

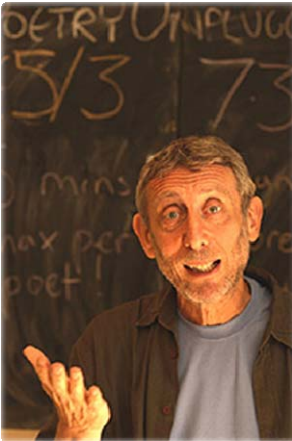


Looking at books

The Big Picture guide to exploring
picture books

booktrust

Foreword by Michael Rosen, The Children's Laureate



“A common misconception is that picture books are simple art-forms. Perhaps this derives from our belief that they are made with the intention that very young children will enjoy them. Quite apart from the mistaken notion that young children are simplified human beings, even the notion that they are the sole audience for picture books, is a misconception too. Most picture books are produced in the full understanding that they are books to be shared. And we know how: an adult – whether this is a parent, grandparent or adult relative, or a playgroup, nursery or school teacher – will hold the book in such a way as the young child (or children) can see the book, while the adult reads the words out loud. Picture books have

to work in that situation, not simply as ways of talking to children. This means that most picture books contain layers of meaning, areas of back-reference to a world bigger and wider than one usually lived through by a young child; they point towards texts that exist outside of any picture book, hinting or alluding to them, in order for the adult to draw these in as any given book is read, or re-read. This makes each book occupy what we might call a nodal point and this is part of why they are important and rich ways of talking to young children. Put it this way: any parent or teacher knows that the best picture books are springboards for lengthy conversations with young children.

Another factor that feeds into this rich dialogue surrounding picture books is the fact that they are, in the jargon, 'polysemic'. That's to say, they tell us things in a variety of ways. At first glance this is obvious: picture books tell a story in words and in pictures. However, the relationship between the words and the pictures is not a simple one. The pictures don't simply 'illustrate' the words. They tell their own stories in their own ways. Sometimes these are referred to in the words, sometimes not. What's more, the eye of the reader of those pictures will nearly always be constantly ranging over the pages, looking in corners, scanning, tilting, hunting for images, hints, jokes, mysteries and feelings. What's more, just as the words in picture books have their own rhythms, so do the pictures, either in terms of how they appear in a regular rhythm with the turning of the pages, or with where they are situated on one page in relation to another and so on. In relation to this, there will be a tonal message too, warming or cooling us as we read.

The consequence of all this is that really good picture books have the capacity to draw in many readers, giving a chance for people of all ages and a massive range of backgrounds a variety of ways to engage their attention, whether that be through the books' sounds, rhythms, images, tones, feelings, ideas or however. They are, in short, like moments of powerful illumination, sparking off many diverse thoughts and feelings.”

‘The pictures don't simply 'illustrate' the words. They tell their own stories in their own ways.’

Exploring picture books

The richness of pictures

Pictures are not just for the youngest children. We know that older children and adults are often more motivated to read magazines and graphic novels than pure text.

However, pictures can be challenging to read because they give out their meanings on several different levels. For example, imagine a portrait. You might immediately notice the striking red of a woman's dress. Later you realise she is peering sidelong at something in a mirror, and then you might try to read the letter she is holding... and so on. You can dig into the treasure of a picture for a long time and still not reach the bottom. Not all of us possess the best tools for this digging.

Young people need to develop skills in reading complex images, and creating them, in order to deal with a global media that is increasingly visual. To do this, they need a wide range of visual experiences and they need continued practice in thinking about and interpreting what they see. Picture books offer a convenient and satisfying way of doing this.

This guide gives ideas for five different ways of looking at pictures. Each way relates to different stages of children's development.

Finding the right books

American writer and illustrator Maurice Sendak described an illustrator as:

“someone who has something just as important to say as the writer of the book – occasionally something even more important. You must leave a space in the text so that the pictures can do the work [...] the illustrator is doing a tremendous job of expansion, of collaboration, of illumination.”

In some storybooks the pictures are used simply to add colour or describe elements of the story. In the most interesting books the words and the pictures have their own separate 'lives' and the interplay between the two is part of what makes these books exciting. Sometimes of course this interaction doesn't quite work. Have you ever found yourself reading out a story, building up the suspense, when suddenly a child spots a visual clue to the next scene and spoils the surprise? By contrast, we hope you'll find that the choice of books presented here are instances of words and images working in harmony.

Bringing pictures to life

Sometimes picture books fail to come fully to life because we might neglect to breathe life into the pictures. We often think the task at hand is 'to get through the words' - to tell the story with pace and verve. That can mean deflecting questions like 'what's that girl doing

You can think of your picture books as self-contained 'art galleries' that you can keep visiting, finding more treasure each time.

with that funny cat?’ However, panache in storytelling can be as much about drawing on the richness present in the pictures as that in the narrative prose.

When we read aloud to children they are generally looking at the pictures for longer than we are. When early readers are slow in their reading, they may well be scanning the pictures thoroughly, taking time to absorb the meaning. We can unthinkingly give them signals that they should hurry up and that images are somehow less important.

This guide will help you and the children you are reading with get the most out of pictures. This may involve taking more time to explore a book from different perspectives and asking more questions about images. When telling the story, you can even add extra dialogue or sound effects to fill in the extra time needed for children to take in the pictures. You can also try making art and stories, inspired by the pictures.

Five ways of looking

The guide explores five ways of looking which are loosely linked to the ways children develop ‘symbolic skills’. As they grow, children develop abilities to engage more fully with images and words that are removed from real things. They can begin to understand the meanings of images that are increasingly more fantastic, more witty, more rich with information, more paradoxical or more symbolic. This does not mean that older children and adults stop enjoying those images that are simple, sensual and familiar. It’s just that we increasingly appreciate the ‘doubleness’, or the layering of reality and symbolism.

Stage of development	‘Dimension’ of looking
Sensory and concrete learning	Looking for pleasure
Imagination and fantasy	Inspiring imagination
Broadening horizons	Stimulating curiosity
Developing empathy and interpersonal understanding	Understanding others
Higher cognitive thinking	Exploring the making of art and stories

Looking for pleasure

Learning to look

When new babies are learning to look, they are physically learning how to use their eyes - how to focus and to respond to any new visual stimulus. They focus on what presents the strongest contrast. They would rather gaze at an unfamiliar face or watch the sun streaming through a window blind in preference to regarding a soft toy. This is why books for new babies often contain strongly contrasting patterns and simple faces.

Real vs. representation

But why give children such images in books? Why not just let them look at the real world? Learning how to deal with symbolic representation is such a complex task, such a long haul throughout our lives, that we may as well introduce babies to images and signs in books as early as possible. When we show images, even to the youngest babies, we need to match them with words or mood-sounds, so that babies can learn that you make connections between a thing, a sound and an idea while understanding that the thing, the sound and the idea are not the same. We need to point and talk, mime and make sound effects, pointing out repetitions and connections: 'Look, a moon, it's round, and the clock, it's round too.'

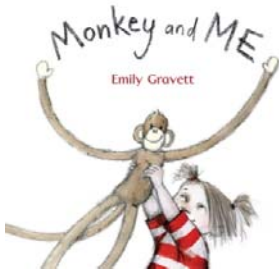
Comforts and challenges

Babies often react positively to particular images and feel comforted by them. Picture books hold the world still and safe so that we can explore it. Babies may get attached to particular images, or textures for example, and want to look at them again and again. It's important, however, to recognise that babies develop very quickly and need new stimuli alongside their comforts. In fact, babies and toddlers can gain a lot from looking at magazines, catalogues and books for older children. See if they can spot familiar things or make links between the things they see in one book and another. This is how they expand their frame of reference, begin to make meaning and learn to speak.

Pixar vs. painting

The importance of pleasure in looking does not fade as children grow. They just want more. More realism, more fantasy, more detail, more style and cleverer jokes. Once children have discovered Pixar and PlayStation, they can feel that books don't give them the same thrill. However, paintings and drawings have a sensual quality that children appreciate as much as adults do. Good picture books compete with digital animation, but not by playing the same game. Children can appreciate picture books are different from digital entertainment – that the images are more likely to be 'hand-crafted' and this may inspire them to try making art themselves, experimenting with different materials and techniques.

Monkey and Me by Emily Gravett (Macmillan)



A small girl ('me') plays with her toy monkey, possibly after a visit to a zoo. They make the shapes of different animals and act out the animal's behaviour, prompting the reader to guess which animals they are mimicking. The next spread reveals the answer.

Activities

For younger children:

- Try acting out the animals yourselves.
- Look at the cover. How does it make you feel? Why? What shape do the words of the title and monkey make?
- Look at the endpapers: How many girls is that? (It's one, drawn in several poses.) What is she doing? Look at all the shapes you can make with your clothes. (You can try making body shapes or shadows with clothes.)

For older children:

- Look at the lines of the drawing, how Emily Gravett has left her sketch lines visible.
- Children have fewer chances today to draw with a plain pencil, so why not have a go at drawing a cuddly toy.
- You can also talk about the layout of the drawings on the pages: Which has the most space? Which is the most full? Why has the artist put lots of the same girl on one page? When does she only put one girl on the page? What do you notice about the words on the page?

Visit www.bigpicture.org.uk to read an interview with Emily Gravett.

Visit the illustrators' gallery at www.bigpicture.org.uk to see more of Emily Gravett's work.

See 'More... looking at books' for more books and activities for helping children find pleasure in looking, including:

- *The Ravenous Beast* by Niamh Sharkey (Walker Books)
- *Penguin* by Polly Dunbar (Walker Books)
- *Aaarrggh. Spider!* by Lydia Monks (Egmont Books)
- *Orange Pear Apple Bear* by Emily Gravett (Macmillan)
- *Poppy Cat's Dream* by Lara Jones (Macmillan)
- *The baby who wouldn't go to bed* by Helen Cooper (Corgi Childrens)
- *Traction Man is Here* by Mini Grey (Knopf Books)
- *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle (Puffin Books)

Inspiring imagination

To dream impossible things

Between the ages of three and seven, children develop an intense fascination with fantasy and impossible things. Even though they know such magical experiences don't accord with their daily experience, and therefore might not be true, they just can't help weaving their fantasies. These fantasies come mainly from within themselves, extrapolated from the stories they are told, their daily experiences and their play with other children. Because fantasies come from within, children may feel empowered by their creative ability, but also fearful of what they are producing.

Imagination vs. evidence

Confusingly, whilst we humour their fantasies with our talk of tooth fairies and dragons at home, in nursery and at school we ask them to be more critical, checking their statements for evidence. Fact and fantasy are held in difficult tension. Some children therefore begin to believe that the imagination is somehow 'childish' and not appropriate to the realms of learning. Fantasy is not 'true', and is therefore 'wrong'.

New ways of imagining

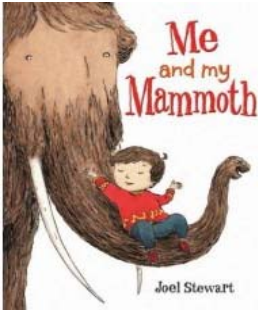
Picture books have enormous scope for opening up new ways of imagining. The artist's vision, working alongside the words, can show us novel ways of seeing the figures of our imagination and also more metaphorical ways of understanding the world. It can bring fantasy back into our enquiries about the true nature of the world.

It is important to explore with children the ways that people continue to be imaginative throughout adulthood and to highlight the value of 'professional imaginers' such as illustrators. To do this, you could try comparing one artist to another, to understand how each individual's imagination is a unique mix of the personal and the environmental or cultural influences on us.

Even though children start suppressing their fantasy life as they enter Key Stage 2 this does not mean that they no longer have the capacity for a visual imagination. There is no shame and every reason in holding up imaginative picture books as major resources for older children.

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Me and my Mammoth by Joel Stewart (Macmillan)



Me and My Mammoth is an exploration of the visual imagination. The boy in the story loves making things, but they never turn out 'right'. When an aeroplane kit turns out as a large hairy mammoth, he gives in to his imagination. He goes on an adventure with the mammoth to an icy land where he wins an ice sculpture competition. The final page shows him back home, happily making things that go 'wrong', surrounded by the odd things he has made.

Activities

- This book can spark off talk amongst children: Have you made anything that didn't turn out right? How did you feel? Did you keep it?
- Look through the book again, thinking about how Joel Stewart made it. Are there any bits that he might have felt went a bit wrong? What has he used to make the pictures? (He's used black pen and coloured inks and paints.)
- Try these art games where children can't help things going wrong:

Consequences

What you need:

- A piece of paper for each player, folded twice to make three sections.
- Some coloured pens or pencils.

Step 1: Ask children to think of any kind of upright creature or character they want to draw.

Step 2: All players secretly draw its head and then fold the paper to hide it.

Step 3: Everyone passes their strip on to another player, who draws the body of their creature.

Step 4: They fold that part back, pass on and you all repeat for the legs. Unfold and enjoy the results.



Follow the rules!

Step 1: Write instructions on slips of paper and put them in a hat. The instructions might include 'draw an extra eye', 'turn the paper', 'draw with your wrong hand'.

Step 2: All players (which can be just one child) think of something to draw, and start.

Step 3: Very soon, call 'stop' and make everyone take an instruction and follow that rule.

Step 4: Keep changing the rules every few minutes.

Visit the illustrators' gallery at www.bigpicture.org.uk to see more of Joel Stewart's work.

See 'More... looking at books' for books and activities for helping inspire children's imagination, including:

- *While You Are Sleeping* by Alexis Deacon (Red Fox)
- *Dougal's Deep-Sea Diary* by Simon Bartram (Templar Publishing)
- *In the Attic*, by Hiawyn Oram, illustrated Satoshi Kitamura (Andersen Press)
- *The Emperor of Absurdia* by Chris Riddell (Macmillan)
- *Imagine: A Book of Imaginings* by Norman Messenger (Walker Books)

Stimulating curiosity

More questions?

It's often said that children are naturally curious. We all know children who begin every sentence with 'what', 'why', 'when', 'where' or 'how'. So, why do we need to stimulate their curiosity? One reason is that children can stop asking questions. This happens when we rush them, when we don't have conversations about their questions and when they feel anxious that their question will seem stupid. Picture books can help create a safe environment for questioning.

The best picture books tap into what children are curious about – how and why things change, what is true and false, hidden things, the contrasts between big and small, what humans are capable of, the earth in relation to space and so on. All of these queries are steps towards the bigger questions, such as: Are humans different from animals? Are humans in charge of their own destiny? What was at the beginning? When will it end?

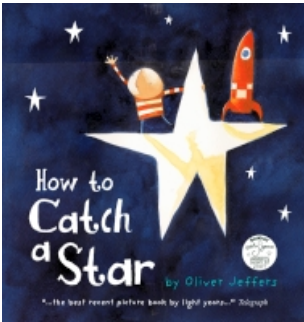
The mysterious image

Works of art can stimulate curiosity more than a piece of information: A mysterious image can open up many questions. A narrative can engage our emotions and make us *really* want to know more (what if...? why did that happen? would I do that?). Children can often learn how the world works by enjoying things *not* working, which they are more likely to see in a story or a picture. When they challenge this 'wrongness' they feel as if they own the knowledge, or rather they realise again what they know.

In this guide we have focused on books that are imaginative or story-based rather than information books. Of course, there are some beautifully illustrated information books. However, imaginative books have great power to raise volleys of extraordinary questions, for people of any age.

**Picture books
can help
create a safe
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for
questioning.**

How to Catch a Star by Oliver Jeffers (HarperCollins)



This is a book about trying out many options to solve a problem – it's a version of a quest story. The boy tries every possible way of catching a star. He is very enterprising but it just won't work. Then at the very end, after seeing a shooting star land in the sea, he finds a star(fish) washed up on the beach, and he's happy.

Activities

- After reading, go through it again looking at the illustrations. It's a very spare style, using only a few elements. You could compare this to Traction Man. Ask children to list the elements they see (it's not a long list).
- Talk about the way Oliver Jeffers has painted trees and how they change colour on different pages.
- Ask the children: Do boys really look like that? If you wanted to draw a really simple boy, how might you do it? (Ask them to have a go.)
- Look at the ways the sea, sky and ground are painted. The artist has used watercolours. If you get hold of some watercolour paint or coloured inks, let children create simple landscapes with washes of watery colour. Then they can use black pen or felt tips to draw details such as trees or people onto that background.
- Ask children to think of some other things that are impossible, that we might want to do. Which things are 'most' impossible and which things could you try to achieve?

Visit www.bigpicture.org.uk to read an interview with Oliver Jeffers.

See 'More... looking at books' for books and activities for helping stimulate children's imagination, including:

- *Egg Drop* by Mini Grey (Red Fox)
- *The Very Small* by Joyce Dunbar, illustrated by Debi Gliori (Corgi Childrens)
- *The Cockerel and the Fox* by Helen Ward (Templar Publishing)
- *Eric and the Red Planet* by Caroline Glicksman (Red Fox)
- *Tyrannosaurus Drip* by Julia Donaldson, illustrated by David Roberts (Macmillan)
- *Moon Zoo* by Carol Ann Duffy, illustrated by Joel Stewart (Macmillan)
- *My Map Book* by Sarah Fanelli (HarperCollins)
- *Wolves* by Emily Gravett (Macmillan)

Understanding others

Different perspectives

A vital part of a child's development is to recognise that other people (and animals) have different feelings and needs from their own. Empathy is not just important to make children happier and more caring, it is a key learning skill. Empathy helps them understand different ways of thinking and different cultural perspectives.

Emotional learning

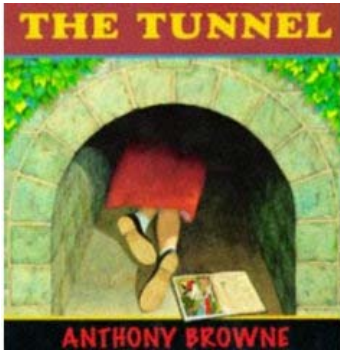
Children mainly learn empathy through the ways they are treated by their parents, and through critical encounters with others – for example, misunderstanding or neglecting others, and so coming into conflict with them. We can try as much as we like to tell children they must consider others but telling has less effect than being emotionally embroiled in a situation.

Characters have feelings

Stories, as we know, hypothesise a range of situations in which you can become similarly involved with characters and their emotions, without the bruises of reality. Illustrations enhance the effect of such stories, helping to visualise people's inner feelings and expressions. For example, Nick Sharrat's illustrations in Jacqueline Wilson's books help us to identify with the characters, despite their lack of detailed realism. The genre of books usually recommended to develop empathy is 'realistic literature'. However, many artists struggle to produce innovative illustrations to suit 'realistic' scenarios and characters. This is why some of the very best illustrated books about character leave out unnecessary realistic details and create space for children to translate a situation or the emotion and make sense of it for themselves. Animal or alien characters can work well, acting as allegories and helping children develop empathy for stranger creatures than themselves.

'Some of the very best illustrated books about character leave out unnecessary realistic details and create space for children to translate a situation or the emotion and make sense of it for themselves'

***The Tunnel* by Anthony Browne (Walker Books)**



This is one of Anthony Browne's best books for thinking about pictures and how character can be expressed visually. It shows how, depending on our personality and situation, we see the world differently from others.

The story is about a brother and sister who don't get on because of their differences. One day out playing, the boy explores a tunnel and the girl has to follow. On the other side is a scary wood, where trees conceal wolves and other creepy things. At one point the girl finds her brother in a clearing, turned to stone. She hugs him and brings him back to life. Back home, they are closer than before.

Activities

- In the first pages ask children what they can tell about the different characters from the way they are drawn.
- Look in detail at the double page centre spread, showing the girl running through the forest: What can you see here? What is hidden? Can you imagine what it was like to paint this picture? What do you think happens next?
- After reading, you might talk about tunnels, doorways and passages. Have you ever felt scared about going into a dark building or tunnel?
- Ask children to paint or draw a tunnel or dark doorway. The picture might include themselves with friends or family. Think about how the characters feel.
- They could then try another picture that shows what is on the other side. Is it scary? Is it lovely? Is it amazing? Reassure children that they don't have to copy Browne's realistic style, but to get across the feelings with simple shapes and colours.
- There are many doorways, tunnels and passages to other imaginary lands in fairy tales and myths. Older children might be interested to search for other examples.

Visit www.bigpicture.org.uk to read an interview with Anthony Browne.

See 'More... looking at books' for books and activities for helping children understand others, including:

- *Beegu* by Alexis Deacon (Red Fox)
- *Meerkat Mail* by Emily Gravett (Macmillan)
- *The Incredible Book Eating Boy* by Oliver Jeffers (HarperCollins)
- *Augustus and His Smile* by Catherine Rayner (Little Tiger Press)

Illuminating the making of art and stories

Abstract ideas

As children develop they begin to engage in increasingly abstract ideas. They can switch between being absorbed by a story or picture, and thinking about it as something fabricated by a human being. It is important to guide children to consider what pictures and stories are for, who makes them and how they are made. This will lead to future understanding about the differences and connections between cultures – our myths, our ways of knowing, our symbols and visual styles. A key element of ‘visual literacy’ is being able to make pictures to communicate with others or stimulate thinking.

Really effective visual stories are surprising, funny, touching, sensual or vibrant. They have to be both just real enough and just imaginary enough. This is a pretty tall order. To achieve it, you have to be aware of different conventions of narrative pictures, and feel confident enough to play with them and try new ways of doing it.

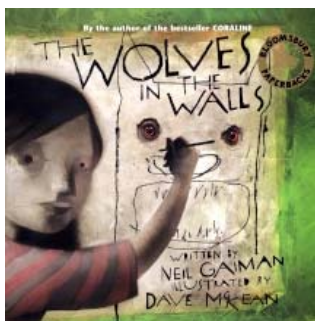
People make pictures

Understanding of these ideas will be helped if from a very early age, children have had plenty of opportunities to make their own art in response to picture books. They will grasp that *people* make pictures – they don’t just appear – and what kinds of images can be made with different tools.

When looking at pictures here are some things you might talk about (with children aged 4 years and upwards):

- What you would have to do to make a picture like this - how the artist has made the picture (using what materials and processes).
- How realistic or unrealistic the elements of the picture are.
- How the parts of the picture are laid out on the page and how the words form part of the picture.
- How flat or deep the picture is (how much do your eyes travel into the space of the picture).
- How different artists make different kinds of pictures.
- How the artist achieves an effect or mood (for example, using colours, marks, character’s expressions, shape and space).
- How the picture works with the story (for example, does the picture miss out bits of the story mentioned in the text, or add more that isn’t in the words?)
- Did the artist write the story, or work with a writer? What might the artist and writer have talked about when they were making the book?

***Wolves in the Walls* by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Dave McKean (Bloomsbury)**



This book is not for the faint-hearted. It is rather scary, but children can be captivated by it. The story is about a family sharing their house with wolves, who live in the walls but come out and occupy the house. The family are forced to camp in the garden, until the girl persuades them all to go and live in the walls. From there, they watch through holes to see the wolves having a party, messing up the house. This enrages the family, so they scare the wolves away and reoccupy their house. The end of the book ends with the thrilling thought that there might be elephants living in the walls now.

Activities

- After reading once, ask children to tell you how some of the pictures make them feel. Ask them: Which picture do you find scariest or happiest? What is it about these pictures that make the feelings so strong?
- Encourage them to talk about the elements of the pictures – the photographs, the scratches, the colours, the faces and so on. Use the fact that each picture is a combination of the familiar and the imaginary, the safe and the scary and the photographic and hand-crafted to draw out their reactions.
- Do children think that the wolves are only in the girl's imagination?

See 'More... looking at books' for books and activities for helping children understand more about making art and stories, including:

- *Lulu and the Flying Babies* by Posy Simmonds (Red Fox)
- *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak (Red Fox)
- *The Princess and the Pea* by Lauren Child (Puffin Books)
- *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne (Corgi Childrens)