

Are You Just Reading to Them?

by Rachel DeMille



So much has been said about the importance of reading to our kids; and those of us who do can attest that it's a formative experience—on so many levels:

- Bonding
- Laughing
- Making memories
- A shared language
- Gratitude
- Reliving the past
- Pity and compassion
- Empathy for others
- Tenderness
- Shared stories/quotes/inside jokes
- Moments of transparency and unguarded confiding
- Feelings of righteous outrage and commitment to make a difference
- Self discovery and desire to improve
- Exploring new ideas/places/words/peoples/images
- Connecting with our ancestors/predecessors
- Deepened affection for family
– and so much more...

It occurred to me one day last week, when I was teaching a little lesson for a group of friends and their kids (we take weekly turns for an hour of class before the kids play together), that I do something a little more

than just reading. It's one of those things that comes so naturally that sometimes you forget to even comment on it or suggest it to others.

As I taught our little group about the power of stories to help us "Remember," I retold the traditional folktale of the 3 Little Pigs—not the Disney version, but the one where the piggies actually get gobbled up because their houses were not made to last. And then I did what I always do: I started to ask questions about the story. We had a discussion about it. In technical mentoring terms, we had a "debriefing." It took longer to discuss the story and listen to the responses from the kids and their moms than it did to tell the thing, and it could have gone on for three times as long. There is so much to talk about when you have a good quality story!

I found a version on the web that's really close to the one I read to the kids. You can view it at:

<http://homepages.uni-paderborn.de/odenbach/wwwmath/pigs/pig3.html>

(Click on the arrows at the bottom of each illustrated panel to "turn the page").

Some of the things we discussed:

- Why did the piggies leave their first home?
- Where did the little pigs get the materials to build their houses?
- Does it seem strange that the man gave away the straw/wood/bricks just because the pigs needed them and asked for them—without paying?
- Do you think the man would have given away the materials if they hadn't asked?
- Who in our lives gives us what we need, just because we ask?
- Why is asking an important part of that process?
- How did the pigs get the houses? [They built them]
- How much did they cost? [Only the cost of their labor]
- So basically, they all cost the pigs the same amount; which house was the most valuable, and why?
- Why would a pig ask for free materials of lesser value, and put his effort into building a house that doesn't actually do what a house should do—protect and shelter?
- Do we ever ask for things that aren't of lasting value?
- Do we ever put our effort into things that don't serve our interests? How/What?
- Did the unfortunate piggies try to avoid the wolf? Why were they unable to do so? [Because they had not prepared adequately]
- Did the wise piggy try to avoid the wolf? How? [He put in extra effort to use the resources he had been freely given by the man so that the wolf wouldn't be able to enter his home. He also made plans and sacrifices in an effort to never be in the same place with the wolf when he

had to leave his home.]

- What happened to the foolish piggies? Does misfortune ever come to those who mean well but do less than they could?
- How does this apply to us?

There are many more questions that could come from such a story. But obviously, just any old version of the story doesn't provide such fertile thought. Some common versions are stripped of the details that make this one such a great discussion. This is why we recur to the classics. They stay around generation after generation, retelling after retelling, because they have more than a bossy moral at the end; they have myriad open questions embedded in the details.

Not all stories are created equal; not all reading times are created equal. It sort of brings to mind the computer science term, "Garbage in, garbage out." The common acronym is: GIGO. It means, the quality of output is determined by the quality of input.

How many times have we pulled out our hair in frustration because our computer (or vacuum, or car, or...) isn't reliably doing what we need it to do? Somewhere in the programming, design, construction or planned obsolescence of the tool we were confronted with its limitations. And yet, a sleek, well designed program can really make your life a dream and simplify your work; and there's nothing quite so glorious as a vacuum or car that you absolutely love!

When it comes to family reading time (or personal reading, or leisure pursuits), are we choosing materials freely available to us that don't serve our interests? Are we putting in the time and effort, but getting inferior results?

GIGO. The lesson of the 3 Pigs tells us this:

- Choose the highest quality materials
- Put in the extra effort to put them to work (Don't just read; interact. Don't just lecture; listen.)
- Shun, dismiss and expel the influences that distract, compete or deceive

I think sometimes moms and dads feel overwhelmed, frustrated or disillusioned with their family's education and have no idea that the fix could be as simple as having a family reading time with a great classic. Consider: if I had chosen a different version of the 3 Little Pigs, what kind of discussion might have ensued? How might I have spent that 30 minutes? What additional effort or floundering might I have gone to, and never had such an enriching and bonding experience with my kids and friends?

To my way of thinking, it would have been a lot harder, and a lot less fulfilling. When we're engaged with a great classic, I don't have to have 7 different lessons going on for 7 different kids at home. They each take from that experience something that applies to them specifically. In fact, my 18-year-old daughter happened to pass by the parlor while I was leading the 3 Pigs discussion and she stayed to take it in. It was every bit as interesting and relevant for her as it was for my neighbor's 4 year old. She commented to me afterward that she hadn't realized how much there was to think about in that story! My response: that's the power of classics and mentors. GIGO.

Quality in, quality out. And in this case, quality also translates to all the wonderful feelings and experiences I listed at the beginning of this article. After such a discussion, the natural result is a spirit of harmony and produc-

tivity that never fails to lead to other wonderful projects and happy times throughout the rest of the day. Isn't that more productive and less stressful than the alternative?

What do you think will happen to your family's education when you input the classics and debrief with interactive listening? What will the output be? Sounds like a good time to employ the scientific method....

For more from author Rachel DeMille, visit <https://tjed.org/>

Discussion Questions

- ★ *What are some things you learned from this article?*
- ★ *Why do you think questions are such a powerful learning tool? Is asking questions a strength for you, or something you want to be better at?*
- ★ *What are your favorite results of reading to your kids from the list at the beginning of the article, or adding something new to the list?*
- ★ *What are some of your kids' favorite classics? Have you seen your children have good experiences from reading classics?*
- ★ *What challenges have you experienced using classics with your kids, if any?*