

# Building Better Brains

Board Books and Thirty Million Words

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When our daughter was two, she gnawed half the cover off a board book version of Peggy Rathmann's *Goodnight, Gorilla*. To her, it was a book good enough to eat. Our copy—tattered, weathered, *gnawed*—remains on our bookshelf. To my wife and me, the mangled little thing is a treasured possession.

It would be impossible to tally up the number of hours we spent during my daughter's first three years reading through Rathmann's nearly wordless book. Nor could I estimate how many words we expended in our conversations about the images on the pages while we read.

What stays with me is how loving, connected, and tender I felt towards my daughter as she sat in my arms, both of us laughing as the gorilla climbs into bed and wakes up the zookeeper's wife. I still recall the sound of her voice as she cried, "Gorilla! What did you do!?" And me replying, "Sorry!" in the Gorilla's voice, her hand then playfully slapping the cardboard page with delight.

Neither of these lines—"Gorilla! What did you do!?" "Sorry!"—are in Rathmann's text, but they, and my daughter's page slaps, represent the kind of improvised call and response that naturally occurs between parents and children as they page through books together. And it turns out, according to research on baby and toddler brain development from organizations like Thirty Million Words, where I recently worked; Providence Talks; and other commendable early language research groups, these free-flowing interactions are critical to the healthy brain development of kids.

As parent and child connect meaningfully with each other, whether through acts of reading, talking, singing, or even nodding and smiling, during those earliest "neuroplastic" years, the child's brain is establishing life-long connections that will vastly increase her intellectual and verbal capacities.

Author Ellen Mayer understands these things and has penned four smart picturebooks—*Red Socks*, *A Fish to Feed* (both published as board books), *Cake Day*, and *Rosa's Very Big Job*—to facilitate meaningful parent-child interactions. These are potentially groundbreaking books as each title provides a note to parents written by language and literacy expert Dr. Betty Bardige about the importance of talk and how to use what's occurring in each story to launch meaningful interactions between parents and kids while reading them aloud. They are also important books for their soothing illustrations, which

pointedly feature characters of color, still far too underrepresented in early literacy children's literature.

Mayer's books each depict an adult and a child embarking on a simple task—visiting a store to buy a fish, getting dressed—and model through each story how even the simple, routine moments in our day are rich with opportunities to talk and connect with our children.

In *Red Socks*, the mother character names colors, provides descriptions, and offers spatial observations, all examples of how we can help children name, measure, and know their world.

"Let's see what else is in the laundry basket. Here is your red sock. UH-OH! Where is the other red sock? You found the other red sock! Yay! It was hiding in your pants pocket!"<sup>1</sup>

In *A Fish to Feed*, a sweet book in which a father and son go shopping for a fish and carry it home, the board book is constructed with holes in the pages that children will enjoy playing with and looking through. The text shows how shopping, something we all do with kids, is a rich opportunity to talk. "There are so many things in this store," says Dad. "What do you see?"<sup>2</sup>

Mayer's latest books are equally successful in exemplifying parent-child talk. In *Cake Day*, the title becomes a fun refrain as a grandmother and her grandson bake a cake. In *Rosa's Very Big Job*, a preschooler and her grandfather create exciting adventures out of household chores.

Bardige avoids overly wonky language in her notes to parents and focuses on the everyday. "*Cake Day* shows some simple, research-based techniques that can help develop your child's language. . . As you do chores around the house . . . it's a wonderful time to talk together!" writes Bardige.<sup>3</sup> This mixture of read-aloud, talk modeling for parents, and information from Bardige make Mayer's books delightful, instructive little packages.

Now that neuroscience is fast catching up to proving what many parents, librarians, and caregivers have always known—that talk has a huge influence on brain development in children up to five years old—publishers should consider including notes like Bardige's in future editions of early literacy books. New parents reading classics like *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats; *Ten, Nine, Eight* by Molly Bang; *Goodnight, Gorilla*; or new favorites like *Journey* by Aaron Becker; *Kitten's First Full*



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*Moon* by Kevin Henkes; and *Roadwork* by Sally Sutton will benefit from advice on how to read and talk about the texts with their young children.

Children's librarians and baby daycare providers are particularly encouraged to add books by Mayer and other authors committed to boosting parent-child talk to their early literacy/board book collections. In her book *Engaging Babies in the Library: Putting Theory into Practice*, published by ALA Editions, researcher and former children's librarian Debra J. Knoll writes that given what we increasingly know about baby brain development, the importance of meaningful interactions with children under five, and the myriad ways socioeconomic status impacts these things, "libraries should consider providing focused service most intensively to babies and toddlers."<sup>4</sup>

Part of that work, she recommends, is "advocat[ing] for the publication of books that will expand babies' and toddlers' growing vocabulary base."<sup>5</sup> In *Rosa's Very Big Job*, Mayer intentionally gives young Rosa and her grandfather big words like "dangerous" and "enormous" to describe their adventures because, as Bardige writes in her note for parents at the end, "children love big words . . . adults can introduce big words when they talk with preschoolers" and they don't need a dictionary to do it.<sup>6</sup>

To Knoll, partnering with parents to support healthy brain development for all kids must be a top priority of library service in 2016 and beyond. Librarians can emphasize to parents and caregivers who visit the library and attend baby storytime programs the importance of tuning in, talking more, and taking turns, as Dr. Dana Suskind puts it in her book *Thirty Million Words*.

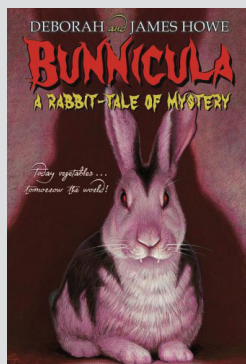
Librarians can also point to the simple, easily replicated interactions between characters in Mayer's books as examples of how exactly to do it. They can emphasize, through the example of the father in *A Fish to Feed* or the grandmother in *Cake Day*, that every moment of the day, no matter how routine (shopping for groceries, cooking dinner, walking down the block), is rich with potential for talk.

Providing circulating copies of these books—and recommending them!—could spur parents to provide more word-rich homes full of connections and meaning. Every child deserves as much. ↵

## References

1. Ellen Mayer, *Red Socks* (Cambridge, MA: Star Bright, 2015), 12.
2. Ellen Mayer, *A Fish to Feed* (Cambridge, MA: Star Bright, 2015), 7.
3. Ellen Mayer, *Cake Day* (Cambridge, MA: Star Bright, 2016), 28.
4. Debra J. Knoll, "Engaging Babies in the Library: Putting Theories into Practice," *American Libraries*, May 31, 2016, <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2016/05/31/engaging-babies-library-childrens-librarians>.
5. Ibid.
6. Ellen Mayer, *Rosa's Very Big Job* (Cambridge, MA: Star Bright, 2016), 28.

## Howe Honored with Empire State Award



James Howe, the author of more than ninety children's books, has been awarded the 2017 Empire State Award for Excellence in Literature for Young People. He will be honored by the New York State Library Association this November.

New York resident Howe is best known for *Bunnacula*, the vampire rabbit character he created in 1979; that first of several *Bunnacula* books won more than ten Children's Choice Awards.

This fall, Howe's personal essay, "How Miracles Begin," will be published in the young adult anthology about music, *Behind the Song*, edited by K. M. Walton. Two more of Howe's *Houndsley* and *Catina* books are due out in 2018 and 2019, and the author is working on a memoir and a graphic novel version of *Bunnacula*.

The first winner of the Empire State Award, in 1990, was Maurice Sendak; last year's winner was Steve Sheinkin. The award honors a body of work that represents excellence in and that has made a significant contribution to literature for young people. It is presented to a living author or illustrator currently residing in New York.