



The hidden agenda of bedtime stories

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Nathalie Foy's voice is soft, her touch gentle. The house is still, the big bed is warm.

On one side, 9-year-old Griffin leans against a pillow and pulls the quilt over his legs. On the other, Rowan, 5, bounces and wriggles before nestling into the crook of his mother's arm.

Lamplight reflects the red and orange hues of the walls, bathing the trio in a rosy glow. She opens *The Voyages of Dr. Dolittle*.

"Now, do you remember where we were?"

And so begins their journey from Toronto's Annex neighbourhood to Puddleby-on-the-Marsh, the home of an unusual doctor who keeps an exotic menagerie and speaks animal languages. They meet Jip the dog, Dab-Dab the duck and a parrot named Polynesia. They hear that a young lad named Tommy Stubbins wants Dr. Dolittle to fix his squirrel's broken leg.

Happy sounds float up from downstairs: Gavin, 2, is perched on his dad's knee, giggling delightedly as Ted Betts reads the story of *Grumpy Bird*, who wakes up one morning too grumpy to fly.

There's nothing better than a bedtime story, even in this age of digital distractions. Parents don't need experts to tell them that children's books offer a time of comfort, security and love. It is the decompression period before lights out. And not the least among its attractions is that books introduce children to wonderful worlds of imagination and adventure that will lead to a lifelong love of reading.

Indeed, Maria Tatar, a Harvard University professor, says the bedtime story is nothing short of "spiritual, intellectual nutrition for your child. It's our duty as adults to fight all the distractions and give this to our children." Her 2009 book, *Enchanted Hunters*, explores the power of stories in childhood.



Aaron Harris/For the Toronto Star

Nathalie Foy reads to her sons Rowan, 5, right, and Griffin, 9, before bed.

At its most basic, the bedtime story is part of a nighttime continuum of biochemical ritual that helps children get a good night's sleep. Bath, pyjamas, dimming lights, reducing noise and story-telling provide signals to the brain that begin the relaxation process and trigger sleep by releasing melatonin. The hormone lowers body temperature and assists with the onset of sleep, says Dr. Rakesh Bhattacharjee, a pediatrician who specializes in sleep medicine in Toronto and Chicago.

When children are absorbed in a story, "it causes the brain waves to slow down," essential for falling asleep, says Vancouver psychologist Lee Pulos, who likens it to a hypnotic effect.

Researchers say that this state is enhanced by the slower, more deliberate speaking voice that adults typically use when reading aloud.

Like lullabies, the rhythm of poems and prose and the changing tone and pitch of the reader can be soothing and form strong associations with sleep, especially when reinforced with calming body movements like walking or rocking that hark back to the womb. Even babies who cannot yet associate words or images can feel a calming feeling throughout their bodies.

There's good evidence, too, that reading before bedtime builds cognitive skills, as the brain processes and consolidates new information during the hours of sleep immediately following the storytelling. This varies with the age of the child. Infants spend half their sleeping hours in the REM stage, when learning is organized in the brain; for children 2 and older it's 20 to 30 per cent. (For adults, the REM period occurs during 20 per cent of a typical sleep.)

That means that young brains spend many hours of sleep processing and imprinting the rhythms, repetitions and patterns they hear.

"Their brains are getting wired to integrate the senses," says Laurel Trainor, professor and director of the auditory development lab at McMaster University. She has found that even young babies can distinguish the difference between songs sung as lullabies and those used in play.

But after their first year, as children begin to understand language, content becomes important. Bedtime stories can help children work through their own anxieties as they listen to them acted out through characters in books.

Children under 4 may fear darkness, being alone and the possibility that their parents may not be there when they awake. On a deeper level, they may fear the darkness of their own mortality, says Tatar.

"Putting the anxieties into stories is so important."

Goodnight Moon is an excellent example. It has been a favourite since 1947 because it tackles nighttime separation and darkness yet is infused with reassurance and intrigue as the narrator bids goodnight to everything in the great green room, from the comb and the brush and the bowl full of mush to the quiet old lady who was whispering "hush."

For older kids, the barnyard of *Charlotte's Web* or Peter Pan's Neverland teaches them to solve problems and aids their search for identity. They experience risk through characters and learn empathy by identifying with them and imagining how they feel.

Each child has a barometer for what scares them, based on their own personality and experiences. But Tatar says by school age they need stories that fuel the imagination and make them think “what if?” — even if it doesn't necessarily induce sleep.

That's certainly what Nathalie Foy and Ted Betts want in bedtime reading: “I want the books we read to engage the kids, to make their minds work, and most importantly, to capture their imaginations,” says Foy.

But now it's time for bed.

Dr. Dolittle has put Tommy Stubbins' squirrel in a splint made of matchsticks. Griffin and Rowan enjoyed the tale, chiming in when Foy pauses to ask what shellfish are or the meaning of “extinct.” But for most of the time, their bodies were still, their eyes gazing dreamily at the ceiling.

Gavin, clad in his new racing-car pyjamas, has had a good evening too — as Maurice Sendak's wild things roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth. He has watched the alphabet fall from the tree in *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*. He has recited pairs in *Hockey Opposites* and bid goodnight to “noises everywhere.” He's very sleepy.

Together in their room, Gavin and Rowan are tucked into bed, serenaded by Dad. Next door, Griffin is indulging in stronger fare, reading Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*.

Dreamland beckons.