun is hard work for the baby's inner self. They are learning in this way to connect with reality, and they are preparing to have a sensible personality that has a developed ability to read and understand.

In this book we can make use of one more important element. The text referring to the picture extends even the thematic and semantic context of the picture. It is reminding us of the activities, sounds and stimuli that the picture does not express (eating, washing of hands):

Before eating splash - splash
we are washing both little paws
and then we dry them
the small bath towel dries them neatly.

When reading a book, we can therefore focus on opening the story of unseen things as well. For example, how did the teddy bear climbed up to the sink? How did he splash with a little girl in the water? How did they take a soap? Scientific research shows that it is very important for the development of a child (and even an adult) to develop imagination that is not stimulated by physical images. We can move on from the picture to the unseen context and invent the game, while we are still in touch with the book.



When I worked on a Handbook: Reading with Understanding of Analphabet Illiterate for a picture book of author Ľubo Paľo named Veľká nuda: Tim a Pim (Big Boredom: Tim and Pim), I tried to encourage adults to start working with seen and unseen in the book and move freely in the context of the story. Tim and Pim are mice who choose to get bored. They do not want to do anything, not even help their mom. Finally, they find out it is extremely exhausting.

When I work with the picture, I make use of its theme and genre perspective as well. I focus on the theme of rest, that was predetermined by the text as well. It becomes a harmonic setting. In the fine arts, it is often associated with light. In our book it is connected with the sun. I do not want the child to be limited to interpret the picture on the topic of mice only within 3 sentences. It is at the age of 5-6 years, that the child develops a sense for details. This must be stimulated! I alternate the main character of the picture. The sun (as a detail from the picture).



What does the sun see? And question for older children: What the sun cannot see? (A game of unseen things). What happens in the yard, if a dark cloud comes and covers the sun (we make a cloud and cover the sun): maybe a mother-chicken runs with her little chicken to hid themselves, because it will rain). My other goal is to inspire children to develop an ability to identify themselves with the situation: we can play a game with additional character (our finger or even a ball or a puppet) in the meadow. Here is Tim, and here is the mole and where is the finger? What does Tim say to the finger? Hi! At the age of 2, the child will not be able to see themselves directly in the picture. But with pre-schoolers, you can already play that they are somewhere in the picture. It is a very important game for developing empathy, imagination, understanding.



Through this game, it is possible to stimulate and develop the healthy decision-making process of the child as well. The pain is already a familiar concept. The pepper is very chilly. Tim has an "ouch" and Pim has an "ouch" also. Will the finger lick the pepper as well? Yes, and he has "ouch", we must help him!

Or another situation: Tim and Pim are sitting on the bench. What are they doing? How are they doing? What about animals? Where do you want to be? Will you go and see the animals or will you sit down next to Tim and Pim? You want to sit next to Tim and Pim? Okay, are you tired? Do you want to relax with them? Or do you just like them? The point is not to morally judge child's choices (even you want to be lazy and choose to do nothing?). It is about making the decision and talking about possibilities and consequences. In this way, the child engages creatively in the story and learns to feel, perceive, and navigate in the real environment. This is the way how the child gets used to proper decisions (that are even of high moral quality).

Various mechanisms are developed in children through these games. They help them to find their place in the story and to experience what they see or feel. Every question may be a theme for a dialogue or a game. We can stimulate other processes as well, e.g. motor development:



Let's play a game about annoying fly. In what different places it can sit down? On the finger. At the ear. On the leg. Look, if the fly sits here, will the leg say hello to the fly? And here?

Or: What can you do in the yard in front of a mouse house?

Let's try to demonstrate simple situations together with the children. You can lie down in the grass like Tim or sit down as Pim. Or would you rather sit on the bench next to the house? Emma, what does the Mom Mouse do? Are we going to lean toward the window (stand on our fingertips?) and ask her: "Mom Mouse,

what are you doing?" Or, Daniel, are you going to check Mom Mouse in the kitchen? Let's run!



3-year-old Rafael received a wonderful gift: Not only the picture book named Dierožrút (The Hole-Eater), which he will understand better when he goes to school, but also a real Mr. Hole-Eater made of paper! This means that the picture entered his reality. It is materialised and Rafael can eat holes with him. This has a tremendous impact on his perception. Computer simulation will never reach this level. As this is real, tangible. Moreover, it was made by someone close.

The child in this way becomes naturally used to the fact that a picture can be the source of many

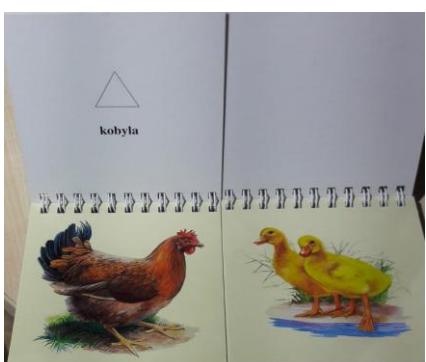
activities. The games aimed at stimulating developmental processes are enjoyable for children. Their whole being is set to have a desire to develop in a particular area. Those of you who have had this experience, you know how much joy the child feels. And this joy and all these positive emotions become part of reading.

In bookshops, especially nowadays, there are picture books aimed at usage: educational (dictionary types of books) or perceptual stimulation, e.g. tactile (where the child interacts with touch, movement, and visual changes such as revealing, covering, and moving with pictures) and also pop-up books. Sometimes we think that these types of educational books are the most stimulating for the child. I personally disagree with this view. Why? In particular, they stimulate mechanical discovery and, moreover, sometimes in inappropriate ways. Try to perceive now your own internal "stimulusmeter", as I prepared, in conclusion, a few examples to compare:



"Find my mom!" That is a very strong emotional challenge! And how it is processed? Expressionless! Objectified! We do not give the child any emotional signals. It is confusing, because we are talking to little ones about their mother. They have not yet learned the words like we do. This is not the most suitable method of

stimulating children under 5 years. They need to learn in connection with an emotional experience.



Even though these "technical" books can be used, you need to expand their context: by telling stories about unseen things (without a picture), and by games, drawing, and other books.

Even here, though it is a tactile book, it is very schematic. It is focused on naming some segments of the picture, it

resembles the computer screen, and it even evokes movement on the iPad screen. Tactile books are stereotyped, they lack creativity, artistic dimension and emotionality, which can be depicted by a true illustrator only.



This illustration speaks!



As a child, I loved pop-up books, but what about this one? What is it about? It is about a word “owl”. Notice the poor setting. In short, we may classify it as a dictionary principle.

Although I have included several specific activity suggestions in my presentation, they are for inspiration only. I do not really believe in the manuals. That is why I tried to explain the concept of the

inner-being experience. Every child is an individual being with his or her own needs. Every day is different in the life of the child. The child is developing during their first 3 years at such a rate, that they will not even need such a speed for their entire lifetime altogether. And therefore, reading the picture books is a wonderful dynamic space for the whole body, soul and spirit.

If you KNOCK, KNOCK! WOULD YOU SEE BEYOND?