

Poetry Opens the Doors of Literature

Busy parents – and what parents are not busy? – have a head start on introducing children to books and reading through the magical effects of poetry. **Rhythm, rhyme,** and other forms of assonance (sound echoing) are among the key elements of poetry and its companion, song. Along with clear, vivid imagery, they help us remember who “was a merry old soul” or how “the snow lay round about” when “Good King Wenceslas looked out /On the feast of Stephen”.

The memorability of poetry is a great boon to parents who want to instill a love of, or at a minimum an appreciation for, poetry. Poetry can be “taught” from infancy, through **lullabies, nursery rhymes,** and many of humankind’s **scriptures**. As a practical matter, exposure to poetry – **hearing** it, **reciting** and **performing** it for pleasure, the all-but-automatic memorisation that accompanies these basic poetic pleasures – turns out to be one of the most effective ways to give a child a leg up not only on reading but on a host of other academic and personal skills. [Professor Nile Stanley](#) details some of the research behind this assertion, and offers **further resources** for parents, in his book [*Creating Readers with Poetry*](#).

Nowadays of course, any snatch of verse you can recall can probably be looked up on the Internet. This can be helpful in jogging your memory on entertaining rhymes for infants. (Hint: try to find well-edited sources with author attribution – even more than mediaeval manuscripts, the Internet is rife with transcription errors.) As you make the transition from recitation to reading, though, you’ll find that nothing quite matches the satisfaction of **snuggling up with a child and a book** – no mouse to fiddle with, keys to click, or lighted screen to over-stimulate your child just as you are winding down the day. Professor Stanley is a fan of **Dr. Seuss**, whose extraordinary, beloved light verse is perfectly pitched to a child’s imagination and sense of fun – both in the realm of anarchic silliness and in books that treat more serious themes, such as justice and fair play.

Beyond these resources, please consider making a trip to **your local library** part of your weekly round of errands. There are few people on the planet more knowledgeable and passionate about introducing books to children than the **children’s librarian** – including the decades’ worth of new poetry and stories in verse published since your own childhood. Children’s sections of many libraries offer **story or poetry hours**, or other activities that instill a love of books, reading, and libraries even in those who cannot yet read. And such programs allow you to steal those few precious quiet moments you never seem to have at home – whether to indulge in a popular magazine, catch up on the news in greater depth than the telly affords, or browse the fiction or poetry shelves for your own reading. Besides your public library, **Leaders for Readers** offer another resource for you and your children; take a few minutes when dropping off your child for their day program to get to know the library and librarians – and look for orientation programs to appear on the school schedule.

Once your child is reading independently, browsing the shelves in pursuit of **their latest enthusiasm** becomes its own pleasant, rewarding activity. Meanwhile, you can be chatting with the librarian over **poetic connections** the child might miss – for example, T. S. Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, at a suitable age.

Starting again from basics can be a way to rekindle the pleasure many of us felt at our earliest exposure to poetry – which for some of us was extinguished by some of the many bad ways poetry can be taught – so that the enthusiasm we try to convey to our children is heartfelt and infectious. One of the great virtues of poetry is the compactness of its language and many of its forms, so that even a busy parent can find time to read **a few new poems a week**. Should your own enthusiasm for poetry be rekindled again, it will add richness to your life and to your ability to help develop genuine appreciation of poetry by your children.

Make your home a place that loves books and welcomes reading. You may already have an extensive library. You may be starting from scratch with **bricks, boards, and a standard answer of “books”** when asked what you need for the baby. In either case, your children will learn their first attitudes towards books and reading from you. Poetry, and the wealth of it written for children, can be one of your greatest and most accessible resources.